



Got Stress?

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International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (www.iffgd.org)

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Stress is a major issue for many with Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Fear of leaving the house or finding a bathroom in time or having an embarrassing accident in public can be debilitating and stressful. What if you could change how you feel about stress? I always believed that stress was a bad thing. However, there are multiple scientific studies which prove this may not always be the case. These studies confirm that the way one thinks about stress affects how your body reacts to it. You respond to any threat, whether psychological or physical, by releasing adrenaline and cortisol hormones into your system.

How do these hormones affect your body? Hormones are chemical substances that control tasks in your body. Cortisol helps; control blood sugar levels, regulate metabolism, reduce inflammation, control blood pressure and increases memory. Metabolism is the series of reactions in the body that break down foods into energy, allowing the body to use that energy. These functions make cortisol a crucial hormone to protect overall health and well-being. Adrenaline: increases your heart rate and blood pressure, expands the air passages in your lungs, sends blood to your muscles and changes your body's metabolism.

Your body's stress-response system is your brain's "911". Once a perceived threat has passed, hormone levels are supposed to return you to normal, resuming their regular activities. However, with a chronic illness like IBS, you may be in a constant state of stress. Do you know someone with a chronic illness who is always calm in what you would perceive to be a stressful situation? There is nothing wrong with their hormone balance, they just may have the key to changing your attitude toward stress.

The studies I referred to regarding stress management, are decades old and have been following hundreds of people throughout their lives. What they discovered may surprise you, as it surprised me. Stress is not always to be avoided, it can make you smarter, stronger and more successful.

Just by changing your mindset regarding stress you will be healthier and happier. **Handling** stress is the key. You need to get better at stress management and I'm going to show you one easy way to do just that.

What exactly is a mindset? Mindsets are belief frameworks which influence your reality. Changing these could lead to long-term health, happiness, and success.

Here's one way you can think about stress differently.

Try journaling, a highly recommended stress management tool. It is a simple technique, the health benefits of which have been scientifically proven. Research into journaling shows the following:

- Reduces digestive issues associated with IBS
- Decreases the symptoms of asthma, arthritis, and other health conditions
- Improves cognitive functioning
- Strengthens immune system response

How do you turn your negative response to stress around? Let me make it easy for you.

Start by thinking about what affected you negatively in the last year or maybe even just last month or yesterday. What increased your anxiety? What made you sad? What made you mad? Think about what you gained from the experience you have just observed about yourself? How do you change your mindset to make it a positive experience? I find the best way to figure this out is to write it down. That's right, the old fashion way with pencil (I like mechanical pencils) or you can use pen and paper. Make it your favorite pencil or pen. Get a special notebook or journal and just start writing. The tactile practice of putting things down on paper resonates with your brain and makes things more real. If you must be techy, this also works with a keyboard. Find a place to write. Wherever you are most comfortable. It could be a special place in your home, the nearest coffee shop with your favorite drink, or even the library. Make it a special "ME

TIME” event. Whether it is 5 minutes or a couple of hours. Allow it to fit easily into **your** lifestyle.

Now that you have found your special place, get started and move forward. Here is the scariest part – **BEGINNING**. Make it easy. You are in your favorite place with your special writing tools or laptop. The first thing to do is: **BREATHE**. Yes, all you have to do to start is breathe. **Write that down.**

Here is my favorite stress relieving breathing technique:

- Close your eyes
- Place your right hand on your heart and your left hand on your belly
- Bring your attention to your breathing (just observe, do not try to change anything)
- Inhale and exhale through the nose
- As you witness the breath, make a mental note on the quality of your breath (is it fast or slow, ragged or even, shallow or deep)
- Now start to even out the breath, making your inhales and exhales the same length
- After a few breaths, start to make your exhales longer than your inhales
- Try counting to 2 on the inhale and counting to 4 on the exhale with a pause in between each
- As you become more comfortable and relaxed try to increase the count, making your exhales twice as long as your inhales. Try to reach a count of 4 and 8, but only as it feels comfortable. If you feel yourself gasping for the inhale, then you have gone too far.

Write down how the experience left you feeling. It does not matter what you write. Focusing your mind is the important part. Do not make any rules or make it complicated in any way.

Congratulations! You have begun.

About IFFGD

The International Foundation for Gastrointestinal Disorders (IFFGD) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education and research organization. We work to promote awareness, scientific advancement, and improved care for people affected by chronic digestive conditions. Our mission is to inform, assist, and support people affected by gastrointestinal disorders. Founded in 1991, we rely on donors to carry out our mission. Visit our websites at: www.iffgd.org, www.aboutibs.org.

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About the Author

Here is my personal story about stress. My long history with IBS-C became life threatening when my colon burst, and I screamed “call 911”. When I woke up from surgery, I had lost a large portion of my colon and was the owner of a colostomy bag. Up to this point in time I was a fairly positive person, however, this crisis really threw me for a loop. I never knew anyone who had a colostomy. I had only heard horrible stories about exploding bags and carrying around a bag of poop. How could I go back to work or teach yoga? I have to admit for a while this situation caused me to sink into despair. Also, unrelated to this medical emergency, I lost my job and was forced to retire. Then I changed my mindset, I put on my big girl panties (which have a nice little pouch for my colostomy bag) and started to figure out this next phase of my life and how to handle these new stressors.

My name’s Evon, now my husband refers to me as Evon 2.0. The new 2.0 Model is lucky to carry around her own toilet and no longer must spend hours in the bathroom. This completely changed my mindset about stress. I had been teaching yoga part-time for years and had received certification as a yoga therapist in 2016. In the back of my mind I had always counted on my yoga therapy practice to fuel my retirement. Light bulb moment! I was now retired. Changing my mindset changed how I felt about what I could handle. It changed how I experienced it physically and emotionally. It changed how I coped with future challenges in my life.