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## Exercise releases stress-fighting hormones



by Holly Leber

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Tonya Ransom knows about stress. The creator of Busy Bodies fitness is a single mother and business owner.

"I have all the challenges — feeling like I don't have enough time, trying to raise an 8-year-old, cooking dinner, grocery shopping. All the same challenges my clients have, I experience those," she said.

To alleviate her stress and increase her energy level, Ransom turns to exercise.

"When I go out there and I'm training [clients], it is definitely a stress release," she said.

Last year, the American Council on Exercise named stress reduction through fitness as one of the top projected fitness trends for 2011. Stress is not just mental, but physical as well, experts say.

"When you're stressed, the body does not recognize whether there's a dangerous situation where you have to respond immediately, like a lion's getting ready to chase after you, or just mental stress, worrying about work or other anxieties," said Tina Stonebrook, a registered nurse at Memorial Hospital.

The physical response, she said, is the same no matter the cause of the stress. The body releases chemicals, including adrenaline and epinephrine, which cause the physical stress response — increased blood pressure and heart rate.

Exercise releases what Stonebrook called "good hormones", endorphins and serotonin, which can help alleviate the physical effects of stress. These good hormones combat the negative ones, helping the breathing rate, pulse rate and blood pressure to return to normal.

Chronic stress can weaken the immune system.

"When you introduce exercise, it helps to reduce stress," said Dr. Jean Cates, a behaviorist at Erlanger Health Systems. "[This] causes the immune system to be stronger, which results in better physical health and emotional health."

Regular exercise, she said, can also contribute to better, more restful sleep.

"The people who tend to be more highly stressed in our community also tend to have difficulty sleeping, which makes them less effective and efficient in their professional and personal lives, more irritable and therefore more depressed and anxious," Cates said.

Exercise can help increase energy and therefore efficacy.

"Stress reduces energy level because so much of their energy gets misdirected and drained by their stress level," Cates said.

Yoga has a particular stress alleviation benefit in its concentration on deep breathing.

"One of the things that happens when the body responds to stress is your heart rate goes up," Stonebrook said. "Deep breathing, slowing down the breathing, taking nice, big deep breaths actually

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can lower your blood pressure and lower your heart rate. It's the only thing you can consciously do, physically, to make that come down. So the deep breathing in yoga is really beneficial."

Cates, Stonebrook and Ransom recognize that the prospect of working out can be a stressful one to those who are not accustomed to it. But high intensity exercise is not necessary. Cates said beginning with 10-15 minutes of walking each day is a start.

Ransom said she likes to put the play back into exercise, and to help her clients see what they can do to increase physical activity in their daily lives.

"Meet your child at the bus stop and speed walk (home)," she said.

Stonebrook suggests getting away from the stigma of the word "exercise," and replacing it with "activity."

"Start out simply," she said, "just with something like walking, especially during a stressful moment, if they can get up and walk for five or 10 minutes, that can help get rid of some of the stress."

Contact Holly Leber at hleber@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6391. Follow her on Twitter at twitter.com/hollyleber.

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**about Holly Leber ...**

Holly Leber is a reporter and columnist for the Life section. She has worked at the Times Free Press since March 2008. Holly covers "everything but the kitchen sink: when it comes to features: the arts, young adults, classical music, art, fitness, home, gardening and food. She writes the popular and sometimes-controversial column Love and Other Indoor Sports. Holly calls both New York City and Saratoga Springs, NY home. She earned a bachelor of arts ...

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