



STRESS

We are all familiar with the term “stress related” illness. But we often underestimate the gravity of just how sick “stress” can make us. We usually consider only ulcers or headaches or maybe we even go as far as “heart attack” when we think of stress manifesting itself on our bodies. But there are so many more areas of the body that are affected by stress. In fact, every system of the body can be affected by stress.

The reproductive system – suppression of this system may cause amenorrhea and failure to ovulate in women, impotence in men, and loss of libido in both.

Immune system – its inhibition will result in being more susceptible to colds and flu and can exacerbate other diseases such as AIDS and cancer.

Skeletal system – stress suspends tissue repair and remodeling, which in turn causes decalcification of the bones, osteoporosis, and susceptibility to fractures.

Respiratory system – changes in lungs can increase the symptoms of asthma, bronchitis, and other respiratory conditions.

Although we know that stress is harmful, we cannot live in a world without it. The goal of stress management is not to ignore stress or eliminate it, but to be able to cope with the bad stresses more effectively.

The first step in reducing stress is to acknowledge the impact of both large and small changes in your life. Even positive changes, such as getting married or having a baby can produce stress related symptoms. In order to cope with stress effectively, a person must adapt to changes and re-establish equilibrium in his or her life. Periods of rapid life changes increase’s a person’s vulnerability to illness.

There are many things we can do to enhance our ability to cope with stress. The following is a brief outline of some of the techniques that can be instituted to help.

BREATHING

Proper breathing is the result of taking oxygen in and releasing the waste product of carbon dioxide. Poor breathing habits diminish the flow of these gases making it harder to cope with stressful situations. It can result in anxiety, panic attacks, depression, muscle tension, headaches and fatigue. Chest or thoracic breathing is often associated with anxiety or emotional distress. Anxious people may experience breath holding, hyperventilation, and shortness of breath or a fear of passing out.

Breathing exercises can reduce general anxiety disorders, panic attacks, agoraphobia, depression, irritability, muscle tension, headaches and fatigue. They can also aid in treatment of breath holding, hyperventilating, shallow breathing, cold hands and feet.

It is imperative that we breathe properly, filling our lungs to the fullest – this is the best-known way to decrease stress that I know. Here's a simple one that is easy to remember. Inhale to a count of 4. Hold for a count of 2 and exhale to a count of 4. Repeat this several times and see the difference!

MEDITATION

There are numerous effects from meditation. Reduction of stress is the primary reason. If practiced once or twice a day, one is able to handle everyday small stresses better and will notice they are more organized. Another interesting benefit is the effects of meditation on the brain waves. As we know, each hemisphere works separately. However to accomplish a complete rest of the brain, the goal is to have both side of the brain working in a synchronized manner. Very experienced meditators achieve this.

Four factors must be present for beneficial physiological effects of meditation to take place: A relatively quiet environment, a mental device that provides a constant stimulus, a comfortable position, and a passive attitude. Meditation can relieve high blood pressure, heart disease, migraine headaches, diabetes and arthritis. It is also useful in curtailing obsessive thinking, anxiety, depression and hostility.

To help maintain a schedule of meditation it is wise to find a group to meditate with once a week.

VISUALIZATION

Your imagination is one of the most powerful tools you own. You can use this tool to combat stress. For example, if you think of sad thoughts, you feel unhappy. Just as when you anticipate certain loneliness for example, your negative thoughts will be reflected in a social behavior. Our thoughts truly reflect our behavior. So it is with this information you can use your thought to control and make the situation better. For example, if you have fears about going to the dentist, you can use a visualization technique by bringing you mind to a different place, perhaps a beach with the ocean waves crashing against the sand. You may tell yourself that you are looking forward to seeing your dentist and that the actions of the drill are actually making your teeth beautiful and attractive.

Cancer patients implement this by visualizing their tumor actually leaving the body. Visualization is used in pain and cancer centers throughout the country.

These exercises are useful in treating many stress-related illnesses, including headaches, muscle spasms, chronic pain, and general or situation-specific anxiety.

HYPNOSIS

I am not referring to the dramatic show of the hypnotist making a person do something he doesn't remember. Although the word is derived from the Greek word meaning sleep, it is important to understand that unlike sleep, one never completely loses awareness during hypnosis. When hypnotized, you are aware and able to respond to things around you if necessary.

It is interesting to ask someone if they have ever been hypnotized and get a very rapid "no". Then when asked if they have ever been to the movies, they laugh and say, "of course"! Did you ever drive home on

a usual route only to realize that you didn't remember particular parts of the trip? Do you daydream? These are all considered hypnotic states.

Self-hypnosis can be learned quickly and safely. It has been clinically effective with symptoms of insomnia, minor chronic pain, headache, nervous tics and tremors, chronic muscular tension, minor anxiety, and chronic fatigue. It may also be used for any subjective experience, which could be improved with positive words and images such as rapid heartbeat, or a knotted stomach associated with anxiety.

The word "try" should never be used when reciting hypnotic suggestion because it implies doubt and the possibility of failure.

Problems that can be relieved by writing hypnotic suggestions are: low self-esteem, chronic anger and guilt, pain or muscle tension, fear of illness, obsessive or fearful thoughts about death, and lack of motivation. A book which would be helpful in learning self-hypnosis is "Self-Hypnosis: The Complete Manual for Health and Self-Change".

AUTOGENIC TRAINING

Autogenic training is a systematic program that teaches the body and mind to respond quickly and effectively to your verbal command to relax and return to a balanced, normal state. It is one of the most effective and comprehensive reducers of chronic stress.

Essentially, an AT specialist will have you get into a comfortable position, relax, undisturbed, and concentrate on verbal formulas suggesting warmth and heaviness in your limbs.

Autogenic training has been found effective in treatment of various systems: respiratory, gastrointestinal, circulatory, and endocrine. Some of these problems include constipation, diarrhea, hyperventilation, general anxiety, and fatigue among other stress-related issues.

The contradictions of Autogenic training are that it is not to be used for children under 5 years old, or individuals with severe mental or emotional disorders. It is also not recommended for person lacking motivation. Persons with diabetes, heart disease, or hypoglycemia should be under the supervision of a medical doctor when practicing AT.

If having difficulty achieving a sensation of heaviness using the verbal formulas, it may helpful to add visual imagery. For example by imagining your arms with weights on them or imagining that they feel like heavy lead sinking to the ground.

BIOFEEDBACK

You learn to "listen" to your body and become aware of the "feedback" you get from it, for example, you may experience tightness in your chest or cold hands or feet during an uncomfortable situation. You learn to recognize and control certain physiological cues to your own tension and relaxation. With biofeedback, instruments are used to detect and amplify specific physical states in your body that you usually don't notice and bring them under voluntary control. The machine gives you immediate information about biological conditions such as skin surface temperature, muscle tension and brain wave activity. Once you learn to recognize and become aware of the different states, it will enhance your awareness of what total relaxation feels like to you.

Biofeedback can be used to treat: tinnitus, insomnia, panic attacks, stuttering, painful intercourse, and migraine headaches among many other symptoms.

THOUGHT STOPPING

This is a technique that can help one to overcome a nagging worry and doubt that may stand in the way of relaxation. Some thoughts can be obsessive and intrusive. For instance, one may always worry that they have cancer or some other serious illness. With thought stopping, one must concentrate and focus on the unwanted thought and suddenly stop or empty the mind. Usually a command is used such as “stop” or perhaps a loud noise can be employed. Some people replace phobic thoughts with more positive thoughts. For example, instead of saying to yourself, “gosh I feel like this bridge is going to collapse”, you might want to replace it with “isn’t it amazing how safe they can build bridges this big”.

Thought stopping techniques can be used for many things among them, obsessive and phobic thought processes, color naming, sexual preoccupation, hypochondrias and obsessive thoughts of failure

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

Its practice is based on the premise that the body responds to anxiety-provoking thoughts and events with muscle tension. Progressive relaxation of the muscles reduces pulse rates and blood pressure as well as decreasing perspiration and respiration rates. Deep muscle relaxation, when successfully mastered, can be used as an anti-anxiety pill.

Progressive relaxation can treat muscular tension, anxiety, insomnia, depression, fatigue, irritable bowel, muscle spasms, neck and back pain, high blood pressure, mild phobias, and stuttering.

COPING SKILLS TRAINING

Coping skills training teaches you to relax away anxiety and stress reactions. You have *learned* to react a certain way in stressful situations. Coping skills training involves learning to relax using progressive muscle relaxation instead of feeling nervous and upset.

Just as your present response to stress has been learned, so will you *learn* to be more relaxed instead.

Coping skills training is effectively used for reduction of general anxiety, as well as interview, speech and test anxiety. It is also used for phobias such as fear of heights.

TIME MANAGEMENT

This is a subject that commands a little more space. Are you a person who tries to figure out how to get more out of the same 24 hours we all have? Most of us are victims of poor time management. Ask yourself if you have experienced any of the following to see if you are among us: constant rushing, frustration, impatience, procrastination, frequent headaches, low productivity, chronic vacillation between alternatives and difficulty setting and achieving goals. It frustrates us at times to know that there are people who not only get what they have planned done but still have time to spare at the end of the day.

There is a principle known as the “20-80” principle. 20% of what we do yields 80% of the results while 80% of what we do yields 20% of the results. For instance, 80% of our mail is junk mail and we waste time reading it, while 20 % of it is imperative to read.

Time management training can help reduce job fatigue, procrastination, and deadline anxiety.

In the “The relaxation and stress reduction workbook”, the program for times management is outlined clearly.

ASSERTIVENESS TRAINING

Assertiveness training has been effective in dealing with depression, anger, resentment, interpersonal anxiety, especially when the symptoms have been brought on by unfair circumstances.

There are a few basic rules of assertive body language. For instance, one should maintain direct eye contact and an erect body posture. They should speak clearly, audibly and firmly, without whining or use of an apologetic tone of voice. And certainly one must make use of gestures and facial expressions for emphasis