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Stress Management

What is Stress?

Stress is the "wear and tear" our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment; it has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings. As a positive influence, stress can help compel us to action; it can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, or a new relationship, we experience stress as we readjust our lives. In so adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder us depending on how we react to it.

How Can I Eliminate Stress from My Life?

Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life, and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, confrontations, and even our frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Our goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us. Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected; on the other hand, excessive stress may leave us feeling "tied up in knots." What we need to do is find the optimal level of stress which will individually motivate but not overwhelm each of us.

How Can I Tell What is Optimal Stress for Me?

There is no single level of stress that is optimal for all people. We are all individual creatures with unique requirements. As such, what is distressing to one may be a joy to another. And even when we agree that a particular event is distressing, we are likely to differ in our physiological and psychological responses to it. Also, our personal stress requirements and the amount which we can tolerate before we become distressed changes with our ages.

It has been found that many illnesses and symptoms are related to unrelieved stress. If you are experiencing stress symptoms, you have gone beyond your optimal stress level; you need to reduce the stress in your life and/or improve your ability to manage it.

How Can I Manage Stress Better?

Identifying unrelieved stress and being aware of its effect on our lives is not sufficient for reducing its harmful effects. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. However, all require work toward change: changing the source of stress and/or changing your reaction to it. How do you proceed?

1. Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions.

Notice your distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over your problems.

Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about meaning of these events?

Determine how your body responds to the stress. Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?

2. Recognize what you can change.

Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?

Can you reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)?

Can you shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)?

Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?

3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.

The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger...physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster? Are you expecting to please everyone?

Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent? Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?

Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.

Try to temper your excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and the "what if's."

4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.

Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback can help you gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart rate, and blood pressure.

Medications, when prescribed by a physician, can help in the short term in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer.

Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution. Relaxation methods work on the idea that you can't be relaxed and uptight at the same time. Basically, anything you do that is the opposite of what the danger alarm system does will tend to shut it off. Some examples include:

- Deep breathing - taking deep, slow breaths rather than the shallow, fast breathing we feel when we are stressed. This really works physiologically to help shut off the danger alarm.
- Muscular relaxation - tensing and relaxing various muscle groups can work wonders. Try your neck and shoulders, your shoulder blades, your forehead and eyes, tensing these groups for a few seconds, then relaxing them. You can also combine this with deep breathing by inhaling while you tense, then exhaling when you relax the muscles. There are more sophisticated versions of these muscular methods, like the shower of relaxation and progressive relaxation.

- Visualization - imagine a very peaceful scene, like lying on the beach, out in a fishing boat on a lake, in a mountain cabin or whatever. It can be a real place or you can make it up. Try to invoke all your senses as you imagine being in this very peaceful, relaxing place. What do you see? What sounds are there? What sensations of touch, temperature or smell? For example, you might imagine the sun on your skin, the cool breeze on your forehead, the salt tang of the ocean, the grit of the sand.

Try all these methods and see which works better for you. Some people do better with muscular methods, others with visualization. All these can be learned quite readily and often work very well.

In the long run, however, it is better to learn how to avoid getting stressed out in the first place. As in the technique of Visualization, thinking peaceful thoughts makes you feel relaxed. In imagining a peaceful place, you have also distracted yourself from whatever thoughts you were having before. This points out the basic premise of cognitive/behavioral psychology, that our feelings and behaviors are largely caused by our own thoughts. This is oversimplified, because there are many feedback loops that make the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviors. But the simple version of the cognitive theory is that peaceful thoughts cause relaxation and stressful thoughts cause stress.

In other words, the reason we get stressed out is not what is happening to us and not what happened in the past (at least not directly), but rather, how we are thinking about what is happening. Past experience does influence us strongly, but the medium of that influence is beliefs or thoughts. This is a powerful idea because it means we can overcome the bad experiences of the past. It means we have power over ourselves, so we don't have to be victims of the past or of present circumstances! The best way to manage stress is to learn to change anxiety to concern. Concern means you are motivated to take care of real problems in your life, but your danger alarm system is not erroneously activated. Changing your feelings is largely a matter of learning to identify and change the upsetting thoughts that are the immediate and proximate cause of upset emotions.

5. Build your physical reserves.

Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging).

Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.

Maintain your ideal weight.

Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants.

Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can.

Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.

6. Maintain your emotional reserves.

Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships.

Pursue realistic goals which are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.

Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.

Always be kind and gentle with yourself -- be a friend to yourself.