

Ep #4: Let's Talk About Stress



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Vijaya Molloy

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If you want to conquer the anxiety of life, live in the moment. Live in the breath.

Welcome to Mind Body Mouth, a podcast that explores the link between the health of your mouth and the rest of your body. If you're a patient, parent, or fellow practitioner who's curious about how functional dentistry can improve your overall health, this is the show for you. Here's your host, Australian dentist, Dr. Vijaya Molloy.

Hi, everyone. Welcome back to the *Mind Body Mouth* podcast. Today, we're going to be talking about something we've all experienced at some point in our lives; stress. I consider stress to be one of the biggest threats to our mental and physical health in today's world.

We'll be talking about acute stress, chronic stress, the effects of stress on your mind, body, and of course, your mouth as well as some strategies on how you might be able to decrease the stress experience in your life.

Acute stress is what happens when our brain perceives that we're in a situation that threatens our immediate survival. In caveman days, this would have been when we had to run away from a wild animal. To put this in a more modern-day context, it might be when we're facing attack, like if you're being threatened, in a fight, if you lose your child temporarily in a supermarket, or you're running really late for an important meeting.

When we're in a situation of acute stress, our sympathetic nervous system gets switched on. This means that our breath and our heart rate increases. Our body produces a surge of adrenaline which gives us a burst of energy so that we can run if we need to. Our hairs stand on end and we sweat profusely. Once the threat is gone, our physical symptoms should normalize. Our heart rate becomes normal and the adrenaline levels taper off.

When we live with chronic stress, as sadly many of us do today, our sympathetic nervous system is always switched on. This means that that

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fight or flight response is always easily triggered. You're always in a state of high alert, wary of any imminent danger.

People who live like this will become angry or upset very easily. This means that some small minor situation might cause them to explode. It could be something as simple as the kids didn't do the dishes they were supposed to do, a work colleague said something that was upsetting, or someone forgot to take out the rubbish.

People who behave this way often look back on the situation and wonder why they reacted the way that they did. And it can be a constant battle to learn to control their emotions and response to a seemingly stressful situation.

When we live in this state of constant stress, our bodies are producing too much of a hormone called cortisol. There's no more adrenaline, so the cortisol takes over. Some level of cortisol is necessary for our bodies to have healthy sleep patterns and to function normally, but too much is not a good thing.

When we have too much cortisol in our bodies, our brains think that our existence is threatened. This sets off triggers which send our body into starvation mode. Our metabolism slows right down, ready to hold onto any fat stores in case there's a famine and we might not get food for days and days. This means that we hold onto any extra weight. We might even gain weight.

Our digestion tends to be really poor, so it doesn't matter how good your diet is or how many supplements you might be taking, you'll still be undernourished. And we also sleep very, very poorly because too much cortisol affects our sleep patterns.

Research shows that our white blood cell production also decreases, which makes us more prone to infections and poor wound healing. The hippocampus, which is an area of our brain responsible for memory and

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logical thought also shrinks, so we lose our ability to have coherent thoughts.

And some of you might be able to relate to that feeling of not being able to hold anything in your brain when you're in situations of extreme stress or going through a long-term stressful situation. The term is, "My brain is like a sieve, my memory is like a sieve, I just can't remember anything."

So, basically, our bodies are in survival mode and we are just existing. We're not thriving, we're not enjoying life. We're just going from day to day, existing and just simply going through the motions of living and generally feeling pretty miserable and unhappy.

In the mouth of a patient that is in a chronic stress situation, we can often see an increase in tooth decay. This is because their mouth is often dry. A dry mouth is also a symptom of chronic stress. And you might remember from the first episode when I spoke about if you're constantly mouth-breathing, your mouth dries out. This becomes very acidic and you're more prone to tooth decay.

Some medication for anxiety and depression can also further decrease your saliva production, which then increases your risk of tooth decay even more. Gum disease is another symptom of a stressed brain and body. A person might show up with very painful gums or an acute gum infection. Mouth ulcers and cold sores are also something that we see quite commonly.

Stress is thought to deplete our body of vitamin B and mouth ulcers are also linked to low levels of vitamin B in the body. So you can see why the two go hand in hand. Tooth-grinding is something else that we link to chronic stress. Some people even do this during the day. A lot of people do it at night.

Stress is not the only cause of tooth-grinding, but it can be part of the picture. A person that grinds their teeth chronically is more likely to have

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cracked or broken teeth and they may turn up over and over again with the same problems, constantly breaking their teeth.

Mouth-breathing is another symptom of chronic stress. In fact, mouth-breathing is such a huge topic, we'll be doing a complete podcast on it later. But mouth-breathing is a kind of chicken and egg type situation because people that do live with chronic stress are more prone to mouth-breathing because they don't breathe deeply. They're more likely to hyperventilate.

But some people are also born not being able to breathe through their noses, so they breathe through their mouths since birth, which means that physically they've been in a chronic stress situation their entire life. I often see kids like this. I'll spot them in the waiting room and then I'll ask their parent if they're prone to stress and anxiety. And nine times out of 10, the parent will say yes. And often, there is another sibling, so they can see the difference between the sibling who is a nose-breather and the sibling who is a chronic mouth-breather.

When we chronically mouth-breathe, not only is our mouth dry, which puts us at a higher risk of tooth decay and also gum disease. But we're also not absorbing enough oxygen. There is a big scientific explanation around why we don't absorb enough oxygen and I'll talk about that in further podcasts. But for now, let's just say that a body and brain that's not getting the right amount of oxygen is not going to be able to grow and thrive to its maximum potential.

Some people don't actually know that they mouth-breathe. I've spoken to quite a few people who are adamant that they nose-breathe and it's only after they've gone away and assessed themselves that they come back and go, "Yeah, actually, I do mouth-breathe."

For some people, it might only be during the night that they're mouth-breathing, so they might want to ask the people near them if they snore. If they're waking up frequently to need to drink water in the night then that's another sign, or if they've got constantly dry lips is another indication.

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So, if you are a mouth-breather and you are aware that you suffer from chronic stress and anxiety, what can you do about it? First, I would suggest paying attention to your breathing. Can you actually breathe slowly and deeply through your nose? Or is it really hard for you to do so?

Something I ask patients to do is put their hands flat on their face on either side of their nose and pull their nose apart to see if that makes a big difference to their breathing. And if it does, then that can be an indication that there's some sort of blockage in their nose.

It can be the structure of their nose, like enlarged nasal turbinates, which are the little bones inside your nose. Or it could be that you've got a crooked septum. The septum is the part that runs through the middle of your nose. This can be crooked right from birth or you might have broken your nose or fallen over or been in a fight. And this can all affect your breathing later on.

If there is a problem with the structure of the nose that's preventing you from breathing or, in the case of children, it can be enlarged adenoids and tonsils, then this is something that might need surgery. Sometimes, it can be as simple as treating allergies, and a doctor can help you with this too.

But if there aren't any obstructions, then you just need to retrain yourself to breathe through your nose; so breathing slowly, not too many times in a minute, and focusing on the exhalation, not just inhalation. A lot of people are so focused on getting enough air into their bodies that they tend to over-breathe without focusing on the exhalation.

And as I said, we'll go into more detail about this in future episodes, but it's all about maintaining the right ratio of carbon dioxide within your system that helps you absorb the correct amount of oxygen.

So, once we've got the breathing sorted, what else can we do to address chronic stress and anxiety within our lives? I appreciate that there are some people out there that do need medical help in this area, and so if this is

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you, go and get it, it's totally necessary for you and hopefully it helps get you on the right path to living a happier and more fuller life.

Another habit is getting the right amount of sleep. I recently heard an interview with Arianna Huffington and she used the term, "Sleep your way to the top," but in a completely different context, meaning make sure you get enough sleep to perform at your best.

I feel like we live in an age where it's almost like a contest to see how little sleep we can survive on. But I don't think getting by on five hours sleep and then having four or five coffees a day is really sustainable or doing anyone any favors.

The minimum recommendation is eight hours sleep. For teenagers and growing children, this is more likely to be 10 or 12 hours. And there was research that came out of a UK sleep center which showed that men actually need less sleep than women. And the reason was that women's brains actually do work harder than men's do.

This was put down to the need for women's brains to be more flexible because of all the multitasking that we do. I live in a family of four males and none of them were particularly impressed when I told them this piece of research, but hey, it's science, so who's going to argue?

Regular exercise has also been scientifically proven to help in the treatment of chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. It just takes 20 minutes three times a week to see a difference. And what exercise does is it stimulates your brain to produce endorphins.

Endorphins are those feel-good chemicals that make us feel happy. The world just seems like a better place. Regular endorphin production also means that we experience pain less. As well as being great for treating anxiety, depression, and stress, regular exercise has also been found to be useful in managing patients with chronic pain. These endorphins from our brain decrease the pain experience that our brains perceive.

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It doesn't matter what exercise you're doing. You might like dancing, go for a walk, go for a run, pump some iron at the gym, whatever does it for you, as long as it's something that gets your body moving, gets your heart rate up, and works up a big of a sweat.

Meditation is another habit that's been proven by science to help us live better. Meditation isn't necessarily for everyone, but if you want to try it, there's a million apps out there you can download. You can just try sitting in a quiet room, focusing on your breathing, watching a candle for 10 minutes; even five minutes twice a day has been shown to make a huge difference, improve your immunity, improve your mental clarity and the way you handle stress.

Laughter is the best medicine as well. So watch funny movies, spend time with friends. Plenty of social contact is also really helpful, talk to the people around you. If you are unhappy, talk about the problem. A lot of people feel like they don't want to burden other people with their problems, but talking is really important. So if there's somebody you can trust, that you can open up to, excellent. Just have one friend that you share your life with. And once it's out there, often a problem doesn't seem quite so massive and insurmountable as it did when it was in your head.

I think screen time is a huge problem these days. We're always on call to our devices. There's always an email to be answered or we need to respond to a message, or if we've posted something on Facebook, we want to see how many people liked it.

And I get that there's huge benefits of having all this modern technology and social networking has done some good things, but I think it's also added so much to our stress levels and also made us constant slaves to our work. We can't switch off because people can email us any time, 24 hours a day.

So if you feel like you're a slave to your device and you just can't switch off, I'm going to suggest to you that, when you come home, as long as you're not expecting any important calls or emails, you just turn that thing off. I feel

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like, in many ways, we live in a life where we're just constantly over-stimulated and our brains just don't get a chance to rest.

I had a patient come in a few months ago and she spent the first 10 minutes of the appointment telling me about the problems she had with her gut. It had been going on for years. And she also had really bad gums.

She knew her gums were bad and it was a problem she hadn't been able to get on top of. If you listen to the first episode, you remember the link between gut health and gum disease. So I just gave her one piece of advice and that was to turn off her phone, not spend any time on social media and just completely minimize screen time.

She came back two weeks later and she said her gums were so much better, her gut was the best that it had ever been, and all she had done was reduce her screen time. She'd already cleaned up her diet, so she was eating really well. So cutting out the screen time was just that last little piece of the puzzle that she needed to enjoy better health. I was actually amazed because I didn't think it was going to make that much of a difference, just that simple thing, and just one thing as well.

I feel like our lives are ridiculously busy these days and we always hear people talking about it. I'm so busy, I have so much to do... And I'm starting to wonder if it really has to be this way or if we've made it this way, and in being so busy, are we just adding to the stress in our lives?

Do we really have to do everything that we commit ourselves to doing? Can we just say no to things? And if we do, will that make us feel so much better? Will that relieve some of the stress in our lives, give us a bit more time just to sit and be with ourselves, relax, do nothing?

I sometimes think we're being conditioned to believe that it's not okay to sit and do nothing, but we totally need it. And I think everyone needs to schedule some downtime. This is something I used to struggle with. I would never sit there and do nothing. Even just sitting reading a book felt like

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wasted time for me. And then I just got completely exhausted and burnt out.

This was even before I had kids. Now I have three kids to look after and a house and a practice; I can't afford to be burnt out and stressed. So I make sure I take time for myself to do nothing because I know that I work so much better if I do. It doesn't matter how many chores are waiting for me, as long as nobody's starving, the electricity isn't getting turned off, no one's going to die, it's okay for me to sit and do nothing for a while.

And it's not just the devices. It's all screens, including television. They leave our brains wired and in a state that doesn't fall readily into a good quality productive sleep. And sleep is so important for our bodies to restore and regenerate.

Another motto I try to live by is not sweating the small stuff. There's always so many challenges in daily life and I feel like there can be a lot of external pressure to achieve perfection, whether it be a perfectly tidy house, perfectly presented children, looking perfect, having perfect hair, makeup, whatever, always performing perfectly at work. So I think it's really important to set priorities.

If you only had 30 days to live, what would be the most important things to you? If you needed to leave some dishes in the sink so that you could prioritize getting a good night's sleep, does that really matter? You'll benefit far more from a good night's sleep and you can always clean the kitchen in the morning.

And if you get the opportunity to spend some good quality time with your kids, that's probably more important than cleaning the house or putting in a little bit of extra effort at work. Of course, we do need to work to make an income and our houses need to be clean enough for us to live in, but just a few examples, just a few things to think about there.

It's easy to waste our time and energy stressing over incidental instances in life and maybe even things like what someone said to us or whether

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someone didn't like us. We can't change what happened, but we can change the way we replay these instances in our brain and how we choose to continue to react to them.

So, as we wrap up, the one take-home message that I'd like to leave you all with is to have a think about what you can do to control the stress in your life. And remember, life is about thriving, not just surviving.

Thanks everyone for listening to the show today. If you don't want to worry about missing any future episodes you can subscribe on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your podcasts, and if you haven't done so already, I'd really appreciate you leaving me a rating and review. Your feedback would be really useful in helping me create valuable content. Visit mindbodymouth.com.au/podcastlaunch for step by step instructions on how to subscribe, rate and review Mind, Body and Mouth. Until next time.

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