

Important Note:

The information contained in this wellness resource packet is intended for use to become an informed health care consumer. It is important that you talk with your primary care physician about your plan of care.

This packet is NOT a substitute or replacement for medical supervision and direction.

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What is Stress?

Stress is anything that stimulates you and increases your level of alertness. It's about how you react to the events that cause changes in your life. Stress is all about your feelings and actions. You often hear associates say, "I'm having a stressful day!". It's not the day that is stressful - it's their reactions to the events of the day that are stressful.

Most people think of stress as a bad thing, but that isn't always the case. Stress can help you focus. Your stress level rises to help you meet a challenge, then it goes back down. This type of stress is good (it's called "eustress") because it helps you rise to the occasion.

Life without stimulus would be incredibly dull and boring. Life with too much stimulus becomes unpleasant and tiring, and may ultimately damage your health or well-being. Too much stress can seriously interfere with your ability to perform effectively (this is called "distress"). The art of stress management is to keep yourself at a level of stimulation that is healthy and enjoyable.

Stress and Your Health

Stress sets off an alarm in the brain, which responds by preparing the body for defensive action. The nervous system is aroused and hormones are released to sharpen the senses, quicken the pulse, deepen breathing and tense the muscles. This response, which is referred to as the "Fight or Flight" response, is important because it helps the body defend against threatening situations. The response is pre-programmed in our bodies. Everyone responds in much the same way, regardless of whether the stressful situation is at work or at home.

Short lived or infrequent episodes of stress pose little risk. But when stressful situations go unresolved, the body is kept in a constant state of activation, which increases the wear and tear to the body. Over the long term, fatigue or damage results and the ability of the body to repair and defend itself can become seriously compromised. As a result, the risk of injury and disease increases.

Research has shown that chronic stress that is not managed can increase your risks for the following ailments:

- Heart Disease (heart attack & stroke)
- Musculoskeletal Disorders (back, neck & upper extremities)
- Mental Health Issues (depression, burnout)
- Workplace Injury
- Impaired Immune Function
- Certain Types of Cancer
- Ulcers

The Fight or Flight Response to Stress

1. Our muscles tense in anticipation of being used to fight or run.
2. Our endocrine system releases hormones, particularly large quantities of adrenalin.
3. Our digestive processes cease abruptly as blood is diverted to the muscles and to the brain.
4. Our eyes dilate to allow more light to enter.
5. As more blood is diverted to other parts of the body, our bowel and bladder muscles loosen.
6. Stored sugars are dumped into our blood to provide a quick source of energy.
7. Our red blood cell production increases to facilitate movement of oxygen to the arms, legs and brain.
8. Our heart rate increases to insure sufficient blood supply.
9. Our blood clotting mechanisms are activated to minimize our blood loss in the event of an injury.

Common Symptoms of Stress

To know when you're stressed out, tune in to what you are doing and feeling - listen to your mind and your body. Are you showing any of the following signs of stress?

Physical Signs	Mental Signs	Behavior Signs
Headaches	Nervous, jumpy	Eating too much or too little
Pain in the neck, back or shoulders	Impatient, angered easily	Smoking, Drinking or using Drugs
Knots in your stomach	Depressed, crying alot	Speech Problems
Diarrhea	Low self image	Reckless Driving
High Blood Pressure	Impulsive	Lack of interest in family or friends activities
Skin problems, acne	Confused at times	Sexual problems
Problems Sleeping	Unable to concentrate	Clenching teeth or grinding teeth
Weakened immune system (colds, flu)	Negative attitude	Wanting to be alone alot
Heart Pounding	Frustrated	Express Outrage
Always Tired	No Sense of Humor	Withdrawal
Shortness of Breath	Sense of Dispair	Anxiety
Sweaty or cold hands	Shaky, Nervousness	Stuttering, Lapses in Memory

Are You Stressed?

Read each of the ten statements and check the column which best describes your feelings:

How I Feel:	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
1. I have trouble going to sleep and sleeping through the night				
2. I have trouble staying focused or concentrating				
3. I've lost my sense of humor				
4. I have headaches or muscle aches (back & neck)				
5. I always feel tired				
6. I either eat too much or don't feel like eating at all				
7. I get angry easily and am very impatient				
8. I'm too busy to relax				
9. I feel frustrated because I can't complete all my tasks				
10. I have no interest in sex.				
Number of checks				
Value	x0	x1	x2	x3
Common Value				
Your Score				

Your Stress Scorecard

If your score is between:

0-10 Kudos to you! You are doing well handling stress.

11-15 Not bad. You are taking steps in the right direction.

16-20 Take care. Your stress level is mounting.

21-25 Caution! Stress is getting out of control and it's impacting your health.

26-30 Time to get help! Talk with your health care provider.

Source: "Chill Out" Pritchell & Hull Associates, Inc., Atlanta, GA Copyright 1998

What Causes Your Stress?

Events or situations that push your buttons are called STRESSORS. You want to know what STRESSORS are, so you can understand why you feel stressed. Stress is a personal thing. What makes you strung out may not bother someone else. You'll find you can begin to control the stress in your life by identifying the causes.

Are any of these "STRESSORS" knocking on your door?

Life Changes	Day to Day	Unhealthy Habits	Other Factors
Marriage	Heavy Traffic	Always Disorganized	Air Pollution, Smoke
Divorce	Lost Keys or Wallet	Sedentary Lifestyle	Noise or Confusion Around you
Having a Child	Car Trouble	Poor Diet, Too Much Caffeine	Flashing Lights and Signs
New Job	Deadlines	Smoking	Constant Hunger
Death of a Loved One	Running Late All the Time	Drinking excess Alcohol	Too Many People Around
Moving to A New Home	Upset Routine	Trying to do Too Much	No Link with Nature
Lost Your Job	Can't Pay the Bills	Excess Charges on Credit Cards	
Chronic Illness	Parenting Problems	No Time to Relax	

Taking A Step in the Right Direction

1. Keep a Diary.

Keep a list of events, times, places and people that seem to make you feel stressed. You may be surprised to see a pattern. Once you have identified the pressure points, you can now move on to the following solutions...

2. Talk to Someone.

Talk through your diary with a good friend or your partner. Discussing things often makes you feel better. Ask for objective advice on how to manage the problem areas you have discovered.

3. Learn How To Relax.

Practice deep-breathing techniques.

Stretch the muscles of your neck and shoulders.

Take a time-out for five minutes every hour to try to think of nothing but your perfect situation. Think about a holiday, an ideal partner or nothing at all.

Take a Hot Bath. Listen to Your Favorite Music.

4. Exercise Regularly.

As little as 20 minutes of brisk walking three times a week will help to reduce stress as well as promoting sleep.

5. Plan Breaks in Your Day.

The aim is to plan for the unexpected. Get up 15 minutes earlier, get things ready the night before. Plan 20 minutes in the morning and at night that is exclusively your time to do whatever you want.

6. Stretch.

Sitting upright on a chair, and keeping your back straight, extend your arms out in front of you as far as possible. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat with your arms behind you. Stretch arms to the ceiling.

Release tension in back and shoulders.

7. De-clutter. Get Organized.

Mess creates confusion and a sense of loss of power. If your desk/home/car is messy and disorganized, try and clean things out and tidy up. You will feel more in control.

8. Change the habit.

Many stresses are habitual. If you start to feel anxious or stressed out, stop what you are doing and do something else.

9. Think positive.

Use affirmations. Positive strands of thought put into words.

10. Get Some Rest. Go to bed at a regular time. Relax before bed.

Source: Dr. Roger Henderson and Ingrid Miller.

<http://www.stressbusting.co.uk>

Take Charge of Your Stress on the Job

1. **A Stress Plan.** Make a detailed list of all the requirements, hassles, pressures or other stressors in your job. Highlight the ones you have some control to change. Then write down strategies for change, including a time table and priorities. Try taking them on one by one.
2. **Stick to Your Job.** Get a copy of your job description. Keep it handy so that you can check in regularly. Oftentimes, we take on more than we should which results in additional stress.
3. **Manage Your Time.** Make a list of the responsibilities that you have for the day and prioritize the tasks into a realistic plan.
4. **Problem Solve.** Take control of conflicts between your personal life and your job. Establish systems and schedules that will help you deal with child care, commuting time and other responsibilities.

Six Rules for Avoiding Distress

1. Stop Feeling Guilty... It's not in your control!
2. Be Decisive... Call it like it is!
3. Avoid Being A Perfectionist... Let go!
4. Praise Yourself... Good job!
5. Stop Procrastinating... Do it now!
6. Set Priorities for Yourself... One at a time!

Tips for Better Sleep

1. Stick with a Regular Routine.

Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time every day will train your body to sleep better by getting it into a regular rhythm.

2. Keep a Pen and Paper By Your Bedside.

Use them to make a list of things that you need to do the next day and/or write down worries that may prevent you from sleeping during the night.

3. Get Some Fresh Air & Sunlight.

Studies show that those who get their fair share of natural daylight tend to sleep better at night.

4. Move Your Muscles.

Regular, moderate exercise promotes deep sleep. Go for a brisk walk, hike, bike ride or swim and fit it into your daily routine.

5. Get Comfortable Before Bed.

Make sure your bedroom is not too hot, cold, noisy or light. These are all discomforts which may prevent you from sleeping.

6. Avoid Excess Alcohol.

A small nightcap might help you wind down and actually get to sleep but alcohol is likely to interrupt your sleep later in the night.

7. Avoid Caffeine.

Caffeine is a stimulant and will keep you awake. Avoid consuming caffeine containing beverages such as coffee, tea and colas before bed.

8. Don't Overeat.

If you've eaten a big meal just before bed, your body will work hard to digest it. This will prevent you from sleeping or wake you up.

9. Don't Smoke.

Nicotine is a powerful stimulant. Smokers take longer to fall asleep and wake more often in the night.

10. Drink a Cup of Herbal Tea.

Unlike tea with caffeine in it, herbal tea will relax you before bed.

11. Relax Before Bedtime.

A warm bath, especially on cold winter nights, will gently warm and relax you. Yoga, deep breathing or listening to soothing music can help relax the mind and the body.

12. Don't Just Lie There...Do Something.

If you can't sleep, don't just lie there fretting about it. Get up and do something that you find relaxing, until you feel sleepy again.

Source: <http://www.stressbusting.co.uk>

A Relaxation Activity

The following is an example of a "Progressive Relaxation" activity. Progressive relaxation involves first tensing your muscles and then letting the tension go. You might wonder why we first tense the muscles. Imagine a pendulum. In order for you to get the pendulum to swing furthest to one side, you have to pull it far along to the other side. Similarly, to relax your muscles, it can help to tense them first. You may want to read the instructions into a tape recorder and play it back to yourself as you relax.

1. Find a comfortable position in a chair with good back support.
2. Loosen any restrictive clothing or jewelry that you are wearing.
3. Close your eyes. Begin to focus on the feelings inside your body - mentally scan your entire body, from head to toe, and note and signs of tension that there may be.
4. For each muscle group outlined below, first tense that area, hold the tension for **5 seconds**, and all at once let go of the tension and say to yourself, "Relax" for **5 seconds**.
 - Your right hand and forearm (lower arm)
 - Your right bicep (upper arm)
 - Your left bicep (upper arm)
 - Your left hand and forearm (lower arm)
 - Your forehead (tense by making a frown and then relax)
 - Your cheeks and nose
 - Your mouth
 - Your neck and shoulders
 - Your chest
 - Your stomach
 - Your right thigh (upper leg)
 - Your right calf (lower leg)
 - Your right foot
 - Your right toes
 - Your left thigh (upper leg)
 - Your left calf (lower leg)
 - Your left toes
5. Once you have relaxed your entire body, alternate tension and relaxation in each of the muscle groups, allow yourself to enjoy the feelings of relaxation. The more you practice, the better you will become and true relaxation.

Source: <http://www.virtualpsych.com>, Scott Wallace, Ph.D., R.Psych

Visualizing or Mental Imagery

1. **Get comfortable.** Sit or lie in a relaxed position. Close your eyes.
2. **Close Your Eyes.** Create a quiet, peaceful scene in your mind. Pretend you're at the ocean, in the mountains or any place that's special to you. Use pictures or music if it helps. Block out all other thoughts except for one calm image.
3. **Clear Your Mind.** Focus on your quiet scene for 5 - 10 minutes. Don't let yourself get distracted.
4. **Breathe deeply.** Let your body relax as your mind takes you to a peaceful place.

If you concentrate and really relax, your mind and body will become refreshed. You'll feel that you can handle the things that were causing you to be stressed out.

Suggested Readings & Resources

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