Background

The housework is not done, Mary needs her physical therapy, dinner is not started, and what do you mean my car is "not-ready-yet?!" Everyday life provides us with a combination of happiness, pride, personal fulfillment, and strength, while sometimes simultaneously creating frustration, sorrow, feelings of inadequacy, and pain. Life is complicated and ever changing. Change, by itself, creates stress. Whether we embrace the change or not, we will feel the ramifications of stress. Given the constant changes and demands in our daily lives this becomes a major source of stress that we encounter.

What is Stress?

Stress is the body's response to a threatening condition. When confronted with stress, the mind tells the body that there is imminent danger and it must fight for its life or flee. This "fight-or-flight" response is an instinctual process to help insure survival of the species. In modern society, the stressful event may be a public speech or a deadline rather than a killer yak, but our body responds as if it were in danger of being destroyed.

Stress causes our muscles to tighten, our breath comes more quickly, blood flows more quickly to spread the increased oxygen throughout the body, nausea may set in, and thinking becomes confused. Once the stress is alleviated, our body is in a weakened state as it recovers from the adrenaline surge. Unremitting stress can impair the immune system making it less able to resist the viruses that cause disease and can lead to a constant sense of exhaustion and loss of energy.

For family caregivers, the stress of caring for a loved one under difficult circumstances, and frequently for an extended period of time, often causes physical and emotional symptoms which need to be addressed.

Symptoms of Stress

Stress can manifest itself in a variety of ways. It is easily confused with symptoms of other problems. If not managed properly, stress may cause problems that can reduce our overall ability to function effectively. Some common symptoms of stress include, not only those mentioned above, but also

- frequent headaches
- fatigue
- constipation, diarrhea, problems with urination
- increased use of alcohol, food, drugs
- withdrawal from family/friends
difficulty/inability to concentrate

- irritability, hostility
- feelings of nervousness, anxiety
- feelings of inadequacy

Myths About Stress

- **1. Stress is the same for everyone.** Stress is different for each of us. What is stressful for one person may or may not be for another.

- **2. Stress is always bad for you.** Stress can overwhelm you or it can add zest to life. The determining factor is how well stress is managed. If effectively managed, stress can result in increased productivity and happiness while poorly managed stress can have the opposite effect.

- **3. Stress is everywhere and is unavoidable.** This is a negative outlook. You can take control of your life, and plan so that stress does not overwhelm you. Learning to delegate, prioritize, and plan can help you manage stress. As a wise person once said, "Managing stress is like weeding your garden; you can never get rid of [the weeds] completely, but you can keep them under control."

Strategies

Stress management is the way we respond and react to the everyday pressures and demands of life. Developing effective stress management skills are crucial.

**Get enough rest and sleep.** Although everyone does not have the same requirements for rest and sleep, the majority of us need at least seven to eight hours per night. Try to develop a regular sleep schedule. Go to bed and get up at about the same time everyday. Avoid alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, stimulating activities, or exercise prior to bed time. You may also want to develop a bedtime routine, like showering, soaking in a warm tub, reading, or listening to soft music prior to falling asleep.

**Breathing.** Deep breathing, when done properly, will relax the body even as it confronts high levels of stress or panic. It is physically impossible for muscles to remain tense when deep, relaxing breaths are taken. When you feel the tension mounting, **stop**, close your eyes and take a few long, deep breaths. Breath through your diaphragm and not your chest. Feel the breath coming in through your nostrils and into your belly (your belly will actually rise) and allow the breath to expel through your mouth as your belly contracts. This pause only lasts a minute or so, but it can clear your mind and allow you to refocus your energy on the task at hand.

**Balance work and recreation.** Take time out for yourself and do something you enjoy. Consider scheduling a break into your busy day. Schedule five or ten minutes when you will stop working and do something you enjoy. Some popular choices: working on a crossword puzzle, walking around the house or building where you work, stepping outside for a breath of fresh air, singing, calling a friend to schedule a lunch date, or staring out the window.

Learning to integrate joyful moments into your daily life will go a long way towards alleviating and preventing stress.

**Seek out support.** Having a network of supportive friends and acquaintances is a vital resource in coping with stress. Sharing and confiding can buffer the stress connected with life’s daily hassles. It is important to remember that you are not alone and that others can understand and empathize.

**Movement.** Moving your body is an excellent way to dissipate stress. A formal exercise plan can be developed and followed, but a less formal approach will work equally well. Taking daily walks can go a long
way in reducing stress and increasing your energy level. When you feel too tired to move, get up and dance, walk, or just jump in place. Doing so will increase the flow of blood through the body and to the brain and reinvigorate you for the tasks ahead.

**Organize and manage time effectively.** Trying to do too much in too little time is a stress trap. Since you cannot make more time, managing the time you have is vital. The three P's of effective time management that can assist you are as follows:

- **Prioritize** set goals for important things
- **Plan** schedule and set realistic time lines
- **Protect** learn to say no to unwanted demands and avoid time wasters

**Learn to laugh!** Laughter is truly medicine for the soul. Research has shown that laughter helps the body relax, enhances the immune system, and increases problem-solving abilities. Think about how good you feel after a hearty bout of laughter: you are breathing more deeply, your face and neck are more relaxed, and you feel happier. Make a special effort to look for humor and the lighter side of things. Learning to laugh at yourself, as well as with others, will go a long way in reducing stress.

**Seeking Professional Assistance**

Stress is a fact of life that requires permanent life-style changes to manage. It gets easier with practice but you must be constantly aware of the symptoms and avoid slipping back into old habits. If you continue to have problems with stress you may want to seek professional help. When seeking help, find a caring, knowledgeable, non-judgmental person to assist you. Consider a psychologist, psychiatrist, doctor, minister, social worker, or counselor.

**Summary**

Stress is a reality of modern society. Everyone confronts it and everyone must learn how they will live with it. For family caregivers, stress is often of a higher intensity and longer duration than for others, and requires diligence to manage effectively. Recognizing the symptoms of stress will allow you to address the source before the physical or emotional consequences become overwhelming. Learning to slow down, breath deeply, and see the humor in life will promote health and well-being.

**References**


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Stress Management for the 90's

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