



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

COPING WITH LIFE IN THE STRESS LANE

Traffic jams, crowded subways, meeting the mortgage payment, troublesome teens, no time to relax, career frustrations-they're all part of modern daily life. And any or all cause stress.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is not an event; it is your reaction to an event. When your body responds physically and mentally to uncomfortable external incidents, stress results.

Stress may also be generated by thoughts, feelings or expectations about things that are real or imagined. A phobia, for example, which is an exaggerated and sometimes illogical fear, can cause its sufferer as much stress as real danger. In addition, a series of small events, seemingly insignificant in themselves, may build up to bring on a stress reaction.

To put it simply, stress is the clash between demands in your life and the means you have to deal with those demands.

IS ALL STRESS BAD?

No. Some stress can even be pleasant, such as the kind you experience when cheering on your favourite team. And many people do their best work under pressures. In fact, stress can be a potent force for personal development; when you have to do it, you learn to do it. This type of stress is known as positive stress.

Normally, a little stress is stimulating. But too much stress runs the body down. On the other hand, too little stress can also be harmful. The sudden inactivity which follows retirement from a demanding job can be very stressful unless new interests are discovered.

THE 'FIGHT OR FLIGHT' RESPONSE

Have you heard of the "Fight or Flight" response? This is the body's instinctual reaction to stress. Muscles tense and breathing becomes shallow as the body prepares for action. Adrenaline and other chemicals are also pumped in to the bloodstream to increase strength and endurance.

In the past, this response was one of humanity's most important survival mechanisms. It enabled us to confront life-threatening

situations when we had no other choice or to escape from them when we did.

In today's more constrained world, however, the "Fight or Flight" response often works against us. The extra, strength-giving sugars and fatty substances which are released into the blood can increase your cholesterol if not controlled. This in turn may lead to clogging and thickening of the arteries or other circulatory disorders.

As well, excess secretions of adrenaline strain the heart. And since fighting and running are rarely solutions to today's problems, we bottle up our anxiety and frustration and leave ourselves open to stress-related disorders such as ulcers, muscular pain, skin problems, and even hair loss.

RECOGNISE YOUR STRESS SYMPTOMS

When you are under too much stress, your body lets you know by sending out warning signs. These can be physical, emotional or behavioural.

Physical symptoms take the form of headaches, high blood pressure, chest pain, fatigue or eyestrain. Some emotional signs are depression, irritability, low self-esteem, anger, and apathy. Behavioural indicators may be overeating or under eating, an increase in smoking or drinking, forgetfulness, insomnia, and careless driving.

Of course these are not the only signs. There are many more. But if you have found yourself experiencing some of the previously-named symptoms with increasing frequency, you are probably becoming a victim of stress.

WHAT ARE STRESSORS?

Things that bring on stress are known as 'stressors' They are many and varied. Financial pressures, living in crowded conditions, criticism from a superior, problems with personal relationships, a death in the family - all of these are stressors.

Are any of them yours? Or do you find stressful thoughts running through your mind when you're not busy, when you're alone or just before you go to bed?

It is important that you identify and try to understand your stressors. Things that make one angry or upset are the stressors most people

think of first. But things that make you sad, frightened, surprised, excited or happy can also cause stress. You may even cause your own stress through thoughts, feelings, and expectations.

MANAGING STRESS - AN A-B-C

A IS FOR ACTION.

When stress is created by something you can control, take ACTION to change things. Many people cite too much to do, with too little time to do it, as their greatest cause of stress. Here are five time-management topics that can help:

- ▲ Make lists. It's easier to do a job when you remind yourself about it by writing it down.
- ▲ Prioritize. Do important jobs first, when your energy is high.
- ▲ Combine similar tasks. Make all phone calls in one sitting. Run all errands in one trip.
- ▲ Avoid time-wasters. Postpone chit-chat until you have "downtime."
- ▲ Delegate. Can't co-workers, children, spouse or friends take some of the load?

B is for BEAR IT.

If there's nothing you can do, you'll just have to "grin and BEAR IT."

Learn to master your thoughts and impulses even if, at first, you can't control your feelings. When anger threatens, count to 10, or 20. Recite the multiplication tables. Memorize a poem. Change your thoughts, then later, once you've calmed down, analyze the problem objectively. Don't allow yourself to be drawn into reacting emotionally.

Keep things in perspective. Don't overdramatize. Sometimes the words we use to describe our stressful situations are emotionally charged and can worsen the way we feel. Saying that one's workload is "killing" them or that one's children are driving one to "pull their hair out" are examples of how we often overdramatize.

Self-talk is a technique many people use to handle stress. They repeat a saying that helps them accept and deal with stressful situations. Here are some common ones:

- ▲ One day I'll laugh about this.
- ▲ It's a learning experience.
- ▲ This is just one more chapter for my book.

Don't forget, a sense of humour and a positive attitude are guaranteed stress reducers. If you avoid taking things overly seriously, and can focus on the positive side, you're already on the road to finding a solution to your situation.

C IS FOR COPE.

And one of the best ways to COPE with stress is by using relaxation techniques.

Of course your body has a natural ability to relax, but often this

ability diminishes with constant stress. For this reason, it may take practice before your body regains its natural ability.

Breathing deeply is the fastest and easiest way to relax. Here's one method: Fold your hands together over your stomach. Now inhale and fill up the bottom of your lungs breathings from your abdomen, not your chest. Inhale to the count of four, then exhale slowly and focus on relaxing.

Freeing up tension in muscle groups is another stress-reducer, and it can be combined with deep breathing as well. First, scan your body looking for tense muscle groups. Start with your feet and work up through your legs until you reach your neck and head. At each place you feel tension, take a full breath and imagine the tightness "dissolving" as you exhale.

Auto suggestion is a third key to relaxation. Allow random thoughts to pass through your mind without paying any attention to them. Then, begin to repeat things like the following to yourself:

"I fell relaxed and calm."

"My hands are warm and heavy."

My heartbeat is slow and regular."

STRESS - YOU CAN MANAGE IT!

We all must live with stress. If we avoided it completely, we would be dead. But if you keep in mind the A-B-C's of stress management, and apply them in your life, pretty soon you'll find your stress resistance in creasing. You may even begin looking forward to new stress-filled situations as challenges to be overcome and mastered. **STRESS - YOU CAN MANAGE IT!**

At the same time, it is important not to overlook symptoms of stress. If you are experiencing difficulties coping with stress in your life or with any other problems, it may be useful to seek out the help of your EAP counsellors at Warren Shepell Consultants Corp.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

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