

MEGA MC@WORK BLOWOUT!

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TRICKS FOR
LOVING
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vanished
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SKINCARE REPORT

GENERATION STRESS

You shun tanning, haven't slept with makeup on since college, and (almost) never pop a pimple. But there's a new skin saboteur on the block: "cultural stress." **KIERA AARON** finds out what you can do to diminish the damage

MY CURRENT BEDTIME is 11 p.m., on the dot. If it's 11:01, I shuffle around my apartment saying, "I'm late! I'm late!" Sometimes, even when I'm at a bar with friends, I set my alarm as a reminder. "Oh, it's 10:30? Fun's over." This lady has deadlines looming and a Spin class in the morning.

But I wasn't always this rigid. There was a time in my life when I was infinitely more relaxed: when I didn't eat the same 500-calorie salad every day for lunch; when I didn't own a smartphone (never mind check it compulsively); when I made weekend plans—gasp!—spontaneously. I call it Argentina.

It was only a few years ago that I spent four months studying in Buenos Aires, but it might as well have been another lifetime: I ate *dulce de leche*, sneaked into private pools at 2 a.m. to go tipsy-swimming, and spent a weeknight at a sex hotel. (I swear, "sex hotel" sounds way less sketchy in Spanish.) Call me crazy, but after almost half a year of *diversiones*, this type-A New Yorker found herself excited to return to Manhattan, land of productivity, kale, and SoulCycle.

And I figured I would be all the better for it. But recently, a close friend told me I was looking "different." I sipped my non-indulgent black coffee and pressed him for specifics. Finally, he came out with this: "You just don't seem the same as when you came back from Argentina—you looked really good then, more at-ease."

This is bad news for my New York self—very bad news. If I appeared "at-ease" then, what about now? Tired because I wake up in the middle of the night to answer e-mails? Pallid because I stare at screens all day long? I love my life, but at-ease I am not.



And it seems I'm not alone. More than half of women ages 18 to 33 report feeling stressed five or more days a week, according to a recent study conducted by Wakefield Research for the cosmetics company Elizabeth Arden. But we're not just talking about the mental toll of demanding jobs. This is a new type of stress caused by our always-on society and our never-off phones that deliver a constant flow of could-be-important information. These kinds of things can keep our stress hormone levels consistently elevated.

"Your body releases adrenaline, cortisol, and other steroid hormones in response to stress," explains Dr. Ranella Hirsch, a dermatologist who practices in Cambridge, Massachusetts. While these hormones are important to your fight-or-flight response—saving your life in a do-or-die

A new type of stress can make your complexion less radiant.

situation—your body needs a break from them. “We don’t have as much waxing and waning of stress hormones in the modern day,” says Hirsch. “We’re always on.”

This steady hum of tension is so pervasive that experts have created a whole new term to describe it: “cultural stress.” Dr. Howard Murad, associate clinical professor of medicine at UCLA, who practices dermatology and inclusive health in Los Angeles, explores the issue in his new book, *Conquering Cultural Stress: The Ultimate Guide to Anti-Aging and Happiness* (Wisdom Waters Press). “We’re referring to the constant drip, drip, drip of stress,” says Murad. “It’s not a full-on flood, but it ends up being as bad as a flood in the long run.” In his book, he argues that cultural stress compromises our cells’ ability to hold water, ultimately accelerating the aging process. New York City dermatologist Dr. Amy Wechsler, author of *The Mind-Beauty Connection*, adds that cortisol can also break down collagen in our complexions, leading to wrinkles over time.

OK, docs, I get it. Stress is going to age me eventually, and I’ll have to deal. (Wechsler says a prescription retinoid with 0.05 percent tretinoin used daily will help with the wrinkle-inducing effects of cortisol on collagen, because it’s been shown to double collagen thickness in six months, according to a University of Michigan Medical School study.) But it’s not like I’ve developed crow’s-feet and saggy jowls since walking through customs and reactivating my iPhone. So what gives?

As it turns out, cultural stress isn’t pretty in the short term, either. Take Zoya Wang, a 26-year-old marketing manager at an investment bank in New York City. “I really see a difference in my skin when I’m traveling for business,” she says. “The trips are brief but jam-packed, and the skin under my eyes becomes dry and puffy.” But when she’s traveling for fun? Balanced, radiant skin.

Melissa Price, 34, an endocrinologist practicing in New York, has experienced similar short-term issues. “During my residency, the overnight shifts and long, stressful hours really took a toll on my skin,” she says. “Even though I’m a bit older now, I have more of a glow than I did back then.”

Experts know why. “Stress can also cause subtle, more immediate changes to your skin,” says Wechsler. For starters, when you’re in that fight-or-flight mode, more blood travels to your heart, lungs, and brain, meaning less rosiness in your face. (Sorry—rosy glow is low on your

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body’s self-preservation priority list.) Your complexion also looks dull because skin-cell turnover slows. To combat these issues, Wechsler suggests using a serum or peel with 5 to 12 percent glycolic acid once a week. A daily serum with ingredients that boost skin-cell renewal, like horse chestnut seed extract, can also help.

Another problem that’s likely to pop up? Dry skin. “Stress increases trans-epidermal water loss,” says Wechsler. “But skin also produces more sebum—the kind that causes breakouts—when you’re stressed.” Call it one of the great ironies of life, but “since this oil is different from the natural oils that moisturize your skin, you could experience dryness and acne at the same time,” she adds. The solution:

Wash with a 2 percent salicylic acid cleanser, spot-treat with benzoyl peroxide—and don’t abandon your moisturizer. A hydrating night cream with hyaluronic acid or glycerin will keep the dryness in check.

If you’re short on sleep, there are also the telltale dark circles and puffiness under your eyes, thanks to blood vessel dilation and fluid retention. New York City makeup artist Rebecca Restrepo offers this a.m. fix: Prime under your eyes with a gel that reduces puffiness, then dab on concealer in a shade slightly darker than your overall skin tone. “It will camouflage the circles, but it looks more natural than one that matches your coloring exactly,” she explains.

After hearing that there’s plenty I can do to alleviate the toll cultural stress is taking on my face, I know I should be unclenching my jaw and relaxing a bit. But, honestly, all this talk of cortisol and collagen just stresses me out more, so I call Murad for advice. He suggests a massage. “The stress-reducing, healing power of touch is very real but very underutilized in our society,” he says. “Plus, a massage improves circulation, giving you a vibrant glow and making your skin look more taut.” Consider it the doctor’s orders. **mc**

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