

# A Stress Free Life – SIMPLE

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Stress is a part of life today. We don't like it, but it cannot be avoided altogether in life. There is good stress and bad stress. Stress which makes us feel low, pressurized and anxious actually harms and hurts our health and is called bad stress or distress. Good stress is that which helps us to perform better. For example, students study hard for examinations and put forth their best. Hence it is considered good stress. It is also called eustress.

Let us first understand what creates stress. Circumstances, attachments, a fast-paced life, multi-tasking, impatience, expectations, our own habits, being attached to the results, the sense of doership – the reasons are multitudinous. Even simple things like the maid or driver not turning up for work causes stress. We can make a list of our trigger factors to become more aware of them. We may be surprised to see how different each one's list is in comparison. If we know how to handle our minds, we can cope better, and even overcome stress eventually.

In spirituality, we believe that stress is the response of our mind, independent of any external situation. Two people in similar situations may not necessarily experience the same levels of stress, because their response to the external stimuli is different. That depends upon their minds and personality.

Arjuna, the mighty warrior, had prepared himself rigorously for twelve years to fight the Kauravas. He was the best archer; he could shoot blindfolded; he was ambidextrous, but faced with the enemies at Kurukshetra, he collapsed. Sri Krishna had to sing the entire Bhagavad Gita to get him to fight! Pujya Gurudev used to say that before the exam the student is wise, after the exam, the student is equally wise, but during the exam, the student is 'otherwise'.

## **Stress Management**

How can one be successful and yet stress free? To manage stress, both skill and strength are required. In a competitive world, skills are essential to succeed. However, skill alone is not enough. Strength, mental strength in particular, is needed to keep stress at bay. Today, depression, divorce and suicides are very common, especially amongst youngsters. This is because one is not equipped to handle the challenges of life.

If our attitude is strong: “Come what may, I can face it,” there will be no stress. In fact, this is the first step in de-stressing the mind. We need to cultivate the mental strength to handle whatever causes us stress. Then we can go ahead and objectively think about how to accomplish the task within the given time-frame. If you are stressed out, nothing can be accomplished.

Swami Chinmay ananda gave us the formula: We can, we must, we will. Whenever we are stressed, we should recollect this formula. Any time the mind says we can’t do it, we should say “No, I can.” Someone has said, “Success comes in ‘cans’ and not in ‘cannots’.” The moment we start thinking that we cannot do it, we will be stressed.

When we undertake a project or a proposal, we should first evaluate the feasibility of the project. If a committee is formed with a group of people who individually cannot do anything and collectively decide that nothing can be done, then nothing will be done! If we brood over the situation of our country and feel that things are going from bad to worse, then we get stressed. We must think about what can be done and start doing it. We should register and exercise our vote. It is our country and we have to choose our leader. If we do not vote, we have no right to complain, as we are not doing our duty.

So stress comes when we focus on the ‘cannot’. If something can be done, then just do it. If something cannot be done, then just drop it. The problem is that we do not do what can be done and brood over what cannot be done. Hence we are stressed.

## **SIMPLE Formula**

Here is a six-level formula to handle stress – SIMPLE. Let us discuss this acronym in the reverse order.

E - External Environment

L - Lifestyle

P - Physical Strength

M - Mental Courage

I - Intellectual Clarity

S - Spiritual Depth

E - External Environment

It is true that most of our stress appears to come from outside. For example, one of the biggest causes of stress is the condition of the roads and the traffic. It is a challenge to reach the destination on time. One can become a nervous wreck in the process. It is better to accept the situation, instead of building up stress.

Several situations can cause stress. Sometimes we feel that the planetary conditions are not auspicious and that causes stress. Whatever be the external factors, if they can be changed, we can manage to change them; what we cannot change, we have to learn to accept.

Procrastination is another major cause of stress. Kabirdas has said *kāl kare so āj kar, āj kare so ab, pal mein pralaya hoyegi bahuri karoge kab* – Tomorrow's work do today, today's work now. If the moment is lost, how will the work be done? By postponing, we build up the list of things to do and end up in sheer despair. We don't do our exercises till our health collapses. Students study at the last minute for their exams, feeling frustrated and tense. If we wake up late, the first thing we skip is our meditation and prayer. We say that we have no time! Because of procrastination, a situation which is external becomes a factor of stress, which is internal.

There is a nice quotation which says, “If we do not face a cub when it is a cub, we will have to face a lion.” Procrastination makes the situation a challenge, the challenge becomes a problem, the problem develops into a crisis and the crisis creates stress and failure. Systematically, an external situation becomes a cause of internal stress due to mere procrastination.

If we wake up and get up at the same time, there will be no procrastination in life. We wake up with the alarm, but press the snooze button, pull the blanket closer and go back to sleep. A spiritual seeker is very alert and efficient, never dull. Dakshah is the word used in the twelfth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. Procrastination is tamoguna. Tamas causes a lot of stress. Pujya Gurudev said, “Plan out your work and work out your plan.” External environment need not cause us stress if we learn to accept the situation and avoid procrastination.

## **L - Lifestyle**

Another reason for procrastination is our lifestyle. We have too many things to do, so we are constantly dealing with the day-to-day situations on a war footing. We do not have enough time to sit down, plan and make a ‘to do’ list. To minimise stress in our life, we should learn to slow down. Doctors are of the opinion that many chronic heart diseases and other ailments are caused only because of our hectic lifestyle. More than medicines, what we need is to make changes in our lifestyle – in the type of food we eat, our exercise regimen and our sleeping habits. Even a fitness freak can collapse due to lack of sleep.

Our body has a ‘sleep-clock’. The body gets tired when we deprive it of sleep. When the sleep is in excess, the body becomes lazy and wants to procrastinate. We require a minimum of six to seven hours sleep, and we need to change our lifestyle accordingly. For our youngsters, relaxing begins at night, after 10 o’clock, by watching television late into the night. Social media takes up a big chunk of our time. We sleep late and rarely do we enjoy the beauty of sunrise and the fresh morning air.

One has to learn to slow down. Instead, life in the modern world is becoming faster. Children are taught to read fast because they have to

prepare for competitive exams. Instead of reading for relaxation, one is taught to speed read – one page a minute! While shopping, we get stressed because there are so many brands to choose from.

Now and then one has to do things fast, no doubt, but speed should not become our lifestyle. We eat our meals mechanically, gobbling down the food to save time. Often, we are not even aware of what we eat. Eating while watching television is yet another distraction.

## **P - Physical Strength**

There are five aspects to be taken care of to develop physical strength. This can be remembered easily with the acronym 'BREAD'.

- ***B for Breathing***

Breathing must be slow, steady and deep. When we get stressed, our breathing becomes quick and shallow, and a large amount of stress hormones are secreted in the body. One simple technique is to set a reminder every hour or so to sit back for a few minutes, stretch and relax, close the eyes and breathe slowly, steadily and as deeply as possible.

- ***R for Recreation or Relaxation***

One must have some good recreation or some hobby in life which will rejuvenate the senses. One should avoid passive entertainment that makes a person dull and lethargic. Depending upon one's own talent and background, one can choose from a variety of creative activities.

- ***E for Exercise***

Exercise is a must. Three times a week, minimum twenty minutes a day, one has to exercise to maintain a healthy body. Our lifestyle has become sedentary. Young people work ten to fourteen hours at the computer. So gym and yoga sessions have become a part of corporate culture. We have to stretch and relax each part of the body consciously to let go of the accumulated stress. When stress accumulates in the body, the muscles, nerves and various parts of the body become stiff.

- ***A for Adaptability***

Each one's body is made differently. We cannot blindly follow the lifestyle of other people. We have to adapt ourselves to our own body and lifestyle after proper stocktaking and analysis.

- ***D for Diet***

Simple and sãttvic diet with plenty of fresh vegetables and less of oily, spicy or stale food will provide us with more prãnic energy. The Bhagavad Gita gives excellent guidelines for this in chapter seventeen.

## **M - Mental Strength**

Mental stress is caused when thoughts are teeming in our mind uncontrollably. On an average, we think 60,000 thoughts a day, and with each thought, we expend a lot of energy. So, just by thinking, we get tired. Pujya Guruji says that some people get tired because of work, but a majority of people get tired by the very thought of work.

The mind gets stressed when we do not control the quality and quantity of our thoughts. If 60,000 thoughts come to our mind, the mind will obviously be tired and exhausted. Lesser the number of thoughts, greater is the peace of mind. But we cannot stop the flow of thoughts altogether.

We have so many thoughts because we take everything personally and brood over it. If somebody does not smile at us, we take it personally. The person may not have done it intentionally, but the mind projects and reacts.

If we live selflessly and without conflict, the number of thoughts in the minds will automatically reduce. There are six enemies of the mind known in Vedanta as Shadripus: They are kãma (selfishness), krodha (anger), lobha (greed), moha (delusion), mada (arrogance or pride) and mãtsarya (jealousy). Even one of these is enough to create agitation. Our minds have all the six, along with bhaya (fear), shoka (sorrow), rãga and dvesha (likes and dislikes). Nobody teaches us how to handle these enemies. The root cause of all of them is selfishness. The more selfless we are, the stronger we become, and our stress is reduced automatically.

Pujya Gurudev's heart was functioning at less than 20% capacity in the last few years of his life, which meant that his heart could stop beating at any moment. In spite of this, he worked very hard, running an organization that depended solely on volunteers and donations. He worked without any semblance of stress or worry, because he was working selflessly for a higher cause.

When we love something more than ourselves, we become selfless. It is not difficult – a mother loves her child selflessly. When we think of how to give more, selfless love happens. So expanding our mind to love selflessly is one important method of reducing stress.

### **I - Intellectual Clarity**

One of the reasons for stress in today's world is the availability of too many choices which leads to indecision. So many career choices are available today. Advertisements of food, consumer durables, clothing etc. bombard us with many tempting alternatives. The mind oscillates between the various choices available. Faced with innumerable choices, we are unable to decide, and this indecision invariably causes stress. Clarity of thought makes us stress free.

We eat food to nourish and nurture our body, but we do not nourish the intellect. So the intellect becomes grosser and grosser. Food for the intellect is to train it to think logically and increase its capacity of discrimination and decision making. Intellectual stimulation and inspiration is essential exercise for the intellect. If we study scientific and spiritual literature, our thinking becomes deeper. We get a wider perspective, a macro picture of life.

Any inspiring thought, be it in terms of relationships or projects or education or any other selfless cause, where we can give time, effort and service, is constructive and helps us to grow intellectually. Today, we have a glut of information, but inspirational guidance is not adequate. Hence we get swayed easily.

Twenty minutes of study in a day would help strengthen the intellect. Any philosophical book can be read. When our mind is occupied with

higher ideas, petty problems do not disturb us. Satsanga and svādhyāya (self-study) help to stimulate the intellect and it is best done early in the morning. If the intellect is inspired, our decisions will be objective and consequently our life will become stress free.

It is important to have a goal in your life. Absence of a goal creates stress, which we may not even be aware of. If we have a goal, our energy gets harnessed; when there is no goal, our energy is dissipated. Let us take the example of water. When it is flowing freely, energy cannot be generated, but when a dam is built across the flowing water, all that energy gets harnessed. Sunlight is full of energy, but a convex lens is required to harness that energy, which can then burn the paper below it. Solar energy is used to generate electricity for big projects. Therefore, a goal is very important to harness our energy in life.

Intellectual clarity is very important. It involves four aspects. Firstly, we must have clarity about our role in life. Without that, one gets stressed out. This was the cause of Arjuna's confusion and stress on the battlefield. He was a kshatriya, whose duty it was to protect dharma. However, overwhelmed by his personal relationship with the Kauravas, he got confused and lost sight of his immediate role as a warrior.

The second aspect of clarity is to keep one's focus consistently on the goal. The third aspect refers to one's identity – the basic question of 'Who am I?' As long as we are attached to our individuality, it will create stress. For lack of a better word, we can call it soul clarity.

The fourth and most important aspect is moral clarity – what is right and what is wrong. There are universal values which determine right and wrong. For example, honesty is a universal value, irrespective of whether one is a doctor, engineer or home-maker, a youth or a senior citizen, a student or a professional – all have to be honest at all times, in order to avoid stress.

## S - Spiritual Depth

We must have the necessary spiritual knowledge to withdraw the mind from external disturbances in order to experience the peace and silence within. Through daily prayer and meditation or prānāyāma, we can consciously try to make our mind quiet. When we are anchored within ourselves, problems do not disturb us.

If we manage our minds efficiently at these six levels of SIMPLE – Spiritual Depth, Intellectual Clarity, Mental Courage, Physical Strength, Lifestyle and External Environment, then we can manage our stress well. Living in this holistic way, we become stress free.



### About Shri Swami Swatmananda

An Acharya of Chinmaya Mission-South Mumbai and National Director of All India Chinmaya Yuva Kendra, Shri. Swami Swatmananda is one of the most dynamic leaders of Chinmaya Mission. He completed the Vedanta Course from Powai in the year 2000 and since then he is serving in Chinmaya Mission Mumbai.

He expounds the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta through talks on the Bhagavad Geeta, Upanishads and other texts of Vedanta & Bhakti through camps meditation retreats, interactive sessions and discussions for youth & adults. Children love him dearly and look forward to his annual summer camps on various themes of spirituality, India, Hindu Culture etc. He inspires the youth with dynamic spirituality, encourages them to think & question. Various mediums like theatre plays, treks, outdoor experiential learning programmes, music etc. are used by him. He also takes the Youth Empowerment Programme (YEP) which is a value-based leadership programme for youth who want to serve the Nation & Culture.

Several corporates like Piramals, Reliance, Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Motors, Toyota, PwC etc. have been addressed by him. He holds weekly discussion groups on the Bhagavad Geeta for some of the top industrialists of India.

Chinmaya Pradeep is one of its kind outdoor Vedantic Vision Park based on the life and teachings of Swami Chinmayananda at Powai, Mumbai. He has conceptualised and executed it.

