Cultural Stress: A Modern Threat to Health

By Howard Murad

Cultural Stress is a new type of stress that is superimposed on the normal stresses of everyday life. From the advent of the digital revolution in the 1980s, to increased population and affluence, to the world-changing events on September 11, 2001, to chronic economic concerns, to the compulsion to send an endless stream of texts or to update our network of friends and family on Facebook and Twitter, many of life's stressors have taken a more prominent and invasive position in our daily lives.

Technology is not entirely to blame for Cultural Stress, but the "freedom" to work and communicate anywhere, anytime, 24 hours a day, keeps America the land of the constantly "logged-on" workforce. Americans work longer hours than nearly anyone in the developed world - even the Japanese. For many professionals, the 40-hour workweek is history.

Sixty to eighty hour work weeks are now the norm. As a result of this pursuit to stay ahead, people experience extreme levels of on-the-job stress. According to data from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 40% of workers find their jobs stressful and 75% of people surveyed believe their jobs are more stressful now than a generation ago.

Nearly 3.5 million Americans spend an hour and a half or more getting to and from work as they are pushed farther away from work in search of more affordable housing. Commuters are filling
4 a.m. trains into major cities and restaurants that opened for breakfast at 6 a.m. are opening earlier to accommodate the bleary-eyed workforce.

**Americans in Isolation**

Cultural Stress, whether caused by fear, overwork or too many options causing conflict in decision-making, ultimately leads to isolation. I believe isolation to be one of the most prominent diseases in today's world. Studies have shown that to reduce isolation, people need to have regular physical and social contact, which reduces Cultural Stress and leads to happier, healthier lives.

World events have driven many Americans to isolate themselves, thus increasing depression and suicide. The CDC reported that the suicide rate among middle-aged Americans has reached its highest point in 25 years. Research indicates that Americans have fewer close friends than prior generations reported. Longer hours, lengthier commutes and the substitution of Internet contacts verses real-life connections contribute to the breakdown of social networks.

**It Starts Early**

Cultural Stress starts young, and while parents may not like to hear this, they are the ones who initiate it in their children. New parents are often anxious about getting their child into the best preschool. In fact, it's common for unborn children to be placed on a preschool wait list. The next focus is on ensuring that the child is enrolled in all the right extracurricular activities - from preschool through high school.

This cycle puts pressure on children to excel at a very young age, while placing a burden on the parents to make more money to pay for the education and extracurricular activities. This scenario coupled with our society's increasing affluence has a far-reaching domino effect. In order to make more money to pay for all the activities we are involved in, we are working longer hours.

The more money we make, the more things we buy, and this phenomenon extends well beyond possessions. As we have become a more informed society, we are more aware of the endless possibilities available to us in the form of clubs, lifestyles, diets and leisure activities, to name just a few. All of this has put a great strain on our health and well-being, especially because the vast majority of Americans are barely keeping up.

**Nutrition, Sleep, Depression and Exercise**

Our busy, on-the-go lives have created yet another problem. We have no time to cook at home, so we have grown accustomed to eating out and as a nation we are consuming more processed foods than ever, and more foods that are fried, high in sugar, saturated fats and calories. We are eating less fruits and vegetables and this reduces the amount of antioxidants we consume.
The result is high BMI (body mass index) readings and glycation, which makes us more susceptible to diabetes and increases the risk of cardiovascular disease. Cultural stress is also keeping us up at night. Our national sleep deficit has resulted in an astounding nearly 50 million prescriptions for sleep aids and billions in coffee sales.

Americans sleep less than people in any industrialized country. Sleeplessness has been associated with increased risk for illnesses such as colon cancer, breast cancer, heart disease and diabetes. The same sleep deficit that makes us unhealthy and also reduces our ability to be creative and productive.

To help maintain mental and physical health we need to eat complex carbohydrates from whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and good fats, especially omega-3 fatty acids. These not only encourage water to be attracted to the cells, but are also a component of the cell membrane. The Standard American Diet or SAD (an acronym that is most appropriate) is almost devoid of omega-3s.

The University of Pittsburgh reported that high levels of omega-3 fatty acids like those found in coldwater fish, flaxseeds, olive oil and raw walnuts lessened bouts of depression as they built more grey matter in "depression" areas of the brain. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, in any one-year period 9.5% of the population or about 20.9 million American adults, suffer from a mood disorder.

Perhaps the best alternative to prescription drugs is exercise. Exercise conditions the body and allows it to detoxify quickly ridding the body of stress byproducts such as cortisol, which is known to impact the immune system. Aside from exercise being an outlet for anger and depression, it reduces boredom and is sometimes referred to as "moving meditation."

It helps many with problem solving as it offers time for reflection. It also increases self-esteem and offers social support. Exercise reduces muscle tension, releases healing endorphins and helps with relaxation and sleep. Finally, exercise makes us more fit to combat Cultural Stress and disease.

**Emotions Tied to Skin**

Dermatologists have long recognized neuropsychological connections between the appearance of the skin, perception of beauty and health. Anxiety and cultural stressors trigger cellular water loss through perspiration. The skin may flare up with acne or eczema in stressful situations.

Recent evidence links the central nervous system and the skin revealing specific communication molecules that originate in both systems. For centuries, ancient medical practices and cultures
have appreciated the connections between mind and body in wellness and disease, yet conventional medicine still trivializes this complex set of relationships.

The role of modern medicine is so focused on acute disease that we forget to ask ourselves, "What is true health?" In my opinion, being truly healthy does not only mean the body is free of diabetes, cancer or other afflictions-being healthy also involves a passion for life, a true connection with others and an overall positive "sense of self."

**Cultural Stress and Skin**

Cultural Stress can cause an outpouring of adrenaline, cortisol and other stress-related hormones that contribute to damaged cell walls which in turn, allows the precious water that keeps them functioning to escape. The water loss has a myriad of effects. It causes our cells and connective tissue to break down, which prevents our heart, lungs, brain and other organs from functioning at optimal levels - all of which become apparent when you look at the skin.

Stress induced water loss also contributes to common skin problems - acne, rosacea and even premature signs of aging. We can encourage more water in the cells and reduce Cultural Stress if we address the body with a comprehensive care program based upon Inclusive Health.

This approach takes all external, internal and emotional factors into account.

1) **Topical Care** - as the largest organ of the body, the skin is extremely responsive to products applied topically. Appropriate skincare regimen and professional spa treatments will address skincare concerns ranging from acne to wrinkles, while also preventing future damage.

2) **Internal Care** - we can only address cell health in the top 20% of the skin, the epidermis, with topical care. The cells in the remaining 80%, the dermis, must be addressed internally through diet and supplementation. A diet rich in raw fruits and vegetables and healthy fats such as those found in raw nuts and olive oil will promote the body to create healthy, hydrated cells. Dietary supplements provide the body with a constant supply of essential nutrients that serve as the building blocks of strong healthy cells.

3) **Emotional Care** - maintain connections with others, discover a passion such as painting or dancing. Reducing isolation promotes a healthy sense of self. Seek out the nurturing power of touch through facials and massage.

**Tips for Reducing Cultural Stress**

- The first step in reducing Cultural Stress is to determine its sources. Once the sources are identified, develop a plan of action to reduce their impact.
• Practice being mindful: Take some time each day to meditate or be quiet and enjoy the simple rhythms of life.

• If you are stuck in traffic and late for an appointment, accept the fact that you can't control the situation. One thing you can control is how you react to these situations. Try to make the best of it. Why have a bad day when you can have a good day?

• Exercise regularly: Go for a walk, do yoga or take an exercise class. Being physically active, even for just a few minutes can make a difference in the way you feel.

• Nourish your body for optimum health: Make it a habit to avoid the Standard American Diet. Get foods that encourage and increase the water content in your body - a diet full of whole grains, fresh fruit and vegetables, good fats and proteins. Take a nutritional supplement to fill the nutritional gaps in your diet.

• Get a good night's sleep: Americans sleep less than people in any industrialized country in the world. You need seven to nine hours of sleep every night to fully restore the body. Don't lose sleep; find the time to recharge your body at night so you have the energy to face the challenges that come up every day.

Connecting the Dots

It's easy to tell people to relax or to be good to themselves, but when stress is so pervasive that there's no hiding from or avoiding it, it takes effort to unplug. The reality is that our lives will become even more hectic as time goes on and we will continue to push our children and ourselves to capacity until we wear out. As Americans, it's not easy to unlearn the need to be on the go, but when it comes to mental and physical health, a day, week or month of complete relaxation may be just what the doctor orders.

Everything in moderation is the key and this includes the things that contribute to Cultural Stress. The goal is to reduce Cultural Stress while enjoying the simple pleasures of life. Howard Murad, M.D., Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine at UCLA and founder of Murad Inc. Howard Murad, M.D., FAAD has literally changed the face of skincare by devoting his life to making beautiful, healthy skin attainable for everyone.

His scientifically-proven formulas and inclusive approach to overall skin and body health have helped millions to live better lives. A board-certified dermatologist, trained pharmacist and Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine (Dermatology) at the Geffen School of Medicine, UCLA, Dr. Murad has personally treated over 50,000 patients.

In 1989, he founded Murad, Inc. as a way to share his groundbreaking skincare formulas which were among the first to achieve significant measurable anti-aging results without surgery. Dr. Murad continues his innovative research and holds 18 patents for advances in the science of skin.
health. These proprietary breakthroughs help Murad products deliver the real results that make Murad one of the world's premier clinical skincare brands.

About the Author

Using his medical experience, Dr. Murad has developed and clinically proven The Science of Cellular Water. The world's most comprehensive approach to understanding health and aging, The Science of Cellular Water looks at the ability of cell membranes to hold water as the fundamental marker of youthful good health and advocates an Inclusive Health approach to help the body create stronger, healthier cells as the pathway to beauty.