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Don't Let Stress Get You Down!

This NebGuide defines stress and its relationship to anger. It discusses a stress management model, stress-busting technique and helps the reader develop a stress management plan.

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What is Stress?

Stress has become a catch-all term to describe events or circumstances that make us feel tense or angry. Stress often is caused by events over which we have no control (destruction of home by tornado or sudden death of a family member) or by a positive event (birth of child). However, most stress comes from the daily pile-up of small aggravations and frustrations.

It is not "things" or events themselves, however, that cause stress. It is how you *interpret* and *react* to them. If the source of stress is *within your control*, you can take action to change the situation. If it's *beyond your control*, you can learn to accept it or find ways to minimize its physical and emotional impact. Experts agree that high levels of stress over long periods tend to be paralyzing and reduce your ability to cope. It can lead to serious illness or depression.

Effects of high stress pile-up. Stress is your body's *internal alarm*. It alerts you to immediate danger and stimulates the **fight-or-flight** reflex, a primitive survival mechanism that triggers a chemical surge that makes your muscles tense and your heart race. Your brain releases (1) **cortisol**, which raises your blood pressure slowly and steadily; and (2) **adrenaline**, which raises your blood pressure in a more violent fashion. These increase your metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and muscle tension. Certain other stress hormones increase stomach acidity and the risk of an ulcer. Ultimately, these reactions can impair your cardiovascular, respiratory or immune system or your gastro-intestinal tract. Heart disease, high blood pressure and strokes can also be related to your stress levels and responses.

Symptoms of stress overload include: (1) headaches, (2) heartburn or indigestion, (3) nausea, (4) high anxiety, (5) sleeplessness-the inability to go to sleep, or awakening after a few hours and being unable to go back to sleep, (6) low back pain, (7) inability to control anger, (8) being unassertive and unwilling to say no, and (9) feeling listless and lost when your values are not in congruence with your lifestyle. There is also evidence that chronic stress can lead to, or worsen, certain illnesses.

Not all stress is destructive, however. When properly channeled, *good stress* actually can help you cope with life's challenges and protect you from danger. For example, when a car veers toward you, your body responds by pumping adrenaline and other chemicals into your blood system to help you to get to safety. Good stress can motivate you to achieve your goals in life. The most effective persons are not stress-free, but are more likely *stress-resistant*. They bounce back from stress rather than let it get them down. They see negative events as a challenge rather than interpreting them as destructive. Positive events, such as getting married or starting a new job, can cause as much stress as negative ones, but are taken in stride.

What are some situations in your life that cause stress? Not having enough money to pay your bills? Not being able to find a job? Family chaos every morning? Worrying about your kids all the time? Relationship problems? Being evicted from your house? Growing older? Even positive events, such as getting married, having children, getting a better job and moving, may be just as stressful as negative ones.

Stress Management

Stress management is a decision-making process. Choosing a low-stress response to life's bumps and bruises will not only preserve your sanity but also your physical health. There are three major ways to deal with stress: (1) **Alter** it, (2) **Avoid** it, or (3) **Accept** that living is stressful by: building your physical, mental, social and spiritual resistance, or by changing your perceptions of life's challenges.

- **ALTER** your life by *removing sources of stress*. Better planning, being more organized in your personal and family life, and becoming more efficient in your use of time are common techniques for altering life. Get and stay organized. Good organization reduces tension by helping you feel more in control. Have a backup plan in case your first one doesn't work well. Open up communication with the person causing you stress. Buy a notebook and write down your frustrations and anxieties and your plans to alter the situation.
- **AVOID** stress by *removing yourself* from the stressful situation, or figuring out how to avoid getting there in the first place. Dr. Hans Selye, father of modern stress research, said it best: "*Complete freedom from stress is death, so we cannot avoid it.*" But you can know your limits so you can "live to fight another day." You may leave a job that is frustrating, avoid people or situations that give you headaches, and emotionally or physically leave a person that is causing pain. Sometimes it is OK to walk away, to let go, and to say "no."
- **ACCEPT** life's stresses by equipping yourself physically and mentally through (1) *building your resistance*; and (2) *changing your perception* of the stressor. You can build resistance by developing and maintaining:
 - *physical health* through eating a proper diet, doing regular exercise and having regular health checkups. Physical exercise such as walking stimulates the endorphins and will help you sleep better. A body that is physically stressed because of sedentary living and poor eating habits is more likely to buckle under the additional weight of mental stress.

- **mental health** by (1) taking a few minutes a day for yourself to "recharge your batteries"; (2) getting clear about your own goals and priorities in life; and (3) becoming the best person you can be.
- **social health** by building friendships, and strengthening relationships with parents, children and/or your intimate partner and participating in your community.
- **spiritual health**, which is especially important in times of high stress. Prayer, meditation, worship, faith and commitment can strengthen you for tough times.

A person who is physically, mentally, socially and spiritually healthy is better able to manage stress.

Change your perception. One way to learn to live with life's stresses is to change the way you interpret the situation. This means **stopping** your **negative** thinking and conversations that go in your head and replacing them with **positive** thoughts. We use these automatic, internal conversations to interpret events and situations. These "talks" can be healthy, or unhealthy. Self-talk is the way people review their mistakes, problems and conflicts. If our self-talk is negative and self-punishing, it provokes stress. Remember, most stress is **self-induced**. Try a **thought-stopping technique**. The moment you begin to develop negative thoughts, say the word **STOP!** Or, visualize a large, red **stop sign** with big letters reading **STOP**. You can think positive thoughts and be motivated for action, or, think negative ones and feel weighted down. You do have a **choice** in your response.

Here are some additional approaches to dealing with every day stress:

- **Take a problem-solving approach** to a potentially stressful situation. Has this happened before? If so, what did you learn from it? Decide what's the worst that can happen, and consider your options. Ask yourself: "Will I even remember this incident five years from now?"
- **Think about your concerns.** Take stock of your worries and fears. Look back over the last year and see how many things you worried about that came true and how many never happened. Listen to the way you talk-to yourself and to others. Do you dwell on criticism? Do you create unnecessary stress by overdramatizing situations and making things seem worse than they are?
- **Talk to yourself in a positive way.** Say whatever helps you to calm down. "Some day I'll laugh about this..." "things could be worse..." "this is a character-building experience..."
- **Pay attention to signs of stress overload.** When stress is taking over our lives, we get headaches, colds, have indigestion, don't sleep well, act cranky and often feel angry. This is the time to look for patterns of stress in your daily life and try to get rid of them.
- **Don't try to be perfect.** We all should worry less, criticize less, preach less, listen more, have more fun, be more honest with our own feelings, develop our own joys and friendships and don't sweat the small stuff (which is nearly everything). The goal is not to be a perfect parent, a perfect spouse, or perfect worker, because no such thing exists.

Stress-busting Techniques

There are numerous ways to lessen the impact that stressful events and stressful thinking have on our physical and mental health. While each person has to find a remedy that works, here are several suggestions you may try in addition to your own:

1. **Muscle relaxation:** Tense and relax all the major muscle groups – from shoulders to toes. Muscle

relaxation is especially useful if you tend to carry a lot of tension in your forehead or shoulders. Practiced one or twice a day, this technique can stop muscle tension before it grows into a full-scale headache or other problem. Relaxation tapes to guide you through this process can be found in a library or purchased at a book store.

2. **Meditation:** Spend 10 to 20 minutes of quiet time in a comfortable position, repeating a word (relax, love, etc.) You focus only on the one word and try to keep all thoughts out of your mind. When you're in a deeply relaxed meditative state, your blood pressure and heart rate drop and your brain produces more slow alpha waves, which are associated with enhanced well-being.
3. **Yoga:** This ancient practice combines full, deep breathing with muscle stretching and focused relaxation exercises. The process helps you recognize the stress signals your body produces and then work on getting rid of them.
4. **Massage:** The traditional Swedish massage therapist strokes and kneads tense muscles. This brings a new flush of blood and oxygen to them, which allows for better disposal of metabolic waste. It counteracts the tensing of muscles that occurs during stressful situations. Massage has been shown to have many healthful benefits.
5. **Thought-stoppers:** Sometimes we lay in bed, our mind races and we can't sleep. Often the anticipation of a situation is worse than the actual event itself. If you are tossing in bed at three a.m., unable to refrain from thinking negative thoughts, say the letters **S-T-O-P** over and over through your mind, and count backward from five to zero. Imagine each letter or number in vivid color and decorated with balloons and streamers. If the stressful thought is still there, spell or count again.
6. **The quieting response:** Whenever you're in a stressful situation, you can do this four-step exercise:
 - Say to yourself, "Isn't this a silly thing I'm doing to my body?"
 - Take 4 or 5 deep breaths - inhaling, holding and exhaling, each to the count of five.
 - As you exhale, let your jaw fall comfortably slack.
 - Say to yourself, "I am feeling relaxed and calm," as you exhale.
7. **Stress inoculation:** This technique prepares you in advance for a situation you know will be stressful. The idea is to imagine in your mind what will be said to you, and then come up with your best response. You can role-play a situation in your mind or practice out loud.
8. **Worrying.** Most of us worry over things that don't happen, or about things over which we have no control. Whenever you start to worry about something, ask yourself *Is there anything I can do to change or prevent the situation?* If the answer is yes, think about developing a plan. If no, agree to set aside your worrying until **worry time**, a few minutes every day reserved for fretting. And, don't allow yourself to worry in between. Try to use your worry-energy in the most productive way possible.

Practicing any of the stress-management techniques described here is guaranteed to make you feel better. Each success gives you courage to keep going. Before you know it, you'll be one of those people that everyone envies because you cope with stress so well.

Anger and Stress

How are anger and stress related? Anger produces the same fight-or-flight response, and stimulates the release of the same two hormones (*adrenaline* and *cortisol*) into the bloodstream, as when you are faced with any threatening or dangerous situation. If left unchecked, anger can damage your relationships, your reputation and your health. Whether you act in a constructive or destructive manner is a matter of *personal control*.

The use of physical force is an appropriate or useful response in very few situations, yet your body continues to react as though it were often necessary. If your anger response is frequent and becomes a chronic behavior pattern, it can (1) cause heart rate and blood pressure to rise; (2) cause platelets circulating in the blood to become sticky, promoting the buildup of plaque in your arteries; (3) stimulate fat cells to empty into the bloodstream, making more cholesterol available to be incorporated into plaque; and (4) suppress the immune system, making you more susceptible to illness.

Anger also has a number of harmful *psychological effects* that may take their toll on your physical health. Hostility may be associated with poor marital satisfaction, difficult relationships with friends or other family members, and greater problems at work. A hostile attitude also drives others away and may contribute to social isolation, itself a predictor of poor health and reduced longevity. Perhaps because they are under greater stress from frequent arousal, people who measure high in hostility are also more likely than others to engage in habits that are dangerous to their health, particularly smoking, excessive alcohol use and overeating.

Damage control strategies you can use to help control your anger response:

- ***Reason with yourself.*** While anger may not feel like an emotion that responds well to logic, you can use your reasoning powers to keep from reacting automatically, and from flying into a rage. ***Important:*** Rely only on evidence you can observe objectively, ***not*** on your interpretation of others' motives. Instead of losing your temper, be assertive. Describe the specific behavior that's bothering you, and tell yourself what you want. Be specific about the behavior you want changed, and make the request calmly. If necessary, take a few deep breaths before speaking.

The key is to talk yourself out of a destructive response. Recognize that your anger will not change the person or situation that has irritated you. Remind yourself that if you remain angry, it's your own health and well-being that will suffer most.

- ***Use the thought-stopping technique.*** Say the word **STOP!** either aloud or to yourself. Do this over and over again until you calm down.
- ***Withdraw.*** If you find yourself "losing it," take a deep breath, count to **10** slowly, and leave the scene for a few minutes. Calm down, then come back when you have gained control of yourself.
- ***Empathize.*** When people do something annoying, try to find a reasonable explanation for their behavior. Try to see the situation from their perspective. This can often short-circuit impatience or irritation before it erupts into rage.
- ***Talk it out*** with someone who will listen to your feelings without trying to solve the problem. Reflecting your feelings and understanding your reasoning behind them helps you regain a sense of control. ***Don't*** try to manipulate the listener into taking your side and blaming someone else as the "bad guy."

Learning to be responsible for your own anger behavior, and not blaming someone else for your response, is the first step in anger control. Suppressed anger can lead to depression and other physical

ailments. It destroys relationships and does not produce the outcome you want. If you need professional help, contact a clinical psychologist, professional counselor or marriage and family therapist, before the toll is too high.

Your Stress Management Plan

If you plan to change your life to manage your stress more successfully, you'll need to first assess the most stressful situations in your life, and then, develop a plan to use on a daily basis. Remember: *If it is to be, it is up to me!*

1. Describe the most stressful experience you had in the past month.
2. How did the experience **affect** you physically?
3. How did the experience **affect** you emotionally?
4. What could you do to change your life to **alter** the source of your stress?
5. What could you do to **avoid** the source of this stress?
6. What could you do to **accept** your stressful environment by building your resistance through better:

physical health?
social health?
mental health?
spiritual health?
7. How can you **change** your unrealistic expectations? Irrational beliefs? Negative self-talk?
8. What strategy is most useful to you (or another family member) to better control your anger?
9. List one strategy for you to manage stress more effectively? List a strategy to reduce the negative impact of out-of-control anger?

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