

Living With Stress

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Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Stress is a fact of life, and we all function with some level of it. Sometimes the source of stress is obvious, but often it's not.

A certain amount of stress is good; it keeps us sharp and on our toes. Too many of us though, live with stress overload, which can affect the mind and body and, if not brought into check, can predispose us to a host of maladies, from high blood pressure and increased the risk of heart attack and stroke to suppression of the immune system, sleeplessness and infertility. In short, too much stress can make you sick.

"People respond differently to stress, and some even appear to thrive on it. Many of us, though, react negatively to stress, which may be expressed through anxious, agitated behavior, withdrawal and depression, or even 'freezing,' becoming so stressed out that you can barely function," said Ann Joy, B.S., R.N., a psychiatric nurse with the Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association.

Stress can be due to external forces such as major life changes, financial worries, work or relationship issues. But some stressors are internal: a pessimistic or negative outlook, unrealistic expectations, perfectionism, and an inability to accept the uncertainties of life.

"The key is to manage stress, whatever its origin, by taking charge of your life. Perhaps you can't change the situation, but you can learn to take control of how you respond to it," Joy said.

Simplify, Simplify

Easier said than done? Of course it is, but what may help you achieve a less anxious state is simplifying your life and keeping things in perspective so that you can distinguish what is truly important from what only seems important in the moment.

- Drop activities or commitments that sap your energy or time. Be selective about what you obligate yourself to. "Busyness" can be habit-forming. Learn to say "no."
- Nothing is perfect. Accept that in many cases good enough is, in fact, quite good enough.
- Too much audio/visual stimulation is stress inducing. Turn off the TV, radio, computer, smart phone, and video games. Consider taking a short vacation from TV news, on-line news, the daily paper and news magazines.
- Don't multi-task. "Recent research indicates that multi-taskers have difficulty concentrating and are more easily distracted than those who do one thing at a time," Joy

said. “Concentrating on one task and finishing it before going on to the next helps you re-learn what it feels like to be totally engaged.”

- Clutter sends a visual message that you’re dealing with more than you can manage, so get serious about de-cluttering your environment. But, even if your home or workplace isn’t something out of the “Hoarders” television program, clearing out the clutter can seem overwhelming. “Start small,” Joy said. “Tackle the junk drawer. Do one kitchen cupboard. Work on one closet.” As you go, look for items you don’t use or clothes you don’t wear. A good rule is to discard any item you haven’t used or clothes you haven’t worn in the past year. Donate anything still serviceable, and throw away the rest. Keep going, one area at a time, until you’ve gotten rid of all the stuff that’s cluttering up your life and restored order to your surroundings. It’s liberating.
- Pay down debts. That’s a tall order in tough economic times, but few problems cause more stress than the burden of debt. Do everything you can to reduce your level of debt and to keep it manageable.
- Establishing a routine can be helpful in doing what has to be done, but occasionally you need to break free of routine and be spontaneous. Along the same lines, don’t hoard your vacation time. Not taking any vacation time for two, three or more years is nothing to boast about.
- Get more sleep. “Nearly 74% of us don’t get enough sleep,” Joy said. This chronic loss of sleep saps your energy and affects everything you do, including your performance at work or school and increasing your level of stress. Get into the habit of going to bed early and keep to a set bedtime. If your favorite TV show airs after your bedtime, record it to watch at another time.