

## *Patient Education Handout* **STRESS MANAGEMENT**

### **What is stress?**

Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension. Stress is what you feel when you have to handle more than you are used to, both physically and emotionally. When you are stressed, your body acts as if you are in danger. It makes hormones that speed up your heart, making you breathe faster and giving you a burst of energy. This is called the fight or flight stress response.

Stress can have some **positive** effects, e.g. it can give you a burst of energy to focus more in an exam. It can compel you to action and focus your attention. Stress can help you win a race, go on a job interview or finish an important report in time.

Stress can have some very serious **negative** effects. Long term chronic stress is caused by events that last over a long period of time, such as problems at home or at work. If stress lasts too long or you feel stress too often it can lead to many health problems

### **What causes stress?**

A lot of things can cause stress. The types of personal problems that may cause stress include:

- Health issues - especially chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes, or arthritis.
- Emotional problems - such as anger you can't express, depression, grief, guilt or low self-esteem.

- Relationships - such as problems with friends or loved ones
- Life changes - such as the death of a parent or spouse or having a baby
- Family stress - such as having a child, teen or parent who is dealing with major problems.
- Environmental stress – e.g. living in an area with overcrowding, crime or pollution.
- Financial – problems with living expenses, job loss and other financial concerns.

### **What are the signs of stress?**

Signs of stress may include the following;

1. Anxious Feelings – worrying about things you have little control over or worrying about events far off in the future. These feelings can cause you to feel irritable, have a “short fuse”, lack focus or concentration, or feel sad and want to cry all the time.
2. Physical effects - being under stress can cause physical symptoms. You may suffer from headaches, or neck and back pain. Some people break out in a rash, or have other skin irritation. Because of the increase in heart rate and blood pressure, you may even experience trembling.
3. Change in Routine - a clear sign of stress is when you lose the pattern of your normal routine. Being unable to sleep is a sure sign of stress as is loss of appetite or sexual desire.

**Crisis Hotline: 1-888-447-3339 or 211** (when calling from a cell phone)

## **What are the signs of serious stress?**

Early warning signs when ignored can build to the point of causing serious physical and emotional problems. Living with serious stress puts pressure on several parts of the body.

1. **Your heart** - People who are overstressed may suffer from high blood pressure, and an increased or abnormal heart rate. (Arrhythmia). They may also suffer from blood clots, and hardening of the arteries (Atherosclerosis). Serious stress is also linked to coronary artery disease, heart attack and heart failure.
2. **Your Digestive System** - Extreme and constant stress can cause diarrhea or cramping, colitis, constipation or can lead to an ulcer
3. **Your Muscles** - Constant tension from stress can lead to neck, shoulder and low back pain.
4. **Your Reproductive Organs** - Stress is linked to low fertility, erection problems, problems during pregnancy and painful menses.
5. **Your Lungs** - Stress can cause symptoms of asthma, and chronic breathing problems to worsen.
6. **Your Immune System** - Stress affects the body's ability to fight off infections or diseases. This can increase your risk of colds or flu.
7. **Your Skin** - Skin problems such as acne and psoriasis are made worse by stress.

8. You may feel cranky, and unable to deal with even small problems.
9. You may feel frustrated, lose your temper more often and yell at others for no reason.
10. You may feel jumpy or tired all the time.
11. You may find it hard to focus on tasks.
12. You may worry about small things.
13. You may feel that you are missing out on things because you can't act quickly. And you may imagine bad things are happening or about to happen.

## **Healthy Ways to Relieve Stress**

The best way to manage stress is to learn healthy ways to cope. Practice these techniques until they become habits to turn to when you feel stress.

- ✓ **Emotional release:** Let your feelings out - talk, cry, and express anger with friends, family or a counselor.
- ✓ **Relaxation techniques:** Meditation and guided imagery are two ways to focus and relax your mind.
- ✓ **Physical activity:** Regular exercise, even for 20 minutes, can relax you and is one of the best ways to manage stress. Walking is great way to get started. Even every day activities like house cleaning, and yard work can reduce stress. Stretching can relieve muscle tension. You may wish to try Yoga, or Tai Chi, which combine exercise and meditation.
- ✓ **Fun activities:** Do something you enjoy. This can be a hobby such as

gardening, a creative activity such as writing, crafts, or art.

- ✓ Eat foods that improve your well-being, e.g. increase the amount of fruits and vegetables you normally eat.
- ✓ Make sure to get enough sleep
- ✓ Make an effort to socialize even if you may feel tempted to avoid people.
- ✓ Try to think positive, set realistic expectations.
- ✓ Avoid using alcohol or drugs to relieve stress. Substance abuse can risk your emotional and physical well being.

**Call the Crisis Hotline at**

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You have lost control and have the desire to harm yourself physically.

OR

You feel very anxious, and cannot cope with daily activities such as school or work or family

Notes/Additional Information: \_\_\_\_\_

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Sources: National Library of Medicine and NIH  
MedlinePlus at [www.medlineplus.gov](http://www.medlineplus.gov)

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