

H E L P O U T

Manage your stress

by Sandra Pinches, Ph.D.

The term "stress" has in recent years become such a popular psychological concept that it is a household word, offered as an explanation for all sorts of emotional and physical problems. Part of its popularity is due to the fact that people can admit to feeling stressed without fearing that they will be seen as neurotic. The stress concept is also more holistic than earlier psychological theories of neurosis, in that both the body and mind, the personality and the environment are regarded as important in evaluating and maintaining a state of wellness.

The notion of stress tolerance used to be familiar primarily to engineers, who need to know how much weight or movement a structure can accept before crumbling. For people as well as for buildings, good stress tolerance depends upon strength, flexibility, endurance, and the absence of flaws in critical areas. Of course, even the most fit structure has a breaking point, given enough external pressure.

Human symptoms of stress tend to be psychomatic, both mental and physical, because the action of the nervous system impacts upon both the mind and the body. The part of the nervous system which is activated under stress is called the sympathetic system, and it is responsible for releasing adrenalin, for speeding up the heart rate, increasing perspiration and so on. This reaction pattern, called the "fight or flight response," serves to

prepare an animal to fight or run from a threat. When this mechanism evolved most threats were of short duration, as when another animal attacked, so the nervous activation soon returned to a resting level. Unfortunately, in modern human societies anxiety provoking situations are often long lasting, and people can further increase stress by imagining or remembering threats which are not actually present. The fight or flight response thus becomes a chronic state, producing anxiety, fatigue and wear and tear on the system.

Some common signs that stress tolerance has been exceeded include muscle tension, headaches, low back pain, acid stomach, spastic colon, high blood pressure, and skin disorders. The emotional experience of stress often involves worrying, inability to sleep, feeling "unable to cope," being fatigued, and having a short temper.

The first step in reducing stress is to identify its sources, which arise from within the person as well as from the environment. On the physical level, proper diet and regular aerobic exercise can decrease symptoms and improve stress tolerance. On the psychological level, certain types of temperament and personal belief systems tend to be associated with an increased probability of stress symptoms, and these attitudes must be changed to increase stress tolerance and wellness.

Individuals who place paramount importance on setting and achieving goals, usually in as short a time and perfect a manner as possible, tend to generate stress for themselves regardless of the quality of their environments. This type of person is strongly oriented toward "doing" at the expense of "being," equating rest with laziness and

nonproductivity. People who drive themselves usually ignore physical and emotional signs that they need to rest, or play, and so overextend themselves until they become disabled with illness. Men have traditionally been prone to overextend themselves at work, while women have placed priority on taking care of other people at their own expense.

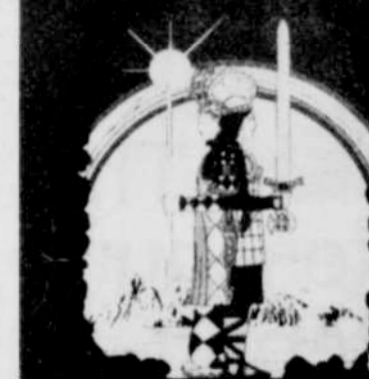
In addition to changing beliefs, people can manage stress by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, or relaxation response, rather than activating the sympathetic system. Many body-based strategies like massage, Tai Chi and shiatsu activate this calming, quieting response. Progressive relaxation, a technique which can be self-taught and practiced at home, employs muscle relaxation and self-hypnosis principles to achieve similar effects. Some forms of meditation reduce both mental and physical tension. The most important thing to remember about all of these techniques is that they must be practiced regularly to be effective.

Many powerful stressors arise from the environment, which ranges from the immediate family context to the whole planet. The key to coping with environmental stressors is to be able to differentiate what can be changed from what must be accepted as it is. For example, organizing a union to change oppressive job conditions can be a more effective strategy than using self-hypnosis to deal with work-related tension, although the latter is necessary until conditions improve. Symptoms generated by external pressures can be alleviated, but will usually return as long as the external situation remains the same.

In addition to psychological, physical and political strategies, stress can also be approached as a spiritual problem. This is

especially true for stressful situations over which a person has no power. Impending death of oneself or one's partner is a good example of a time when a deep religious faith facilitates an attitude of peaceful acceptance rather than stress-generating resistance to reality. A spiritual orientation also tends to sustain the hope that mistakes will be forgiven, and that damage will be healed. Finally, a spiritual attitude provides the basis for revering our own bodies and minds as sacred, deserving the best and most loving care.

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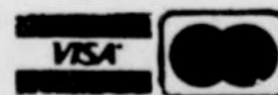
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