Dr. Rob’s Science Connection -- Enhancing Brain Health

## **Don’t Stress About It**

There are of course many factors that affect our memory ability and stress is certainly one of them. It might be surprising, but a small amount of stress can actually make us pay attention, motivate us to take care of things, and maybe even help us make new memories. However, a lot of stress can really have a negative impact on memory and maybe even our health. In the short term, being too stressed about something can cause us to not pay attention to what we are supposed to be doing. For example, if someone is late for an engagement and they are rushing to try to get out of the house, and they become overly stressed thinking about the repercussions of being late, then they might not pay attention to whether they have their wallet or purse. The act of thinking about the stressful situation leaves less mental room to think about other things and can kind of dumb us down in the short run. In the long run, there is evidence that people who are chronically stressed out or have what we call a “neurotic personality” are more likely to develop dementia. There is also evidence that high levels of chronic stress can also damage neurons in our brains, particularly neurons in the hippocampus, where new memories are made. If that was reason enough to try to reduce stress levels, there is also evidence that stress increases the chance of developing depression, which in turn can also impair memory performance,

 So what should someone do if they want to reduce their stress level. First, they should try to get more physical exercise, which can alleviate anxiety and give a sense of well being, Second, they can try to reduce the stressors. For example, if getting stuck in traffic and being late is a constant stressor for someone then that person should simply leave earlier. Here are some other ways to reduce stress.

Stretch

* Take a warm bath
* Stand up and smile
* Sleep
* Learn to say “no”
* Switch to decaffeinated beverages (do so gradually if you consume a lot of caffeine)
* If things are out of your control, admit that and accept it
* Eat healthier food
* Listen to your favorite music
* Look at photos of family and friends
* Organize your time
* Make a list of things that need to be done
* Talk to a friend
* Take a nap
* Read a book

Recognize that life is a work in progress and that not everything will be done exactly as you had hoped or planned.

Don’t avoid doing things that need to be done as a way of reducing stress, as recent research shows that can increase stress in the long run.

Dr. Rob Winningham is a Professor of Psychology and Gerontology at Western Oregon University. For the past 20 years he has researched human memory and ways to enhance cognitive abilities. His brain stimulation activities are used by thousands of retirement communities and have been shown to improve memory ability.

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