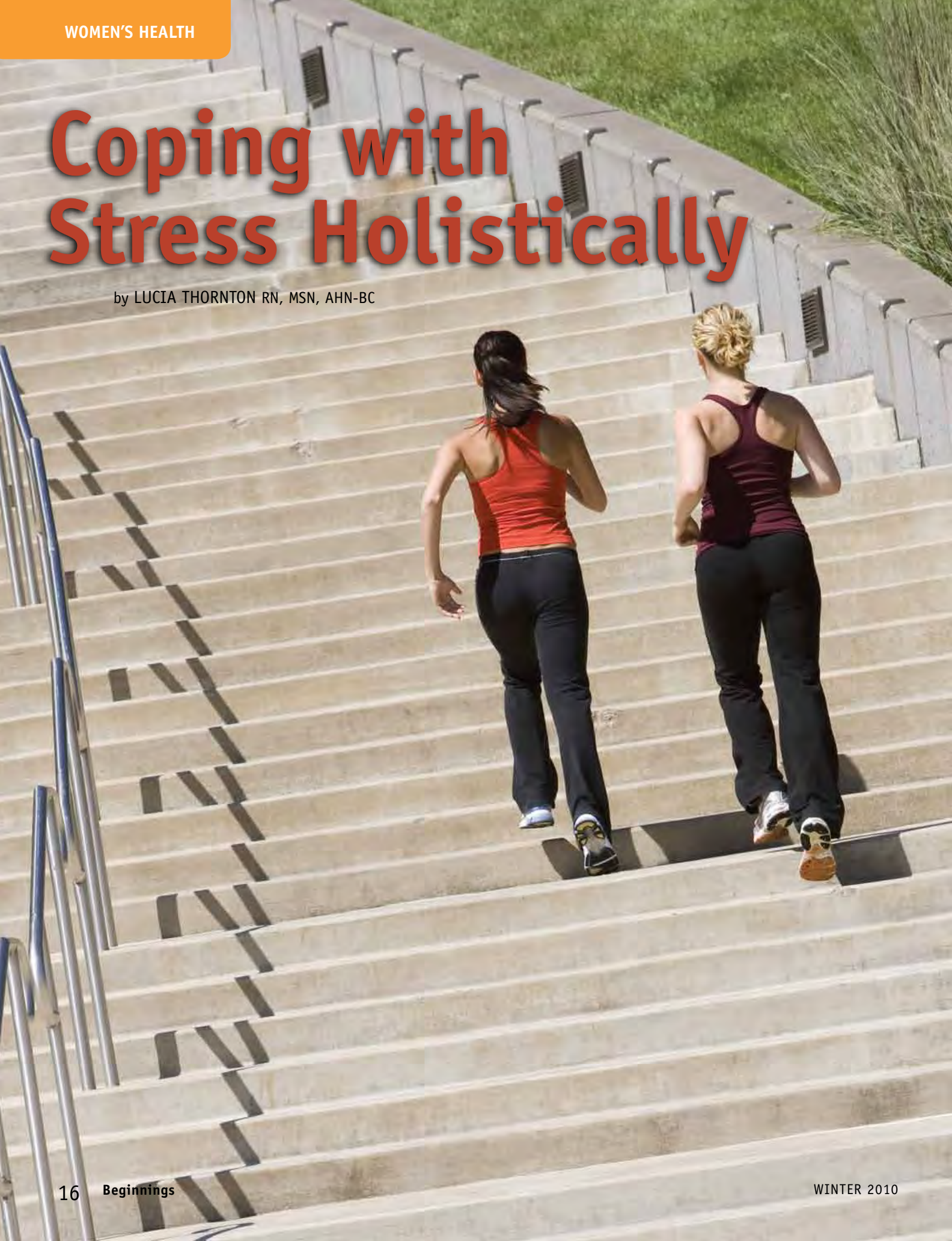


Coping with Stress Holistically

by LUCIA THORNTON RN, MSN, AHN-BC



Holistic nursing views everything as inseparable and interrelated—our mental, emotional, physical and social/relational aspects are all intertwined and interconnected. What affects one aspect will influence all other aspects.

When developing a personal plan to deal more effectively with stress and bring more health, vitality and wholesome behavior into your life, a holistic program that utilizes a variety of approaches is useful. The wonderful thing is that since every aspect of who you are is interrelated, when you create health in one area of your life, the positive effects spill into all other areas of your life (Thornton, 2006). Here are just a few ideas to get you started.

Daily Spiritual Practice

The ability to access your spiritual essence is perhaps the single most important and powerful practice that is available to you. When you engage in such practices, you are in fact getting in touch with an infinite reservoir of energy. These practices allow you to set aside your concerns and worries, quiet your mind, and rest in the essence of your infinite, spiritual *Being*. When you engage your spiritual essence, you are disengaging from that part of you that perceives and reacts to stress. Simply put, these practices allow you to set aside your ego and allow your awareness to rest in a space of wisdom, knowingness and compassion. Practices that are most

useful and commonly used include meditation, contemplative prayer and communing with nature.

Make it a habit to begin your day with whatever spiritual practice you choose and during this time, create an intention for what you want to manifest during the day. Just setting aside 10 minutes will set the tone for the entire day.

Exercise and Movement

One of the best antidotes for stress is exercise. Stress affects nearly every part of the body. Exercise, on the other hand, improves the functioning of nearly every part of the body that stress adversely affects.

Develop a daily exercise/movement routine that works for you. Ideally 30 minutes to an hour of exercise each day will help you immensely in coping with life's stressors. The best exercise program involves a combination of anaerobic (weight-lifting, calisthenics, etc.), aerobic (jogging, walking briskly, swimming, biking, aerobics classes, dancing, etc.) and stretching/yoga. Most of your exercise should be aerobic (70-80%). Remember to begin your exercise activity at a slow, controlled pace for five minutes or longer until your body warms up. After completing your exercise, spend five to 10 minutes in stretching exercises.

Incorporate types of exercise and movement that you enjoy and that fit into your schedule. Remember, even doing 20 minutes of exercise a day is

better than none. Use simple measures to incorporate movement into a full schedule. Weather permitting, take a walk outside during breaks and at lunchtime. Always take the stairs instead of an elevator. Instead of parking your car closest to your point of work or school, park farther away. When you get home from a stressful day of work, put on some lively music and dance to your heart's content. Create practices that are fun, doable and nurture your heart as well as your body.

Whole Natural Foods

Stress upsets our nutritional balance, so careful attention to your diet during stressful times is critically important. The body requires increased levels of vitamin A, vitamin C, thiamin, riboflavin and protein when under stress. Eating whole natural foods with an emphasis on fresh vegetables, fruits, whole-grains and legumes helps the body receive the added nutrients needed during times of stress. Since stress increases the production of free radicals in your cells, it is important to increase your intake of anti-oxidants (vitamins A, C and E) either through supplements or whole food sources (Thornton & Gold, 2000).

Also, since stress causes your metabolism to increase, it is most beneficial to eat five to six low-calorie, nutritious meals during the day. This will provide you with a steady source of energy and maximize your physical

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stamina. It is important to eat foods that are low on the glycemic index, which measures the speed with which sugar from foods is released into the bloodstream. A slower release provides a steadier source of energy (Loehr & Schwartz, 2005).

Certain foods should be avoided during times of stress. Avoid or eliminate caffeine, nicotine and alcohol. Caffeine overstimulates the adrenal glands and can further deplete your body of B-complex and C vitamins as well as induce symptoms of anxiety such as nervousness, fear, heart palpitations, nausea, restlessness and tremors (Null, 2005). So replace that cup of coffee with a cup of hot water and a slice of lemon. The hot lemon water will calm and relax you and also help with your digestion. Eliminate foods high in simple sugars (high glycemic index) from your diet such as processed foods, sodas, breads, and anything containing fructose, glucose, corn syrups, corn sweeteners, and white or brown sugars. Alcohol also contains a lot of simple sugar, so eliminating or avoiding alcoholic beverages is also advisable.

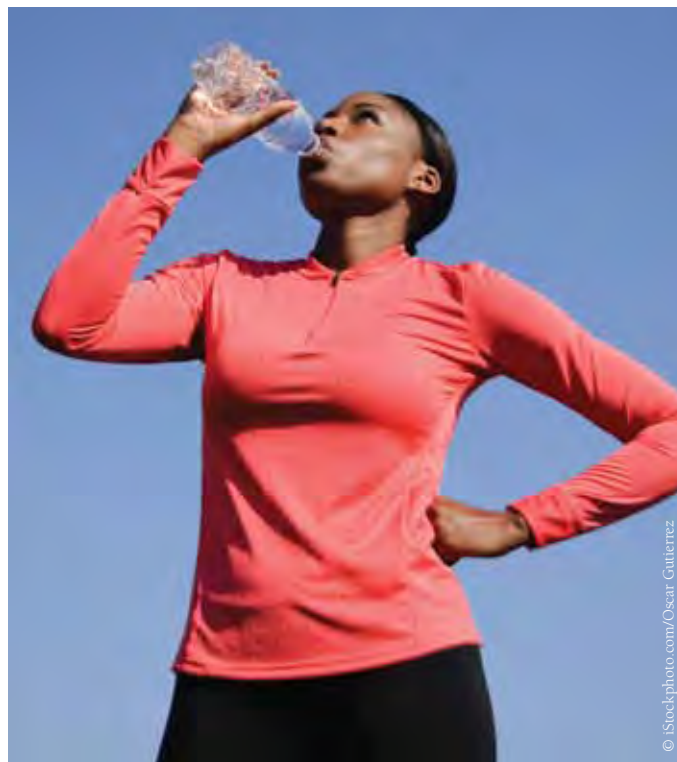
Eat Consciously

Eating consciously and in a settled atmosphere is very important. Stress oftentimes causes us to eat in a very rushed and anxious manner (as we are preoccupied with disconcerting thoughts and worries). Consuming food in such a state predisposes us to further digestive problems such as bloating, poor food absorption, indigestion, cramping, constipation, diarrhea and acid reflux. Make a habit to “sit down and slow down” while eating. Take a deep breathe, pause a moment to express and really feel gratitude for the food, and then create a special blessing of thanks. Turn off the TV or radio, put away the newspaper, light a candle, and just focus on nurturing yourself.

Drink Plenty of Water

Drinking plenty of water is always important but even more so during times of stress. When the body becomes dehydrated, the physiological processes that occur are some of the same ones that occur when coping with stress. The same hormones released in both states are endorphins, cortisone release factor, prolactin, vasopressin and rennin-angiotensin. Consequently, dehydration can cause or further aggravate your stress, and stress will cause further dehydration (Batmanghelidj, 2000).

Most authorities recommend drinking at least six to eight 8-ounce glasses of water each day. Another guide for adequate water is that the number of ounces you drink should equal your



body weight divided by two. For instance, if you weigh 150 pounds, then you should consume 75 ounces of water each day (Thornton, 2000).

Breathe From Your Belly

Common responses to stress include shallow breathing, holding your breathe and irregular breathing. This leads to greater tension, anxiety and further difficulty with breathing, which leads to decreased awareness and clarity in thinking. During stress-filled times, the sympathetic nervous system is engaged, and the “fight and flight” cycle perpetuates itself until the parasympathetic system takes over.

It is possible to voluntarily activate the parasympathetic system by breathing in a slow and deliberate manner into and out of your belly. This type of belly-breathing shuts down the stress response and places you in an optimal performance zone (Luskin & Pelletier, 2006).

Belly breathing, also called abdominal breathing (a component of many yoga traditions), is a quick and wonderful technique to break the stress cycle, and bring quietude and

relaxation into your day. It is also a very useful tool to teach your patients who are experiencing stress and anxiety.

A Permanent Practice of Self-Care

Any stress management program is founded on incorporating healthy habits into your daily life. Learning to care for yourself enables you to role-model and mentor the same kind of behavior in others. Remember to set self-loving limits and boundaries such as:

- taking adequate time for meals and breaks
- eating well
- taking in optimal amounts of water each day
- getting eight hours of sleep each night
- tending to your spiritual needs

It is easy to fall back into unhealthy habits, especially when work and life conditions become very stressful. If this happens, simply notice this, and without judging yourself, return to the practice of caring well for yourself. Establish a support mechanism or group that regularly reinforces healthy habits of self-care.

Establishing healthy patterns of responding to stress and incorporating self-care practices into your daily regimen will benefit you throughout your entire life. Now is the time to make a commitment toward a healthier, happier and stress-free you. Don't delay—you deserve it!

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