

Optimizing Stress

March 2011 Monthly Bulletin



The Balancing Act of Stress

Stress: It's an old (ancient!) story

Many people think of stress as tension or pressure. But it's actually more. Understanding stress and its effects can help you use it to your advantage. **More...**



Worklife Balance

Learn to relax your body

The head, neck and shoulder areas – which form the “stress triangle” – are the places where we hold much of our tension. Learning how to release the tension in the muscles can help you relax. **More...**



Mind Matters

Building stress hardiness

Stress in life is the norm, not the exception. The key is to develop stress hardiness – the ability to cope and bounce back from change and other stressors. **More...**



Stress Management 101

Do this, not that

Sometimes we choose to do things that aren't the best option for us. When experiencing stress, the healthiest option is to focus on activities and behaviors that will really help over time. **More...**



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Many people think of stress as tension or pressure. But it's actually more. Understanding stress and its effects can help you use it to your advantage.

What happens when you are stressed?

Stress is a response by your body to any demand made upon it. Your body responds in many ways. Hormones such as adrenalin surge. Your heartbeat and blood pressure increase. Your blood sugar rises.

These effects – unchanged for thousands of years – actually helped our cave-dwelling relatives survive. This stress reaction, which we often call the “fight-or-flight” response, helped them run away faster or fight harder against the dangers of their daily lives.

Modern-day stress: both positive and negative

Today we don't need to hunt or fight for food and shelter. But we still experience stresses. Some are negative like traffic jams, difficult jobs or the breakup of relationships.

Stresses can also be positive. Think of events like having a baby, winning the lottery or successfully completing a project. These are events that are happy, yet they can still cause stress – positive stress.

The long-term effects of stress

Your body can't tell the difference between positive and negative stress. In either case, your body reacts with the stress response.

If stress is chronic, it can be harmful. You may feel tired, depressed or anxious. You may have physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches or backaches.

Use stress to your advantage

Stress is like body temperature: If it's too low or too high, you can't survive, but the right balance can keep you going strong. It makes sense to use stress energy positively to meet life's challenges, experiences and goals.

Stress isn't all bad. In fact, positive stress can make life both rich and satisfying.

Getting help

Confidential support, information and resource referrals are available for a variety of concerns – both work and personal. Call for assistance for you or your household members. Call or visit us online today!



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The head, neck and shoulder areas – which form the “stress triangle” – are the places where we hold much of our tension. Learning how to release the tension in the muscles can help you relax.

Find your “stress triangle”

Place your left hand on your right shoulder. Move your fingers halfway in toward your neck. You’re at one point of the triangle. The second point is the same place off your left shoulder. The third point is on your forehead, between your eyes.

Stretch away tension

These simple exercises can help relieve tightness in your “stress triangle.”

▪ **Stretch.** Stretch your right ear to your right shoulder, keeping your left shoulder pulled down. Slowly lift your head to upright. Next, stretch your left ear to your left shoulder, keeping your right shoulder pulled down. Slowly lift to upright. Last, drop your chin down toward your chest. Return to upright. Begin with 8; build up to 16.

- **Shrug.** Draw a big circle with your shoulders, one at a time. Go forward and then back.
- **Pick fruit.** With one hand, reach up as if you were picking an apple from a tree slightly ahead and far above you. Go from one arm to the other, building up to 8 times on each side.
- **Give yourself a mini-massage.** Use your right hand to work on your left shoulder and left hand on your right shoulder blade, moving up toward your neck and including your scalp.

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Mind Matters

Building stress hardiness

Stress in life is the norm, not the exception. The key is to develop stress hardiness – the ability to cope and bounce back from change and other stressors. Improving your stress hardiness can help you manage and even thrive in the midst of the stress in your life.

Steps to stress resiliency

- 1. Recover:** After a stressful event, you need to regain your sense of balance and routine. To begin your recovery, take a break.

Plan a weekend getaway, or just make time to “chill out” at home. Mini-breaks like going to the movies can help you gain distance and perspective. Other good stress reducers include exercise and sharing your feelings with others.
- 2. Refocus:** Try to step back and see “the big picture” in order to calm down. Take time to think about what has happened, why and what it may mean. Work on finding the positives in the change.

You might have mixed feelings. For example, if you’ve been promoted,

you might be pleased with the recognition but uncomfortable about supervising a staff.

You may feel sad or angry about having to let go of familiar people and routines. All of these feelings are valid. Work on identifying – and accepting – your feelings and reactions.

- 3. Regenerate:** Your body needs time to heal after stress. Give yourself permission to rest. Eat regularly. Have some fun and get support by connecting with new people or old friends.

Learning to live with stress

We can’t escape stress, but we can build stress hardiness. That way, we can be more at peace with the stresses in our lives.

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Stress Management 101

Do this, not that

There's a book that's popular right now called *Eat This, Not That!* Maybe you've heard of it? It helps readers to consider making the healthier choice when faced with different food options.

It is the same with stress. Sometimes we choose to do things that aren't the best option for us. When experiencing stress, the healthiest option is to focus on activities and behaviors that will really help over time. Consider the following list. Use the "Do this" points to make some headway in managing your stress.

Do this

- Breathe slowly and deeply.
- Remember, this too shall pass.

- Take some time and review your options.
- Meditate for 5-10 minutes a day.

Not that

- Take rapid, shallow breaths.
- Remind yourself how horrible it all is.
- Try everything that anyone tells you will work.
- Fill each moment with "must do" activities.

Learning and practicing good stress management skills can be helpful. Try to "do this" daily to help become a skilled stress manager.

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