Head and muscles ache from stress: What can be done? [1]

Dear Alice,

I often get stress headaches, backaches, and neck aches. I know these are normal, but how can I try to eliminate them?

Answer
Dear Reader,

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so take some weight off your shoulders by nipping that stress in the bud. Head, neck, shoulder, back, and other body aches often result from a progressive build-up of muscle tension brought on by a stressful day or week. If you can recognize muscle tension when it begins, you can prevent it from turning into uncomfortable aches and pains.

First, try and take stock of what may be causing you stress in the first place. Pinpointing the cause may help you prevent it from triggering those pesky aches and pains. Are exams or important meetings at work responsible for your teeth grinding or shoulder clenching? Is procrastination causing you to lose sleep or sit hunched over your books or computer for hours on end? If you notice trends like this, try to take a break when you sense those stressors kicking in. Prioritizing your to-dos and creating a schedule may help you make time for those much needed breaks. During your five or ten minutes of down time, take some deep breaths, stretch, or go for a walk. Although it may sound like a broken record, eating regular, healthy meals and getting exercise [2] is also a good way to deal with the stress that is becoming a real pain in the neck (and shoulders and back). As you’ve likely heard, too, "laughter is the best medicine" so try reading, watching, or listening to something that will make you smile and take your mind off what is stressing you out.

If you're looking for a more physical remedy for your stress-induced aches and pains, check out the related Q&As for ideas on how to relieve muscle tension in your neck, shoulders, and back. If it's more than just stress that's got your muscles in knots, you may want to consider talking to a mental health professional or making an appointment with your health care provider to investigate any underlying cause(s) of stress.

Muscle pain, fatigue, anger, and other symptoms are often our bodies' ways of telling us to "chill out." So, lighten the load by focusing your efforts on preventing the stress responsible for your aching muscles.

Alice!
Category:
Emotional Health [3]
Stress & Anxiety [4]

Related questions

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Resources

Stressbust Yourself Toolkit [11]
Medical Services (Morningside) [12]
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [13]