

INDIVIDUAL STRESS & WELLNESS

Stress - everybody has it and everybody talks about it. What is stress?

Stress is the response of the body to any demand made upon it. Stress also refers to the reaction of people to their environments. Examples of stressors include fatigue, hunger, thirst, interpersonal conflict, extreme cold or hot temperatures, and work demands such as role conflict, role ambiguity, work overload, lack of control, problematic peer, subordinate, or boss relationships, poor structural design, politics, or unclear, ineffective organizational policies. Responses to stress are both physiological and psychological causing people to change or adapt their behaviors.

Stress is commonly viewed in terms of the fit of individual needs, attitudes, and expectations with environmental demands, changes, and opportunities. A good person-environment fit results in positive reactions to stress; a poor fit leads to negative consequences such as hypertension, heart attacks, diabetes, asthma, chronic pain, allergies, headache, backache, skin disorders, cancer, and immune system weakness. Stress may also precipitate alcoholism, drug abuse, absenteeism, job exit, and low productivity.

Stress is a necessary, unavoidable feature of life. What matters most is the intensity of psychological and behavioral effort toward readjustment or adaptation. Listed below are a few ways to better manage stress.

1. Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions.

Notice your distress. Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about the meaning of these events? Determine how your body responds to the stress.

2. Recognize what you can change.

Can you reduce the intensity of stressors (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)? Can you shorten your exposure to stressors (take a break, leave the physical premises)? Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?

3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.

The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger...physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms? Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you. Try to temper excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective.

4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.

Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal. Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution. Consult your physician if necessary.

5. Build your physical reserves.

Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging). Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals. Maintain your ideal weight. Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants. Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can. Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.

6. Maintain your emotional reserves.

Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships. Pursue realistic goals which are meaningful to you. Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows. Always be kind and gentle with yourself -- be a friend to yourself.

7. Consult with your primary care physician, the Employee Assistance Program or other fitting health care professional as needed.