

## Coping With Stress

"Don't get stressed out!" is a common phrase these days. There are many self help books written giving advice regarding the dangers of stress and how to cope with it.

What exactly is stress? Stress can be defined as our body's natural response to an external threat or danger. Physiological changes take place in our bodies that prepare us to either fight or take flight. That is, we either need to change the situation that we are in so it will no longer be threatening or we need to get out of the situation. In this sense, stress is a very necessary and natural part of life. It helps us resolve crises and adapt to the changing world around us. The kind of stress, however, that can be harmful is a situation where neither flight nor fight is possible. What results is often a feeling of being trapped or caught with no solutions. Examples of this can be seen in stress that sometimes occurs in relationships. There may be a chronic marital conflict, a parent/child relationship that never seems to get resolved, or a relationship at work between employees or between a supervisor and an employee. Other examples of chronic stress are financial difficulties resulting from prolonged unemployment or living from check to check with expenditures always exceeding income. There can also be stress from chronic illnesses. All of these situations, if they persist over time, result in an added strain on the body. The body is preparing us for "fight or flight", but when no action is possible the results are a gradual lessening of the body's ability to respond to change. It loses some of its resiliency much like a rubber band that is repeatedly stretched. The effects of this kind of stress can sometimes be seen in reactions such as headaches, ulcers, muscle spasms and high blood pressure. Sleep disturbance can also result from chronic stress. Also, irritability in relationship to other people or a lack of social response and withdrawal can be signs of ongoing stress.

What can be done about stress? There are three different approaches to dealing with stress which can be helpful in lessening the strain on the body. The first and probably most commonly suggested is exercise. Regular exercise, which means at least two or three times a week, uses up some of the adrenalin which the body produces in times of stress. By exercising and depleting some of the adrenalin the body is able to relax naturally. A second method of dealing with stress is through "time-out". This can be as simple as taking five or ten minutes every several hours for a brief rest, to various forms of meditation or visual imagery. This relaxes our thought processes, clears the mind, and allows the body to take a brief rest. A simple procedure that can be done while even sitting in a chair is to alternatively tighten a muscle in your legs, arms or stomach and then relax it. This also brings about a state of rest for the body. Another simple procedure is to take very slow deep breaths focusing on the lungs filling up with air and emptying. Taking six or eight deep breaths several times during the day can aid in the relaxation process and give the body a break. A third method of coping with stress is by sharing our feelings with someone else. Having a friend who can listen on a regular basis to some of our concerns may not solve the problem, but it reduces some of the distress we experience. Just feeling understood has the affect of relaxing our bodies.

Probably most important factor in dealing with stress is to be able to have some balance in our lives. We need both work and play, time to be alone and time to share with a friend or family member, time to be productive and time to rest. This sense of balance is probably what we all are searching for and it can only be achieved with a conscious effort over a period of time.

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