

# Stress Management

*Courtesy of Duke Women's Services*

**S**tress is the response of our bodies, minds and spirits to the events of our lives. Stress is usually thought of as pressure, tension or problems. However, the causes of stress, or "stressors," may be pleasant or neutral events as well as difficult ones. Stress can be viewed as the result of any change that requires us to adjust our behavior.

How people respond to changes greatly affects the amount of stress they experience. Because of individual make-up or personality, different people react to "stressors" in different ways. What may cause one person little or no distress may have enormous impact on another. The differences in people, including age, sex, physical fitness, and personal habits, influence how they respond to the events in their lives.

## **What Are Stressors?**

Stressors are any events, people or things that cause us to change or adapt our behavior. They can occur at every level - physical, social, and mental. Physical stressors include illness, noise, heat and cold, smoke and pollution. Social stressors include relationships with family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers; financial concerns; change in marital status, including marriage, separation or divorce; change in family size, such as the birth of a child; and sexual difficulties. Mental stressors include strong emotions such as love, anger, guilt, worry, etc; making choices, and trying to reach unrealistic goals.

## **How Does Stress Affect The Body?**

Stress triggers a physical response in your body which is known as the "fight or flight" response. This response includes the release of stress-related hormones that prepare the body for action by causing physical changes

such as muscle tension, the constriction of blood vessels, and an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate, and perspiration. Cortisone is also released which causes the following changes: increased blood pressure, blood cholesterol, production of glucose, slowing of digestion, and a weakening of the immune system.

To understand why these changes occur, remember that the stress response evolved from a survival mechanism which increased our ability to fight or flee an enemy or threatening situation. In today's more "civilized" world, this powerful response occurs in many circumstances which are not life-threatening, and often continues for long periods of time, resulting in chronic stress.

## **What is Chronic Stress?**

The stress response developed to protect people in specific short-term events, but it can be harmful if it is maintained for long periods of time. Chronic stress occurs when a person is continually in a stress-response condition.

Over time, chronic stress can lead to illness, worsening of health problems and even death. In fact, 50 percent to 80 percent of all diseases are thought to be stress-related. Chronic stress may contribute to headaches, ulcers, rashes, increased pain, joint aches, diabetes, asthma, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, heart disease including hardening of the arteries, and other problems.

## **Signs of Chronic Stress**

Chronic stress causes different symptoms in different people, which may include the following physical and emotional signs of stress:

- *General irritability, hyperactivity or depression*

- Inability to concentrate, indecision or confusion
- Teeth grinding
- Gastric problems including indigestion, nausea, constipation or diarrhea
- Migraine or tension headaches
- Neck and lower back pain
- Loss of appetite or excess appetite
- Increased substance use, i.e., smoking, alcohol, caffeine, tranquilizers, or other drugs
- Sleeping problems, including nightmares

### **Coping With Stress**

People often deal with stress by using strategies that are not really effective. These include denial of the problems, withdrawal from people and situations, isolation, the use of drugs, overeating, or working harder. Unfortunately, if the stressful situation remains, so does the stress.

There are many effective coping strategies which can be adapted to your individual lifestyle. Here are some of them:

- *Take life "one day at a time." Face the problems of the day and work to solve them. Taking action can help relieve the sense of having no control.*
- *Learn relaxation techniques such as controlled breathing and meditation.*

- *Set your priorities and establish realistic goals.*
- *Get involved with others, including support groups, family or friends.*
- *Exercise regularly.*
- *Keep a journal. Recording your feelings can help you develop better self-awareness and understanding.*
- *Develop assertive communication skills. Being open, direct and respectful when you deal with others can help lower stress.*

### **Stress Management At Duke**

Duke University Medical Center offers a wide range of stress management services provided by an experienced, professional staff. Our team of specialists includes psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, nurse specialists and counselors.

Stress management services are available both on campus at Duke Clinic and at our outreach facilities throughout the Triangle area. We also provide these services to inpatients, including cancer and heart patients, where our team works with physicians to help people control pain, reduce depression and anxiety, and enhance their quality of life.

For more information on services available at Duke University Medical Center, call 919-416-DUKE or toll free 1-888-ASK-DUKE.

