

## To cope with chronic stress, turn to nature (even fake plants will do)

Business World · 21 Apr 2021 · S1/1 · Patricia B. Mirasol

LOOKING AT IMAGES of the great outdoors on your computer monitor, tending a fake plant, and listening to birds chirping through headphones can help deal with chronic stress. “Nature is the cheapest and most effortless thing you can do to improve the stress response,” said Dr. Stanley A. Chua, a certified practitioner of functional medicine.

“Exposure to sunlight is really important, although this is a big problem this pandemic, especially for those who are stuck in condos and aren’t able to go to the common areas,” he added in a stress management webinar organized by BioBalance Wellness Institute.

The good news is that multiple studies have shown that experiencing simulated nature — photos, 3D images, and virtual reality — “induces a more physiological relaxing state.” (See, among others, Jo, Hyunju et al. “Physiological Benefits of Viewing Nature: A Systematic Review of Indoor Experiments.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* vol. 16,23 4739. 27 Nov. 2019, doi:10.3390/ijerph16234739) Aside from visualizing tranquil scenes, Dr. Chua suggested reducing stress by going for a walk (if possible), adopting an active hobby like gardening, dancing, journaling, expressing gratitude, being creative, spending time with a supportive network, and body scanning meditation.

### CHRONIC STRESS

Stress is a normal reaction, even beneficial under the right circumstances. “Stress can be good, as in moderate exercise, or when we’re given new tasks at work because it encourages us to learn,” said Dr. Chua, who advocates personalized care for chronic disease combined with lifestyle and behavioral interventions.

This normal human reaction becomes bad, he continued, when it persists for prolonged periods (as in this pandemic), or when individuals become so overwhelmed they can’t anymore function as usual.

Repeated activation of the stress response takes a toll on the body over time. Chronic stress contributes to high blood pressure, promotes the formation of artery-clogging deposits, and causes brain changes that may contribute to anxiety, depression, and addiction, according to Harvard Health in a July 2020 article.

Signs of poor stress response include reliance on stimulants like coffee, an increased need for sugary or carbohydrate-rich food, alcohol dependence, sleep deprivation, and a lack of enriching social connections.

Chronic stress may contribute to obesity, both through direct mechanisms (causing people to eat more) or indirectly (decreasing sleep and exercise). “Try to eat healthy despite your unhealthy cravings. When you’re stressed, nutrient depletion is accelerated, which snowballs the stress response,” Dr. Chua said. “Eating healthy also helps regulate bowel movement, which in turn helps excrete excess hormones and reduce the toxic burden on the body.”

### CALMING AGENTS

Individuals may also opt to take supplements, said Dr. Chua, who mentioned adrenal adaptogens such as ashwagandha (also known as Indian ginseng), nutraceutical support such as vitamin B complex and vitamin C, and calming agents such as chamomile.

“Before using narcotic sedatives, you can try melatonin first — but with the guidance of a healthcare professional,” said Dr. Chua. “If the stressors are always there, however, then these supplements will not work as well as they should.”

Restoring proper stress response is, among other things, a matter of dealing with emotions as needed and not letting these linger. Dr. Chua said that when one’s quality of life is already significantly affected, then it’s time to ask for help.

“If you can’t function at work and if you can’t sleep at night, then it’s time to seek professional help. It’s not wrong to seek help early on,” he added, “although I would reserve the need to use drugs towards the latter part of the treatment, and not as a first step.” —