

Stress-management basics

Marianopolis Student Services

Stress is the process by which we appraise and respond to events, called stressors, which threaten or challenge us. In other words, stress is any change a person must adapt to, whether negative or positive. Stress affects everyone and is unavoidable and if properly managed can be a source of vitality. If stress is severe or prolonged, however, it is then a drain and may cause physical or mental harm.

Stress manifestations vary from one individual to another:

- **Physically:** difficulty sleeping, back, shoulder and neck pain, loss of appetite, trembling, headaches, digestive problems, heart problems, high blood pressure, arthritis, weight gain or loss.
- **Emotionally:** impatience, hyperactivity, aggression or passiveness, feelings of depression, worry, despair, guilt.
- **Psychologically:** distraction, difficulty concentrating, memory loss, difficulty at work and at rest.

Many factors can influence our stress levels, such as diet, smoking, alcohol, caffeine and medication. Also the label we place on a stressor can create or greatly increase stress. As the Roman philosopher Epictetus said, "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the view they take of them."

Coping strategies

The following suggestions are beneficial for reducing stress:

- **Physical activity:** get exercise and expend your energy whether through walking, dancing, golfing. This reduces tension, changes ideas, develops a sense of well-being and enables you to meet people.
- **Positive thought:** repeat positive statements to oneself and learn to recognize your strengths and assets. Avoid taking on other people's problems. Concentrate on what you are now doing and where you are, rather than what you don't have or can't do. Institute a program of daily laughter and change irrational beliefs to healthier ones (e.g. to be worthwhile - I must be perfect vs I will do my best - but I need not be perfect).
- **Relaxation:** read, watch television, take a hot bath, have a massage, do some stretching or try visualization (e.g., picture yourself floating on an air mattress in a calm body of water on a balmy day ...). Learning to breathe better relaxes muscles,

brings more oxygen to the lungs, produces a slower more regular heart beat. Focus on your breathing with a slow, total inhale through your nostrils and a slow, total exhale through your mouth.

- **Nutrition:** a stress-free diet means low amounts of sugar, caffeine, fat, alcohol, nicotine and salt. Try to eat more fish and poultry and other protein sources: tofu, beans, soybeans, corn, barley, oatmeal, whole wheat. Eat more carbohydrates such as rice, noodles, spaghetti, bread, potatoes. Increase your fibre with whole bran and whole grains as well as fruits and vegetables (raw if possible). Reduce or eliminate alcohol and cigarettes as they contribute to heart and circulatory disease.
- **Relationships:** smile at others; invite people for walks or meals; develop a system to remember people's names; develop effective listening skills and try to gain an understanding of another's world (i.e., empathy). Talk freely about your feelings and problems with at least one other person. Assert yourself and say no when you mean no. It is important to live harmoniously with others but also to be good to yourself.
- **Sleep:** it is only during deep, dreamless sleep that the body restores its physical plant, repairing skin, building bone and muscle, preparing itself for the battles of the day to come. To ensure we get a restful sleep we can practice good "sleep hygiene". Try to get to bed at a regular time; make sure the bedroom is dark, quiet, and well ventilated; don't nap in the late afternoon. Avoid nicotine and alcohol for 3-5 hours before bedtime.

Learning to manage stress is not a short-term proposition; it is a life-long commitment. Set aside a regular time for practising some of the suggestions above. The results are small but cumulative and your efforts will be rewarded in the form of better health and well-being. Good luck!

For more information, see a counsellor at Student Services.