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## **High Stress: The Heart of the Matter**

Work Stress. Home Stress. Financial Stress. We all have it in some form or another.

The toll of chronic stress isn't limited to emotional suffering. A new issue of the medical journal *BMJ*, confirms links now exist between mood disorders such as depression and high stress can set the stage for heart disease. In fact, research shows that those of us who even perceive a lot of stress in our lives are at higher risk of heart attacks and other cardiovascular problems over the long term.

So, when is stress just a normal part of life — something we all just need to deal with — and when does it become so problematic that it sets the stage for disease?

We've all experienced the fight-or-flight stress response. Your heart rate increases and your blood pressure climbs. In the short term, this temporary response is good. It gives you what you need to flee or take action. The problem comes if you start to experience these stress response "activations" even when there's not an imminent threat.

Since we can't wave a magic wand and make stress disappear, what are the best coping options? The short answer: eat in a healthy way, attempt to have good relationships, have a good attitude, spend time in nature, and exercise. These are critical and should be mindfully cultivated.

However, I'd like to provide you with three items to help you boost your happiness and well-being today! I have put 1 and 3 into practice, and just completed my character survey.

### **1. Find Three Good Things Everyday**

Each evening for the next week, reflect on your day and choose three things that went really well. It's important to write these down, rather than simply noting them in your head. These things could be as simple as reading a bedtime story to your toddler or having your spouse pick up ice cream for dessert. Then, next to each positive event, answer this question: "Why did this good thing happen?"

**2. Use Signature Strengths in a New Way**

First, identify your top five strengths. You can do this by taking the VIA character survey, at [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org), or simply reflect on your own character and try to find five qualities that are your strong suits. You may want to ask a supportive friend or family member to help you identify these. After doing this, choose one of your strengths, and every day for the next week, try to use it in a different way. Is curiosity one of your strengths? Try reading about a topic you know nothing about.

**3. A Gratitude Visit and Random Acts of Kindness**

Identify someone who has been particularly kind to you whom you haven't thanked properly—perhaps a parent, friend, teacher, coach, teammate, or employer. In the next week, write a note of gratitude to that person. Make your letter as specific as possible! To continue this, you may choose to do random acts of kindness, research demonstrates that people who help others often have happier, healthier lives.

These day-to-day habits, adapted from the University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology, may help reduce the amount of stress you feel, but for people with chronic stress or depression, it may be beneficial to reach out to a professional for help. You don't have to "grin and bear it", we should seek ways to improve overall health!

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