Q. WHAT IS STRESS?
We are all familiar with stress. Stress is a normal response that we experience to some extent everyday. A certain level of stress is necessary to not only function, but to reach our full potential. Too much stress, however, can be a health hazard. The first important step in stress management involves being aware of when our stress levels have become unhealthy. Once stress overload is recognised, there is a range of stress management skills available to address the problem.

Signs Of Stress

A state of chronic stress is not reached overnight - it takes time! Before reaching this state we may notice many symptoms. Rather than acknowledge the signs, we may push ourselves harder, pretending that everything is fine. This continual exposure to stress decreases our ability to function in every area of our lives. The good news is we can stop stress escalating by firstly recognising the warning signs.

WARNING SIGNS:

**PHYSICAL**
- Headaches
- Indigestion
- Heart palpitations
- Nausea
- Muscle aches, pains and twitches
- Fatigue
- Clenched jaw and fists
- Increased sweating
- Increased urination
- Constipation or diarrhoea

**EMOTIONAL**
- Tense
- Depressed
- Anxious
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Loss of confidence
- Decreased pleasure in life

**COGNITIVE**
- Impaired judgement
- Negative thoughts
- Loss of concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty making decisions
- Bad dreams
- Negative thoughts

**BEHAVIOURAL**
- Changes in appetite
- Problems in your relationships
- Increased nicotine or caffeine use
Q. **WHAT Causes PROBLEM STRESS?**

There have been many explanations offered as to why we experience excessive stress. Some studies suggest that individuals inherit the tendency to feel more stress. Other studies describe stress as a response that is learned over a lifetime. Thus, people who experience high levels of stress tend to hold beliefs which make them feel threatened, hypervigilant and out of control. These studies indicate that thinking plays an important role in our response to stress. Irrespective of the cause, stress is an increasing part of our lives. Ignoring it will not make it go away. Once stress overload is recognised, there are skills you can acquire to address the problem.

**MANAGING STRESS**

q. **DOES WHAT I EAT MATTER?**

When we experience stress, our bodies use up enormous amounts of vitamins and minerals. The depletion of our body’s nutrients can leave us tired, run down, irritable and less able to deal with our responsibilities. Vitamins C and B Complex, and calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc are the hardest hit nutrients. These can be restored through a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, dairy products, nuts, yeast, brown rice, fish, liver, eggs and kelp. Sometimes the foods that we reach for when stressed are the foods that interfere with our body’s ability to absorb vitamins and minerals and therefore compound the amount of stress experienced. Foods to steer clear of when stressed include tea, coffee, cakes, biscuits, soft drinks, chocolate and white bread.

Q. **IS Exercise USEFUL?**

Physical exercise is invaluable in releasing tension and assists in the processing of vitamins and minerals. Any physical exercise is helpful - walking, swimming, jogging or gardening. Exercise need not be a chore - especially if it is done with friends. The most important point to remember is to do it regularly.

Q. **HOW CAN I Relax?**

Relaxation is a useful tool, either used alone or in conjunction with other strategies, for the reduction of stress.

The most common form of relaxation exercise involves progressive muscle relaxation. This exercise involves consciously focussing on one area of the body at a time, clenching the muscles, then relaxing them. When relaxing your muscles, imagine all the tension flowing from your body. This exercise can be performed lying down or sitting. If you can, make time to relax each day. You will be amazed by how quickly the physical tension you experience is reduced. Relaxation can also mean listening to music, patting your pet, having a nap or reading a good book. A meditation program will prepare you to manage both physical and mental stresses and will help to recharge your system. The most important thing is to set aside time for it to happen.

Q. **HOW CAN I PRACTICE “REALISTIC THINKING”?**

Our beliefs and thoughts determine the intensity of our feelings when faced with a stressful situation. When we are experiencing extreme feelings of stress, it is often because we are having extreme thoughts. For example, extreme feelings of hopelessness and frustration can be a result of thinking: “I can’t stand it. I’m never going to get this done in time”. To begin to think realistically you can try the following:

- Think about: What is making me feel this way?
- Question: How likely it is that this will happen?
- Ask: What is the worst possible outcome of this situation?
- Consider this outcome in the scheme of things- look at the big picture.
By overestimating the consequences of any event we become increasingly stressed. The above simple exercise can be helpful in changing the way we think, and therefore feel, in stressful situations.

Organising Your Time
We can reduce the amount of stress we experience by using our time and energy efficiently. A realistic list of things to do for the day is a good start. Allow ample time to get things on your list done. It is important to acknowledge that you can only do so much in a given period of time. Setting priorities and learning to slow down are essential ingredients in reducing your level of stress.

Talk To Someone
We often cope better with our problems and life stresses by talking to and sharing our feelings with other people. This may be as simple as talking to your partner or best friend. Other people may find regular sessions with a psychiatrist, social worker or psychologist helpful.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Contact your local GP
- Local Community Health Centre (see ‘Community Health Centres in White Pages)
- Look under Counselling in the Yellow Pages
- Mental Health Information Service: (02) 9816 5688 or toll free1800 674 200 (Country NSW) (for services in your area)

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