

Stress Management





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Stress Management

Stress is an everyday fact of life and cannot be completely avoided. Thus, we need to learn to live with it in a healthy way. Some stress may be positive as it stimulates us to meet life's challenges. However, when stress is prolonged or intense it can be unhealthy and lead to emotional and physical illness. Whether your stress experience is a result of major life changes, or a build up of everyday worries, it's important to deal with it in a positive way.

This teaching booklet will provide you with general information on stress and how to identify and deal with the stress in your life.

Sources of Stress

Stress can arise from 4 basic sources:

- **Environment** – e.g., weather, noise, traffic, pollution.
- **Social stressors** – e.g., deadlines, financial problems, loss of a loved one, family conflict, relationship problems, role changes, job loss, etc.
- **Physiological** – e.g. new diagnosis of a health problem, chronic illness, menopause, aging, lack of exercise, poor nutrition, etc.
- **Your thoughts** - how we interpret an experience, our expectations of life, expectations that we have of others and ourselves.

Each of us reacts to these stressors or demands in different ways. For example, while driving in heavy traffic or having a job interview may be exciting for some people, it may be stressful for others. Our stress balance is very individual!

The Stress Response

The stress response is the body's physical reaction to a stressful situation. You've probably heard it called the "fight or flight" response. In these situations the body releases a hormone "adrenaline" that causes many physical changes:

- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Increase in breathing rate
- Increased muscle tension
- Increased cholesterol / fatty acid levels in the blood

All of these changes make it easier for the person to stay and "fight" or to run away from the threat. When the stressful situation is relieved, your body relaxes and returns to a normal state.

The other response is a long-term "vigilance" response. Another hormone called "cortisol" is released to help the body prepare for survival. This hormone causes many things to happen in the body:

- Gradual increase in blood pressure
- Release of fatty acids and clotting factors into the blood
- Decrease of sex hormones
- An increase of gastric acid in the stomach
- Lowering of the body's immune system

As in the "fight or flight" response, the body returns to normal when the long-term stress is relieved.

Jewish Family Services
287-3510
2nd Floor, 4014 Macleod Tr. S.

Counselling Services (Private)

- look under Counselling Services in yellow pages

Employee Assistance Programs

- check with the human resources department of your company regarding EAP counselling available

Other Community Resources

The City of Calgary, Parks and Recreation, in partnership with the Board of Education, offer a large selection of courses on topics such as:

- relaxation
- meditation, yoga
- self-esteem
- communication skills
- anger management
- assertiveness training

Please contact your local parks and recreation/board of education for courses available in your community.

This material is designed for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction and/or treatment. If you have specific questions, please consult your doctor or appropriate health care professional.

Stress Management Tapes

Stressbreak: Relaxation and Renewal Experience to Improve Performance. (1985) Miller, Emmett E.

The Joy of Stress. (1986) Hanson, Peter.

Community Resources

Reading Materials

Health Connection Libraries

- Foothills Medical Centre Phone: 944-4849
- Peter Lougheed Centre Phone: 943-4737
- Rockyview Hospital Phone: 943-3488

Public Library *in your community*

Bookstores *in your community*

- listed under Booksellers in the yellow pages

Counselling Services

Calgary Counselling Centre

265-4980

200, 940 - 6 Ave. S.W.

Calgary Family Service Bureau

269-9888

300, 906 - 8 Ave. S.W.

Catholic Family Services

233-2360

250, 707 - 10 Ave. S.W.

Stress May Hurt Your Heart

Unfortunately, many people lead stress-ridden lives. One stressful situation is followed almost immediately by another, with little or no time for the body to relax in-between. While the exact role of stress in heart disease is unknown, constant and/or unrelieved stress can mean that:

- the heart is overworked, and
- blood pressure, cholesterol and fat levels remain higher than normal.

Each of these conditions is known to cause damage to the arteries, which adds to the risk of heart disease and stroke.

Source: Lifelines (1996) Alberta Heart and Stroke Foundation

Managing Stress

People are often not aware of how stress affects their body. The first step in coping with stress is recognizing how your body reacts to stressful situations. You can then take positive steps to relieve the buildup of stress. Many of the common signs of “unrelieved” stress are listed below. Take a few minutes to identify which ones apply to you.

Physical Symptoms

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> headaches | <input type="checkbox"/> feeling dizzy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> feeling tired all the time | <input type="checkbox"/> loss/increase in weight |
| <input type="checkbox"/> muscle aches / back pain | <input type="checkbox"/> diarrhea or being constipated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loss of sexual drive | <input type="checkbox"/> frequent illness |

Note: While any of these symptoms may be related to stress, they may also be symptoms of other physical conditions. **Do not assume that stress causes these symptoms.** You should check with your doctor if you have any of these symptoms.

Emotional Symptoms

- irritability
- impatience and frustration
- feeling anxious, restless
- feeling angry and hostile towards others
- feeling “blue”, little or no interest in anything

Higher levels of stress can lead to symptoms of:

- unrealistic guilt
- being suspicious of others
- depression
- feeling helpless with no hope
- mood swings

Behavioural Symptoms

- difficulty sleeping
- eating too much **or** too little
- increased use of alcohol / smoking/ gambling
- avoiding work or other responsibilities
- being late for work frequently
- over reacting to things
- no interest in social activities
- letting personal appearance and hygiene decline
- frequent crying spells
- increased conflict with family / friends or co-workers

Cognitive Symptoms

- increased forgetfulness
- difficulty concentrating
- poor self esteem
- being preoccupied with unreasonable thoughts
- rambling thoughts and speech
- not being able to adapt to new or changing situations

Suggested Reading

A Change of Heart. 1998. Baker, Dr. Brian; Dorian, Dr. Paul. Toronto, Canada. Random House of Canada Ltd. in cooperation with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada.

Couple Skills: Making Your Relationship Work. 1994. McKay, Matthew; Fanning, Patrick; and Paleg, Kim. Oakland, California. New Harbinger Publications.

From Stress to Strength, How to Lighten Your Load and Save Your Life. 1994. Eliot, Robert.

Minding the Body, Mending the Mind. 1987. Borysenko, Joan. New York, New York, Bantam Books.

Stressmap: Finding Your Pressure Points. 1987. Haney, C. Michele; Boenisch, Edmond.

The Joy of Stress: How to Make Stress Work for You. 1986. Hanson, Peter.

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. 4th edition, New Harbinger Publications, 1995. Davis, Martha; Eshelman, Elizabeth Robbins; McKay, Matthew.

The Wellness Book: the Comprehensive Guide to Maintaining Health and Treating Stress-Related Illness. 1993. Benson, Herbert; Stuart, Eileen M.

Making Stress Management a Lifetime Process

Taking care of your health is a lifelong process and will require changes in your lifestyle. Each person has choices. Managing stress in a positive way starts with making the choice to change a behaviour. Learn to identify the stress triggers in your life and take steps to cope with stress in a positive way. Try some of the stress reduction techniques mentioned in this booklet. Your ability to relax, learn to handle stress and heal yourself is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. All it takes is patience, practice, and time!

There are many resources and services available to help you do this. While you are an inpatient in hospital, you may ask to see a Social Worker to help you deal with stress management. Education classes are also offered once a week at the Foothills and Rockyview Hospitals. Ask a member of the health care team for more information about these classes. In addition, there are many books and videos available on stress management. You can visit the Health Connection Libraries in each of the three hospitals in Calgary to borrow these resources.



Coping With Stress

Once you have identified how your body reacts to stress you need to identify “what” sets off this response. These situations are called “triggers” – i.e., they set off a stress response in your body. Think about what causes you to feel stress. Is it a relationship problem? Are there financial concerns? There isn’t enough time to do all the things you feel you have to do? Do you feel inadequate? When you know what situations in your life cause stress, you can consider what you can do to manage them.

There are basically two ways to cope with these “triggers”. You can act on things that you have control over **or** you can recognize or accept things you cannot change. What works best will depend on your coping style. There are three main “coping” styles:

Task-oriented: Taking action to deal directly with the situation.

Emotion-oriented: Dealing with your feelings and finding social supports.

Distraction: Using activities or work to take your mind off the situation.

How would you describe your coping styles? If they work for you, continue to use and develop them. If they aren’t effective, stop using them and begin to develop coping skills that will be positive for you! If necessary, ask for professional assistance to help you do this.

Things You Can Do To Manage Stress

When you find yourself in a stressful situation you can take steps to manage it in a positive way. Here are some stress-reduction techniques:

1. **Education**

Educate yourself about a topic that is causing you stress.

Generally, the more informed you are the more in control you will feel. You can do this by speaking to others who may have had similar experiences, reading on the topic, viewing films or videos, attending presentations or workshops, searching the internet, etc.

2. **Relaxation Techniques**

Relaxation response lowers your heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate as well as relaxes your tense muscles. Here are some relaxation techniques you can practice:

Deep Breathing – This is a common relaxation technique which can be done anywhere, anytime.

1. Slowly inhale through your nose, expanding your abdomen before allowing air to fill your lungs.
2. Reverse the process as you exhale.
Do this exercise for 3 to 5 minutes whenever you feel tense.

Breath counting can enhance relaxation and release tension:

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position with your arms and legs uncrossed
2. Breathe in deeply into your abdomen. Let yourself pause before you exhale.
3. As you exhale, count “one” to yourself. As you continue to inhale and exhale, count each exhale by saying “two...three...four.”

can temporarily help you forget what is happening in your life. You can return to the challenge feeling more energized and perhaps with a different perspective.

15. **Support system**

It helps to share your stress and receive support from those you care about. We can receive support informally from family, friends, colleagues, and even a pet. There is also more formal support available through self-help groups and professional counselors.

16. **Spirituality**

Spiritual skills involve getting in touch with yourself to find the meaning in your life. Tending to your spiritual life is an important way of dealing with stress, particularly if you are experiencing a sense of loss in direction or meaning. Spirituality is not limited to religion but also occurs with nature.

17. **Seek professional help**

If nothing seems to work, you may need to seek professional help to assist you in dealing with your stress. (See reference section at back of this book)

10. Assertiveness training

How you interact with others can be a source of considerable stress in your life. Becoming assertive means learning how to express your rights and feelings in such a way that the rights of others are not violated. There are excellent books and courses available to help you develop these skills.

11. Time management skills

Once you are able to establish your priorities, then goal setting (short and long term) is easier. People who effectively manage their time have learned to focus most of their resources (time, energy, and finances) on what is important to them and minimize the resources spent on activities that they do not value. Again, there are books and courses available to help you develop skills in this area.

12. Use of biofeedback

Biofeedback is the use of a special machine to detect stress responses in your body that you usually don't notice. Once you have developed your ability to identify the stress points in your body you can stop using the machine. These machines can be rented. (see yellow pages under Stress Relief Equipment and Services)

13. Anger management

Anger is a normal and healthy human emotion. Anger helps us defend our rights and protect our freedoms. However, anger can take destructive forms as well. You want it to work constructively for you! Many communities offer courses on anger management if destructive anger is a source of negative stress for you or those with whom you connect.

14. Leisure / Recreational activities

Sometimes it is important to get away from your daily concerns and do something for yourself! Listen to music, go shopping, read a book or go for a drive in the country. A leisure activity

4. Continue counting your exhalations in sets of four for 5 to 10 minutes.
5. Notice your breathing gradually slowing, your body relaxing, and your mind calming as you practice this breathing meditation.

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique to help relax muscles. This exercise will teach you the difference between a relaxed and a tense muscle.

1. Sit or lie down on your back in a comfortable, quiet room with your eyes closed.
2. Make tight fists, hold for 5 seconds, and then relax your fists. Pay attention to the different sensations of tension and relaxation.
3. Repeat step 2 with all of your muscle groups: feet, lower legs, thighs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, arms, and face. Initially, it may take about 20 minutes but with practice, you'll decrease the time to 5 minutes to achieve the same reward. You can also buy relaxation tapes to lead you through these exercises.

3. Meditation Techniques

Research has shown that meditation helps to counter the physiological effects of stress. Meditation has been used successfully in the treatment and prevention of high blood pressure, heart disease, and migraine headaches. Meditation helps you to focus on one thing at a time and thus, increase your calmness throughout the day. There are many books and courses available to assist you with meditation. (Refer to resource section at the back of this book)

Other examples of meditation techniques include imagery (imagining a scene that is full of relaxing themes), yoga, and self-hypnosis, to name a few. Classes on these techniques are usually available in the community.

4. **Prioritizing your responsibilities**

Sometimes a new crisis helps us to set priorities. You don't have to do everything, nor should you try. Decide what is most important. Then use your energy and resources to do this first.

5. **Humour**

Make time for some fun! Laughter is our body's natural way to release stress. Play can be just as important as your well being at work. Rent your favorite comedy video, read a funny book, phone a person whose humour you appreciate!

6. **Take care of yourself!**

Get enough rest and eat well. Lack of sleep and poor eating habits make it more difficult for you to deal with stress. Healthy eating is also important for a healthy heart.

7. **Exercise**

Physical exercise helps to relieve that "uptight" feeling and helps your body to relax. In addition, you can improve your cardiovascular fitness at the same time. Try some activities such as running, walking, playing tennis, swimming or just working in the garden.

8. **Communication**

Using good communication skills can often prevent or relieve stress. This means being a good listener and being able to express yourself clearly. There are many books and courses available to help you improve your communication skills if you think you need to work on this area.

9. **Using self-talk**

Much of our stress is due to the conversations which we have with ourselves. Some of our self-talk is **useful and constructive** (e.g., planning your day, congratulating yourself on a job well done).

However, some of our self-talk is **negative** and can contribute to our stress level ("she can't tell me what to do", "I'm not smart enough to do that", "he looks so angry - I wonder what I have done".)

If our self-talk is accurate and in touch with reality, we function well. If it is irrational and untrue, then we experience stress and emotional disturbances.

Here are some examples of how people use self-talk to criticize themselves;

- **Self-blame:** blaming yourself for things that happen
- **Personalizing:** thinking everything is your fault when it may not be
- **Magnifying:** blowing problems up out of proportion
- **Minimizing:** minimizing successes or positive events in your life.
- **Black or white thinking:** thinking things are all good or all bad, but ignoring the full range of possibilities
- **Mind reading:** thinking you know what others are thinking but not asking for sure (this is where good communication skills can help)
- **Negative-thinking:** imagining the worst possible outcome.

There are others as well, but the above list gives you an idea of the more common ways people end up thinking negatively. Negative self-talk can lead to stress and even make you behave in ways that are not in your best interest. Being aware of your negative thoughts is the first step in dealing with it. Once you recognize it as negative, ask yourself "is this reasonable or correct". Then practice how you can talk to yourself in a more positive way.