



HEALTH

STAYING HEALTHY SERIES

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT STRESS

WHAT STRESS DOES TO YOU

Many scientists and doctors think that stress is the root cause of most heart attacks and, indeed, many other diseases such as arthritis, cancer, asthma, colitis, high blood pressure, frequent colds and other infectious diseases. It's true that stress can increase your risk.

It's natural for our bodies to react to tense situations with a flow of adrenaline that speeds up the heart rate and prepares us to fight, or run for our lives. That worked fine when we lived in caves and had to deal with bears and tigers with our bare hands, but these reactions are less appropriate today.

However, stressful situations aren't harmful in themselves. It's the way you react to them that matters, and some people thrive in situations that make others miserably tense and anxious.

Stress is inherent in every healthy form of life. Stress is, always has been, and always will be, a part of being alive. People cannot maintain an erect posture without the tension of opposing muscles that balance each other and keep the skeletal system erect. Eating puts some stress on the digestive system. Active exercise puts stress on the cardiovascular system.

Your immunological system is constantly killing off bacteria in your body. With normal stress, the overall physiological balance is maintained. We are not concerned with the normal and essential stress or tension, but with undesirable excess tension, that threatens the body's well-being. Everyone suffers the effects of this excess stress. What is important is how you learn to cope with it.

Imagine that you are coming home late from work or shopping one evening. It is already dark. As you go to unlock the door you realize that it is open. Your heart begins to pound, and sweat starts to drip down your forehead. Someone has been in your home. Who could it have been? As your mind races through the possibilities your breathing quickens. Your hands are clammy on the doorknob as you push open the door. You flick on the lights. The lamps are knocked over, desk drawers are overturned, and their contents strewn all over the floor. The living room is a disaster. You've been robbed! The robbers may still be in your house. Your knees are weak, and there's a knot in your stomach as you grab a fireplace poker to defend yourself. Or should you run?

In the case of such an extreme threat, a variety of physiological changes occur with dramatic suddenness to allow you to survive, either by fighting off the threat or by fleeing from it. This is called the FIGHT OR FLIGHT RESPONSE. What typically happens?

1. The heartbeat increases to pump blood throughout the body with greater speed.
2. As the heart rate increases, the blood pressure rises.
3. Breathing becomes rapid and shallow.
4. Adrenaline and other hormones are released into the blood.
5. The liver releases stored sugar into the blood to meet the increased energy needs of survival.
6. The pupils dilate to let in more light; All the senses are heightened.
7. Muscles tense for movement, either for flight or protective actions, particularly the skeletal muscles of the thighs, hips, back, shoulders, arms, jaw and face.
8. Blood flow is greatly constricted to the digestive organs.
9. Blood flow increases to the brain and major muscles.
10. Blood flow is constricted to the extremities, and the hands and feet become cold. This protects you from bleeding to death quickly if the hands or feet are injured in fight or flight, and allows blood to be diverted to more important parts of the body.
11. The body perspires to cool itself, since increased metabolism generates more heat.

The fight or flight response is appropriate if you are confronted by a robber in your home, or by some other threat to your life. But often this response, or some part of it, is triggered inappropriately by a situation which is stressful, but not life threatening. You may be suffering a chronic stress response worrying over unpaid bills.

The ultimate result of not paying your bills may be death; your creditors might come and shoot you; if you fail to pay your utility bill the heat may be turned off and you might freeze to death. These possibilities are neither immediate nor likely, but your body cannot distinguish between the hypothetical threat you imagine, and an immediate, genuine one. Consciousness has developed to the extent that stress responses can be triggered by emotions, ideas, memories and expectations.

Tension headache is a good example of chronic response to stress. Just as in the life threatening or fight or flight response, muscles tense to prepare for action. Muscles in the forehead, face, eyes, jaw, neck and shoulders are held rigidly, although no real physical threat exists. After a prolonged siege of such rigidity, the constricted muscles go into spasm. This is the result of prolonged, unrelieved tension.

If we just stop and relax, resting our muscles briefly during the day, realizing that we do not need to brace ourselves physically against a non-physical threat, our tension headaches and other stress complaints may be totally prevented.

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT STRESS

There is no easy recipe for dealing with stress, but there are ways we can sometimes adapt to it, avoid it, or reduce it. Here are some suggestions:

1. Keep a notebook handy, and when you feel under great stress, make a note of the time and the stressful situation. You can arrange your life to avoid some of those situations in the future.
2. When you feel stress, try and take a few minutes time out. A short walk, a few minutes by yourself, taking some deep breaths, can help a great deal.
3. During times of stress, listen to what you are saying to yourself, and try to change it. An example: You are stuck in traffic and are going to be late to work or maybe a dental appointment. You feel frantic. Instead of fretting, tell yourself there's nothing you can do about the situation. Enjoy the gift of extra time, listen to the radio.
4. In your spare time, practice relaxing. Sit or lie down, let all your muscles relax, focus your mind on a soothing image (a blue mountain lake, gentle waves breaking, leaves blowing in a soft wind). After a few weeks' practice, you will find that you can relax instantly. Recent research has shown that deep relaxation can help lower your blood pressure as it reduces tension.
5. Take up regular exercise. This has a calming effect that lasts much longer than the exercise itself.
6. If you drink more than 3 or 4 cups of coffee a day, cut down. Cola drinks are also stimulants that can increase feelings of tension.
7. Don't fall into the trap of relying on tranquilizers or alcohol. In the long run, they produce their own type of stress, which can be much worse than the type you started with.

For more information on ways to reduce stress, call me at the Tribal Health office, 1-800-422-0232 and I will be happy to help you.

Next in our "Staying Healthy" Series, the focus will be on lowering your cholesterol.

Mark your calendars for Thursday, January 14, 1988, 1:30 p.m. at the Tribal Office for a workshop on "Knowing Your Cholesterol Numbers and What They Mean".

Carol L. Terp, RNC
Tribal Health Nurse

JANUARY 14, 1988

CHOLESTEROL WORKSHOP

1:30 PM - TRIBAL OFFICE