

## Stress Takes a Holiday: Effective Coping in Challenging Times

**Dr. Gail Saltz Dissects, Demystifies and Delineates the Stressors in Our Lives**

BY SALLY SHERWOOD

It's a typical rainy, cloud-covered October day in the city, and at the Parents in Action Benefit luncheon at the Cosmopolitan Club, the speaker, renowned psychiatrist, lecturer, columnist, best-selling author and TV commentator Dr. Gail Saltz, asks, "How many people in this room felt stress in the last year?" Given the anxiety of the last half hour alone in a city depleted of taxis, filled with public transportation delays and populated by umbrella-wielding humanity, it is no wonder that every hand in the room is raised.

"Good!" Saltz says. "We have a roomful of human beings." There is laughter. The stress level plummets, as everyone in the room feels somehow comforted by the universality of "overdrive."

The nature of the city in which we live, she explains, contains its own special recipe for stress: competition, high expectations, a history of "high-flying economy," anxiety about children, ambition, drive, and a psychologically savvy demographic. Not coincidentally, professional help is easily accessible to a population of pressured, ambitious people.

Saltz explained the nature, causes and management of stress. Referencing pertinent New Yorker cartoons that humorously resonated psychogenic stress, sexual miscommunication and a feeling of individual feminine inadequacy in a room filled with "superwomen," she described the toll taken by stress on our mood, anxiety level, immune system and cardiovascular health. Contemporary stressors run the gamut from economic worries and parent/child conflicts to "sandwich generation" care-giving and the midlife "existential crisis," prompting many of us to ask, "Is this it?"

In the competitive microcosm that is New York City, one out of every four children at some time in their youth will develop anxiety stress disorder against a backdrop of competition, high expectations, and pressure from anxious adults. Fortunately, we also have access to tools that can alter our perspective, afford our families coping defenses and help us develop resilience even when we feel most vulnerable. We are, as Saltz notes, "probably the most psychologically, psychiatrically savvy community out there."

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Knowing ourselves and adopting personal coping mechanisms can ease the transition from helplessness to control and from susceptibility to resilience, enabling us to predict how vulnerable we may be to genetically, economically or socially influenced stressors that can seriously affect our overall well being.

Before we discount all stress as deleterious to our health, Saltz reminds us that "good stress" can prepare us for a business presentation, theatrical performance or sports competition. How we manage stress under any condition, however, is paramount to our achieving control over its potential negative impact.

To that end, Saltz recommends "Therapy Camp," tools for stress management that can be tackled independently:

- **Self-observation:** jot down a stressor that occurred and your reaction. For example, you may note that an argument with your partner triggers back pain. This exercise allows us to determine cause and effect and recognize symptoms prompted by stress.

## STRESS TAKES A HOLIDAY CONTINUED

- **Cognitive restructuring:** take a thought and turn it around. A child fails a test and we immediately hyperbolize the worst-case scenario (e.g., no college in the future). Think of something more realistic and immediate that is not life altering.
- **Relaxation training:** take 15 minutes daily for progressive relaxation of muscle groups and/or visual imagery.
- **Time management:** plan the day before to avoid immersion in simultaneous tasks. Realistically evaluate the time each item will take.
- **Problem solving:** analyze a problem and review the efficacy of the solution.

Reminding us of certain truths — sex is stress-reducing; sudden loss does not mandate a timetable for recovery; complicated grief may demand professional intervention; saying “yes” to everything may be self-defeating; sleep heals; libidos differ; preparation eases the impact of empty-nesting — Saltz again underscores the universality, predictability and manageability of stress in our lives. It is, after all, what makes us human. •

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Dr. Gail Saltz is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at the New York-Presbyterian Hospital Weil Cornell School of Medicine and psychoanalyst at the New York Psychoanalytical Institute in private practice in NYC. The mental health and relationship contributor on NBC's Today Show, she regularly contributes to CNN Headline News, Women's Day and iVillage.com, and hosts a series at 92nd Street Y. She is author of three adult and two children's books.