Introduction to Stress Management: Identifying Stressors and Reactions

We are introducing a series on stress management. Our first segment will review some basic information about stress.

Nowhere to Run, Nowhere to Hide
We feel stress when we are exposed to any change that requires us to adapt. As most of us know – if there is one thing we can be sure of – it's that change happens. We also know that no one is immune to stress.

At some point in life, everyone faces periods of crisis, transition or difficulty. Some examples of these periods of stressful change are: illness of a loved one or a personal illness; falling in or out of love; having a new job, house or school; bad weather; financial challenges; and family differences. These changes can affect our health and recent studies show that:

- The majority of doctor visits are stress related.
- Chronic stress speeds up the aging process by shortening the life spans of cells, which opens the door to disease.

Mind over Matter
Our attitudes and perceptions about a stressful experience and our predictions for our future will either relax us or stress us more because our body reacts to not only the actual stressor, but to how stressed-out we think we are. Anxious, stressed people often decide that an event is dangerous, difficult or painful and that they don't have the resources to cope.

Your confidence in your ability to get through a stressful ordeal can lessen the negative impact of stress. You need to think you can be successful; by thinking this way you can actually decrease the negative effects of stress and slow down cell aging.

Fight or Flight
When faced with anything that causes stress, our minds and bodies react in a powerful way by creating biochemical changes that prepare us to deal with a threat or danger. In medical terms, this means the following:

- Our cerebral cortex sends an alarm to the hypothalamus.
- Our heart rate, pulse, metabolism, blood pressure and muscle tension increase.
- Our hands and feet get cold as blood is directed away from our extremities and stomach to go to the larger muscle group, so we can run or fight.

Even though the stressful event may be something like trying to meet a work deadline, rushing to get the kids to school, or getting dinner on the table, our bodies still react as if we are fighting off wild animals or running from an avalanche.

Research has proven that our bodies register the stress before our conscious minds do and so we begin to function in “survival mode” without being aware of it. Even though we are ready to fight or run, it’s rarely appropriate to take either of these actions. Because we are “stuck,” we develop sore muscles, stiff necks and headaches.

The bad news is that living with long term fight-or-flight responses leads to the following long term, negative effects:

- Current afflictions get worse (arthritis, diabetes, asthma, pain).
- Depression, weight gain and headaches occur with more frequency.
- Our cells age prematurely, leading to disease and premature death – from fatigue to heart attack.
- Our high stress level makes us overreact to the next stress.

The good news is that the same mechanism that turns the stress response on can also turn it off. Once you decide that a situation is no longer dangerous, your brain stops sending emergency and panic signals to your nervous center. This bears repeating – thinking positively about your ability to cope with the stressor will help minimize its effects. Your mind believes what you tell it.

You can be SUCCESSFUL!
Coping Mechanisms
When stressed, some of us turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as

- eating comfort foods or drinking alcoholic beverages in excess
- yelling or exhibiting violent behavior
- excessive shopping, gambling or taking risks
- becoming indifferent

Choosing these actions causes our already overworked and injured bodies to suffer more consequences as a result of our bad choices, ultimately adding to our stress.

Positive stress coping behaviors include:

- deep breathing, muscle relaxation and meditation
- attitude awareness, positive thinking and loving yourself
- exercise
- belief in a higher power and prayer
- music, humor and pet therapy
- talking with supportive individuals

What to do this week:
We all know what stress is, but we are not always aware of how we react to it. This week, start keeping a “Stress Journal.” Every day for the next two weeks, record any experiences that stress you. Try to record at least one stressor per day. Record the event, how you felt physically (headache, heart racing, stiff or tightening muscles, etc.) and record your coping mechanism.

Tip:
Don’t judge your stressors or reactions – just observe and write it all down. You can take some time to reflect on how you react to stressful situations later – then you can determine if you could benefit from choosing a healthier choice of action – but for now, just become aware of your patterns of behavior. You need to know what you are doing before you can make any changes in your thinking or behavior.

Follow-up:
Share your experience with members at next week’s meeting. Did anything surprise you? Discuss how identifying your stressors and your behavior will help you make changes toward a healthy lifestyle.

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Your mind believes what you tell it.