The Lupus and Stress Connection

by BARBARA LEECH

Dealing With Lupus and Stress

Someone once told me that I thrive on stress. To be fair, I was once an adrenaline junkie in my career as a reporter, and I loved breaking a big story, deadlines and getting the story to press as a newspaper editor. But along with the excitement, stress was taking its toll.

Throughout my younger years, I had lupus but was not diagnosed yet, so I did not know what was wrong with me or that I was making it worse. The truth is that stress made the wolf (AKA lupus) thrive, not me.

Years later, I am a freelance writer, book editor, and lupus blogger. Though my work is not very stressful, the amount I earn working from home, combined with the ever-increasing medical costs of my care, is a prime source of daily stress.

A lupus flare-up, such as the one I am in right now, means more specialist visits, more copays, more medication, more tests my insurance won't cover and a generalized fear of going to the mailbox and finding an outrageously overpriced bill waiting for me.

Accepting I Am a Stress Hog

I am stressed. I know I do it to myself sometimes, but there is a legitimate basis for it. Having lupus is stressful in itself.

With lupus I never know when the wolf will strike. I never know if Mr. Big Bad will just huff and puff, or if he will blow down my house and eat me alive the next time he comes to town.

And I know stress is feeding the wolf exactly what it needs to have the strength to devour me. Experts agree that stress is a major trigger for a lupus flare and we should do everything possible to lower stress in our lives.

I have done a lot of reading on the subject of stress and lupus, since I can't seem to keep either at bay for very long. I discovered that researchers have documented a link between a high level of reported stress and the worsening of lupus patients' conditions. In fact, a very high percentage of patients actually attributed their lupus worsening to a major stressful event in their lives.

I read one intriguing study that took a close look, examining blood levels of certain stress response chemicals/hormones released by the body before and after extreme stress. They had the subjects give a public speech, since it's a huge stressor for most people!

The study examined healthy people and people with lupus before and after public speaking and analyzed sympathetic activity, catecholamine production, lymphocyte subpopulations, cytokine production, and adrenergic receptor expression — all natural reactions to stress.

The healthy subjects had a normal increase in these naturally occurring chemical responses. These increases should be happening and they are what protect the body from the impact of stress.

But the subjects with lupus did not respond normally to the stress. They did not have the increases, leaving their body vulnerable rather than responding in a healthy, normal manner to the stress.

Now I Have Proof, What Do I Do About It?

So, what I believed to be true about lupus and stress is being researched with interesting and supportive findings.

I am sure you probably agree that stress is extra bad for someone with lupus. It can affect your body, mind and spirit in very negative ways. It is an enemy to overall health.

As I try and remain positive about everything, it is something I battle almost as much as I do this disease. Here are a few tips on what you can do to ease the stress and focus on what matters:

Breathe Deeply

It is the body's natural response to hold our breath when we become stressed or afraid. This triggers responses in the body we don't even realize; it is like a silent alarm to your body that danger is near and it should go into stress mode.

For most people this is "fight or flight" survival mode, but for lupies it is more like "beat my body up with a large flare-triggering bat" mode.

Pay attention to yourself and you may catch yourself doing it. Several deep cleansing breaths when you feel stressed can work wonders at releasing some of what you hold inside.

Take one in and hold it for five seconds, then release it slowly through your mouth. Feel the tension escape through that breath you are expelling.

Next page: *four more tips for reducing and better managing stress.*

More Sleep and Rest

When you can sleep, do it! Take any opportunity — even if it is a cat nap — to recharge.

Say No to Anything You Cannot Handle

If you don't want to do something or know you really shouldn't take on a task, do not say yes to make everyone happy but you. Know your limits, take care of you and say no when you need to.

Check Your Perspective

Much of what keeps me up at night (besides insomnia) is worry over things I cannot change. It is at this time I need to remember what is important, stop beating myself up for the things I feel I should have accomplished and let go of stressing over things I cannot do anything about.

Ask yourself, is what you are allowing to stress you out worth it? I mean *really* worth it. Does it matter like your life, your family, the things and people that really mean the most to you? If not, let the stress go.

Accept That Lupus Is a Roller Coaster Ride

Life, in general, is a ride. With lupus there are extra intense moments, unexpected challenges and seemingly

dangerous loopy-loops. Let go of some of your need to control things because with lupus, you often can't. You cannot always control all of the stops, bumps and freefalls that occur.

Go with it and realize that in the end, it will probably be OK — maybe not what you hoped for, but with lupus, what is?

Feel Gratitude

Yes, it is hard at times to feel grateful when it seems your entire life has been taken over by this disease. But I feel there is always something to be grateful for and I try and focus on those things; my amazing children, my loving husband who is my rock through all of this mess, my home and my work.

I believe that gratitude each day can help wash away some of the stress*.* I suggest creating a gratitude board — a basic memo board where each day you can tack up a post-it that states something you are grateful for.

There is power in seeing a weeks' worth of gratitude written down before you and collected on this board. It is uplifting and sets your mind back on track to what is important.

Try Yoga or Reiki

I am a Reiki practitioner and a newbie to something called "gentle recovery yoga," which is easy on the body and joints but still helps you stretch, relax and feel more at peace.

Reiki is the ancient Japanese healing method of using universal energy (energy that is all around us) to relax and heal the body. Many yoga studios have practitioners that offer sessions, as do some chiropractors. Will either of these methods cure you? No. Will it help you release stress? Yes.

Get a Massage

There is no denying that a massage for lupus can relieve stress and is great for sore muscles as long as it is not too intense. I have not been able to splurge on one for several years, but my husband is always willing to rub my sore muscles each evening and that does wonders for releasing the day's stress.

Join me on my journey of overcoming stress and all the negative impact it has on our bodies as we battle lupus. Commit to letting it go (at least more often than you currently do) and try creating a gratitude board for a week. Letting go of even a little of your stress will have a positive impact on your health!