

Stress is the pressure and tension a person feels when they are faced with a situation that is new, unpleasant or threatening (Stress Management Self Care Handbook, 1999). Stress is very much a part of life. It affects everyone at some time or another. A certain amount of stress can be good in that it moves us to meet life's challenges. However, too much stress can cause both physical and emotional damage.

Even in the womb, it has been shown through research that too much stress can cause problems. If a mother is very anxious or stressed while she's pregnant, there's reduced blood flow to the baby through the uterine arteries, the main source of blood and nutrition for the baby. This could cause the baby to grow more slowly and set up a secondary stress response in the fetus (Glover, Vivette, Discovery Health, Discovery Communication Inc., 2001) Secondly, if a mother has high levels of cortisol, the main stress hormone, so does the fetus. It seems that enough cortisol crosses the placenta from the mother to the fetus to actually affect fetal levels. So if the mother is stressed, her cortisol goes up, so does the cortisol level in the fetus. This in turn could well affect the development of the brain and the future stress responses of the baby. (Glover, Vivette, Discovery Health, Discovery Communication Inc., 2001).

Stress is an automatic reaction to a demand or danger; at it's most basic, stress is a survival mechanism. The muscles tense and the heart rate and breathing speed up. A rush of adrenaline gives an individual the strength and energy needed to deal with the situation at hand or run. This reaction is often called the "fight or flight" response. This cascade of responses is perfectly suited to fighting or fleeing from physical danger. However, one of the detrimental problems from stress is if we remain in a stressed state, the adrenaline continues. This overload is unhealthy. Today's stressors such as traffic, work pressures and family obligations are of a different variety and the responses that worked so skillfully when confronting a brief physical attack can fail when the stresses are emotional and continuous.

The body's response to stress begins in the brain. When we perceive danger the senses send a message to the cortex that in turn processes the message and sends the information to the amigdala. The amigdala activates the hypothalamus, which is located at the base of the brain. This stimulates the center of the adrenal gland to release adrenaline. Adrenaline raises blood sugar, increases heart rate and boosts the amount of energy a person has available to his/her muscles. While this is occurring, the pituitary gland stimulates the outside of the adrenal gland, called the adrenal cortex, to release a second key stress hormone, cortisol. Cortisol acts to maintain high levels of both blood pressure and blood sugar (The Stress Response, Discovery Health, Discovery Communications Inc., 2001).

Stressors are not of themselves bad or good; it is their effects on you that can cause problems. The response caused by stress can have short-term benefits, however scientists are concerned with the hormone's long-term effects on our health. Research shows that extended exposure to cortisol weakens bones, causes nerve cells in the brain to degenerate or perhaps even die, and compromises the immune system, making us more vulnerable to infection.(The Stress Response, Discovery Health, Discovery Communications Inc., 2001).

Extended Exposure to Stress Can Contribute to:

- High Blood Pressure
- Depression
- Skin Problems
- Weight gain or loss
- Headaches
- Back Pain and Muscle Tension
- Insomnia
- Digestive Disorders
- Heart Disease
- Stroke
- Allergies and Sinus Infections
- Sore throats and Colds

Flu
Menstrual Irregularity
Damage to Relationships

Beyond the damage done by illness brought on by stress, living with chronic pain, such as back pain may make an individual feel frustrated and alone. Missing work due to frequent illnesses can also bring added anxiety. If a client has untreated health problems, it is best for them to see their health care provider right away.

How much stress is too much? There is no easy answer to this question. Stress affects people differently. What's stressful to one person may be "no big deal" to another. Perceptions may play an important role in this distinction. Personality is believed to be a significant factor in how we perceive stress. If you think of a "Type A" personality, you see a rushed, ambitious, "on-the-go" person. These traits can bring on additional stress. On the contrary, a "Type B" personality has a more "laid back" approach. They are more flexible and adaptable and possibly more able to put things into perspective.

Beyond personality, which is a gift of social, biological, psychological and behavioral factors, studies also show that men and women handle stress differently. This difference, according to some scientists, is attributed to estrogen. This estrogen and perhaps women, unlike men, tend to have a stronger social support network to which they turn during times of stress, help explain why women, in general, seem to be better able to cope with stress than men (All in Your Head, Discovery Health, Discovery Communication Inc., 2001).

Even people with the most adaptable personalities can experience the effects of long-term stress if they lack a sense of control over aspects of their daily lives. Scientists studying stress in the workplace have found that those who perceive that they have the least control over their working environment suffer from the highest levels of stress-related illnesses (All in Your Head, Discovery Health, Discovery Communication Inc., 2001).

For those of you in the giving professions, how do you cope with the stress in your lives? There are a variety of ways, some more effective than others to cope with stress. Some coping strategies may actually be as harmful as the stress they are supposed to deal with. Dr. George S. Everly, Jr., created the following stress assessment. This scale is an education tool, not a clinical instrument. Therefore, it's purpose is to inform you of ways in which you can effectively and healthfully cope with the stress in your life, while at the same time, through a point system, give you some indication of the relative desirability of the coping strategies you are currently using.

Identifying triggers can be the first step to reducing stress. Keeping a journal can help an individual identify what is causing them stress and how the stress affects them. A journal can also act as an outlet for emotion and frustration. This method can also reduce stress in that it can help in the decision making process as an individual explores the pros and cons of a situation. The individual may discover solutions to a problem they had not previously thought of.

Some of the sample questions to get a journal started include:

How did you feel today?

What upset you today?

Did you laugh today?

Are you facing any major decisions today?

Are you feeling anxious or frustrated? Why?

Once an individual can identify what is causing the stress, if possible they can attack the source.

Rudy

“I don’t know what is wrong with me lately! I lose my temper so easily. I wake up in an o.k. mood, but I struggle to get to work on time. I have been late three times this month. The traffic is so bad. By the time I get home, my son has immediate demands, but I have so much to do. I would love to be in the mood to play with him, but it takes me so long to get home, by the time we eat dinner and get ready for the next day it is past his bedtime and I am exhausted. I just yell at him to go to bed. It is always the traffic that gets me worked up. This shift is killing me. It puts me right in the middle of rush hour. I don’t know how everybody else can stand it. It takes me over an hour to go the distance it should only take to drive about 25 minutes any other time of the day.”

After a meeting with Rudy’s boss a shift change that put him out of rush hour traffic was made. Although he and his family are having to adjust to a new schedule, the time they have together is much more relaxed.

Many times it is not possible to change what is causing an individual stress. One of the most prevalent causes of stress is worrying about things we have no control over. To manage stress an individual must learn to accept things that they cannot change. If an individual does not have control over the stressor, the next course of action is to exert control over the response caused by the trigger. An individual can learn to defuse stress and deal with it more adaptively. Some of the techniques available to help with learning to defuse stress include thought stopping, systematic relaxation, deep breathing, meditation and visualization.

Thought Stopping:

Whether a person is conscious of it or not, they talk to themselves silently every day. This mental conversation is called self-talk. This self-talk helps determine how we will respond to a situation. If the thoughts are negative and criticizing we respond poorly. By learning to identify, challenge and change negative messages, a person can reduce stress. Thought stopping involves being aware of the negative self-talk and when a negative thought enters the mind, internally say “stop!” and replace it with a new more positive statement. An example is “I will never get this project done...Stop! I am making progress and will continue to work towards my goal”.

Systematic Relaxation:

This technique can help a person relax the major muscle groups in the body.

1. Begin getting in as comfortable a position as possible.
2. Begin with the facial muscles. Frown hard for 5-10 seconds and then relax all of the muscles.
3. Then move to the eyes and forehead, tightening the muscles for 5-10 seconds and then relax the muscles.
4. Move to the neck and jaw repeating the process.
5. Continue through the shoulders, arms, chest, legs, etc. until all the body has been tensed and relaxed.

Meditation:

This is a process of focusing on a single word or object to clear your mind. This can often require practice.

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
 2. Close your eyes and concentrate on a calming word or object.
 3. As other words or thoughts enter your mind just allow them to pass and remain focused on the calming word or object.
 4. Gradually, you'll begin to feel more and more relaxed.
- (Stress Management Self Care Handbook, 1999)

Deep Breathing:

This is one of the easiest ways to relieve tension. This exercise brings needed oxygen to all of the muscles.

1. Lie on the back with a pillow under the head. Bend the knees and if possible place a pillow under them.
2. Put one hand on the stomach, just below the rib cage.
3. Slowly breathe in through your nose. The stomach should rise.
4. Exhale slowly through the mouth.
5. Repeat several times.

Visualization:

Your imagination is a great resource for reducing stress. This technique utilizes your imagination to help you escape to gain some perspective to better handle the situation.

Close the eyes and image yourself in a place you enjoy—a mountain meadow, a pleasant garden, a cabin by the lake, a sunny beach or your own back yard. Picture yourself relaxing there. Enjoy the feel of the sun, the fresh breeze, the soft grass, or the sand underneath you. Enjoy the sounds, the wind in the trees, the surf and birds. Become aware of the fragrances. Try to experience all of your senses in the fantasy—sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. Focus on the scene for typically 5 to 10 minutes, then gradually return to your other activities.

In addition to changing the reaction to stressors, there are often ways to make us more resilient to stress. If an individual can learn to manage their time more effectively by getting up early, minimizing interruptions, requesting help, getting organized and planning ahead they can avoid many stressful situations. When feeling the stress creeping in sometimes simply taking a walk around the building can help. Physical activity is a great way of reducing stress. Exercise has an overall relaxing effect. Getting enough sleep is also an important step in ensuring the body is prepared to handle day-to-day crisis.

Stress can lead to an entirely different set of health risks if you seek relief through smoking, drinking, drug use or poor nutrition. There is no one solution for handling stress, but one of the most important factors is to not become a victim of circumstances. Whether or not a person has control over the stressors they can have control over how the stress affects them.