



KEYS TO EMBRACING AGING Stress Management

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Everybody experiences both good and bad stress. It can come from mental activity (for example, working on a research paper), emotional activity (for example, having a milestone birthday) and/or physical activity (for example, walking to school). The way we interpret stress is unique and personal. What may be relaxing to one person may be stressful to another. Good stress can be healthy and useful. It helps us get to an appointment on time or meet a deadline. When stress becomes overwhelming, it becomes distress or bad stress. Bad stress can lead to chronic stress, which can leave you feeling nervous, on edge and tense. It also puts you at greater risk for numerous health problems, including heart disease, sleep problems, digestive problems, depression, obesity, memory impairment and various skin conditions, such as eczema. Learning what causes stress and different ways we can cope with it helps us to be more balanced and healthy throughout life.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is the way your body responds to experiences and events. It helps you rise to a challenge in addition to preparing to meet tough situations with focus, strength, stamina and heightened alertness. The events that provoke stress are called **stressors**. Some stressors are caused by negative events such as a family argument, physical danger, test anxiety or concern over finances. Events that we look forward to such as celebrations or going to a movie with a friend are also stressors. Stressors can be single events or a result of a multiple events that pile up.

Sanford Health (2009) describes the body's reaction to stress:

The human body responds to stressors by activating the nervous system and specific hormones. The hypothalamus signals the adrenal glands to produce more of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol and releases them into the bloodstream. These hormones speed up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and metabolism. Blood vessels open wider to let more blood flow to large muscle groups, putting our muscles on alert. Pupils dilate to improve vision. The liver releases some of its stored glucose to increase the body's energy and sweat is produced to cool the body. All of these physical changes prepare a person to react quickly and effectively to handle the pressure of the moment.

This natural reaction is known as the **stress response**. Working properly, the body's stress response enhances a person's ability to perform well under pressure. The stress response can also cause problems when it overreacts or fails to turn off and reset itself properly.

The stress response (better known as the fight or flight response) is critical during emergency situations, such as when a driver has to slam on the brakes to avoid hitting a child running out into the middle of the street. But the stress response can also be activated in a milder form when there is pressure but no real danger—like getting ready to go to a big dance or sitting down for a mini-mental status exam. A little of this milder stress can help

keep you on your toes, ready to rise to a challenge. The nervous system quickly returns to its normal state after the fight or flight response, ready to respond again when needed. It is not the short-term stress response that causes many medical personnel to talk about the concerns of stress, it is the ongoing or long-term stress that causes the nervous system to produce the excess stress hormones that weaken the body's immune system and causes other health issues.

According to HPMC (Hanford.gov, 2014), people who are experiencing stress overload may notice:

- anxiety or panic attacks
- a feeling of being constantly pressured, hassled and hurried
- irritability and moodiness
- physical symptoms, such as stomach problems, headaches or even chest pain
- allergic reactions, such as eczema or asthma
- problems sleeping
- drinking too much, smoking, overeating or doing drugs
- sadness or depression

Everyone experiences stress differently. Some individuals may become angry and act out their stress by taking it out on others, whereas other individuals may internalize it and develop psychosocial disorders such as an eating disorder. For those individuals with a chronic disease, they may find that the symptoms of their illness flare up under an overload of stress.

Stages of Stress

The body reacts to stress in three ways:

- **Stage 1: Alarm.** Certain hormones are pumped into the bloodstream, which speeds up the heart rate, increases respiration and slows down digestive activity. The body is ready for either fight or flight. Such a situation can lead to stress-related illnesses such as ulcers, headaches, backaches, palpitations of the heart, rashes and various other ailments.
- **Stage 2: Resistance and Adaptation.** The body tries to repair the damage caused in stage one and bring the body back to a "normal condition." It is only when stress is not positively dealt with that the third stage occurs.
- **Stage 3: Exhaustion.** A person's body cannot be stressed all the time. Release must occur or illness may result.

MANAGING STRESS

While we cannot rid ourselves of stress, we can learn to manage it. The ultimate goal in stress management is to achieve a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation and fun – plus the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet life's stressors head on.

Identify the sources of stress in your life

The first step in stress management is to identify the stressors in your life. Are there any stressors you can change by avoiding, reducing exposure or eliminating them completely? Can you go to work earlier if parking is a problem or organize your time differently so that you are not studying for an exam at the last minute?

Learning healthier ways to manage stress

Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no "one size fits all" solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation; therefore, it is important to experiment with different stress reduction strategies to lessen your feelings of stress. Focus on what makes you feel calm and in control.

How to Deal With Stressful Situations

Change the Situation

- Avoid stressors
- Alter the stressor

Change Your Reaction

- Accept the stressor
- Adapt to the stressor

Two common strategies for managing stress include changing the situation and your response to the situation. If there is a situation that you can identify that causes stress, avoid it. For example, if the crowds and chaos of the State Fair make you feel anxious to the point that you do not like to go, stay home instead. In unavoidable situations, such as a holiday dinner with in-laws, you may have to change your reaction. Accept it for what it is, focus on what is really important, adapt to the environment and move on.

Stress Management Strategy 1: Change the Situation

- **Evaluate your physical environment.** If the color on the walls affects your mood or if you are worried about a toddler falling down the stairs or a loved one with dementia wandering out of the house in the middle of the night – modify your environment with paint, gates or alarms on the door.
- **Take a look at the people in your life.** Is there is a person or a group of people who really cause you stress? If so, you may need to distance yourself or resign from that organization/group.
- **Review your calendar.** Sometimes stress results from our inability to say “no.” Look at your commitments. Are you doing what you want to do, should do, have to do? If part of your stress is overcommitting yourself, pare back. Many commitments and tasks are beneficial but if it is hurting your health, it may not be worth it.

Stress Management Strategy 2: Change Your Reaction

- **Laugh, don't cry.** Some things we just can't change. These are the things that we need to learn to accept versus letting them bother us. So your neighbor painted his garage hot pink. Instead of getting worked up when you drive past, accept the pink and laugh at his lack of style.
- **Compromise.** Our need to be “right” often interferes with good communication and can cause stress when we are so focused on what the other person is doing. If we ask someone to change, we need to be willing to change ourselves.
- **Let it go.** Ask yourself does it really matter? Will it matter in five years? We sometimes have to pick our battles. For instance, a mother and child fought most mornings about what the child was going to wear to school. The child chose gym shorts and t-shirts over the mother's choice of “school clothes.” It was causing stress in their relationship as well as starting the day off with ugly confrontation. When the mother finally decided to let it go and allow her child to choose which clothes to wear, the morning conflict ended. The mother recognized that it really didn't matter if the child wore a t-shirt or a polo as long as the child went to school clean, decently dressed and learned while he or she was there.

Having realistic expectations of yourself, shifting your focus to looking at what is really important and taking care of yourself emotionally and physically will also increase your confidence to deal with stressors. Taking a deep breath, meditating, relaxing or taking time to smell the roses allows you to appreciate the little things so that you don't overreact over the big things.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the lifespan, we face multiple demands, such as peer pressure, school, workloads, relationship issues, making ends meet, taking care of family or just making it out the door on time. Stress should not rule your life. Learning what causes stress and different ways we can cope with it is a healthy lifestyle behavior that will reduce pressure and anxiety and influence optimal aging.

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