

# Is stress causing you aches and pains?

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Do you get: Headaches, neck pain, shoulder aches, jaw pain, stiffness, tension, soreness, sensitive to touch, tightness between the shoulder blades, low back pain, maybe even knee pain, body aches and pains, fibromyalgia, myofascial pain and trigger points? Stress may be the cause! There is now convincing evidence that stress is linked to many musculoskeletal disorders, chronic aches and pains, and fibromyalgia. This problem can affect any one – children, teenagers, men and women, people working in office, especially with computers, people working manually, and nurses - to name a few.

## Tense muscles, sensitive nerves, injury

Stress produces hormones, which increase muscle tension and increase sensitivity in nerves so one may feel more pain. Chronic stress seems to lower pain thresholds, and make nerves more sensitive, and these changes occur both in the outer peripheral nerves and within the brain and central nervous system.

Stress is also associated with delayed and changed healing when someone gets a soft tissue or musculoskeletal injury.

## Back Pain

Researchers have found that people with chronic stress may be three times more likely to develop back pain than those with better coping skills; to the point that stress was a better predictor of future back pain than special tests such as MRI or a discogram, which could assess the physical structures.

Stress not only leads to low back pain, but may change the way one uses their back muscles. Stress, pain, and the musculoskeletal condition can all interact with each other. For example nursing students with low back pain have been found to keep their spines in a more extended position.

Research also suggests that one's belief about their back pain can determine if the problem becomes severe. If one believes the problem is severe, disabling, caused by work or a specific activity, then this stress can lead to a more severe problem.

## Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is another serious problem affecting our community.

Fibromyalgia is a problem of sensitisation and is associated with a continuum of chronic muscular pain and tenderness in the population. In other words we can all experience this problem to a greater or lesser degree. In its severe form it can be quite disabling and is usually linked to stress (especially stress we feel we can't avoid), trauma (especially trauma of the neck and shoulder area), chronic muscle tension, infections, all of which can lead to increased immune reaction releasing increased levels of something called

proinflammatory cytokines. These are the things that make you feel unwell and achy when you have the flu. Multiple and chronic stresses seem to play a significant role in fibromyalgia and other chronic pain conditions all associated with this sensitisation reaction.

### **Headaches**

Stress is also a trigger for chronic tension type headaches, and like for fibromyalgia, the problems seems to be associated with increased sensitisation of nerves. There is increased tenderness of nerves around the head and so it requires less input to stimulate nerves.

### **Inflammation**

Inflammation itself can also be stimulated by stress. There is a condition called neurogenic inflammation where the nerves back fire and lead to an inflammation reaction without any injury, insult or infection. Inflammation itself produces chemicals, which make nerves more sensitive to transmit nerve signals which can lead to pain.

Besides sensitisation some research is indicating that muscle pain especially of neck and shoulder area may be linked to reduced blood circulation and increased metabolites. Studies have found – for example in a study comparing office workers and manual workers with upper shoulder pain (upper trapezius muscle) the office workers experienced tension in their muscles but there was no increased activity in their muscle as measured by EMG. Instead it was found they had reduced blood flow and increased metabolic waste products in their muscles. This variation occurred even when at rest – in other words they weren't getting proper recovery and rest with their muscles.

### **The brain is plastic**

Pain and stress affect all levels of our being. Both chronic pain and chronic stress have been shown to change the brain and affect the way it works. The brain luckily is plastic and adaptable, so what 'bad' things have been learnt leading to the brain changes can also be unlearned. However the solution is not so simple, as it requires a holistic lifestyle approach.

As clients often identify when they realise their problem is stress related, the solution is not a simple quick fix treatment. It can be quite overwhelming as stress is a large and insidious thing, and solving stress requires time, awareness, and possibly new skills to move towards a more healthy or healthier lifestyle and wellbeing.

### **Ayurvedic skills**

As our Ayurvedic teacher advised, taking small simple steps may be the best approach. Make one or two small changes at a time. Work with them for a while until they become a new habit then move on to the next step, working towards your goal.

### **Yogic skills**

Yoga can provide tools to help relieve our suffering and move towards a more optimal self.

### **Tantric skills**

Tantra reminds us that moving towards health and wellbeing is not necessarily becoming some one new, but rather uncovering our more natural self – who we really are. In other words stop getting in the way of healing.

### **Reminders**

It is also handy to be reminded about stress; through regular therapy sessions, attending classes, reading articles, sharing with groups, and simply stopping to breathe slowly. We can so quickly get caught up in the busy-ness of life and forget, and be reminded only after we begin to hurt, or fail to heal very well.

### **Make time, take time, lifestyle coaching**

We are all unique in what causes us stress and what also helps us. We need to spend time learning about these things then establishing a Stress Management Plan we can call upon when we need it. For sure when we are stressed we don't think so well, so tools should be practised so they can be used when needed, not just when stressed.

Below are some simple processes we can think about to help better manage stress, reduce muscle aches and pains and move towards more wellbeing. If you would like to know more about these and how you can incorporate them into your life call for a session on 3342 1480.

Stopping to breathe, shrugging your shoulders and turning your head regularly, and becoming more aerobically active can give temporary relief to your shoulder aches. BUT for more long lasting change:

- It begins with taking responsibility for yourself
- Developing mind body awareness
- Be always open to learning – learn more about pain, stress management, inflammation, the big issues in modern society
- Setting a meaningful goal for yourself (often called 'Sankalpa' in Yoga)
- Staying fit – aerobically, strength, flexibility
- Breathing well
- Eating well
- Meditating daily
- Get strength from a group of like minded
- Be environmentally aware
- Be creative – for this you need to create space for yourself
- Do something for others without need for anything in return
- Be Intentional in mind and action
- Be around happy or positive people

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