A Day in *Your* Life: How to Cope

What will today bring? Waiting for life to calm down will keep you under stress forever. Instead, learn to be proactive and stay calm in the face of adversity.

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

FAMILY STRESS: Remember that positive changes such as a wedding, a move or a new baby can bring on just as much stress as such negative situations as financial trouble, job loss or divorce. Solutions:

Communicate clearly. Arguing is a common reaction to stress. Avoid phrases that place blame, such as "It's your fault that" or "You did/didn't." Instead, use "I" statements, such as "I need you to help out more at home" or "I feel angry when our plans don't work out."

Strengthen relationships. Getting out of your regular routine to have fun as a family may help relieve stress. Visit the zoo, hike in the woods, play ball in the park or cycle around the neighborhood. Get together for a dinner or game night with the rule that no one can bring up anything negative.

WORK STRESS: Deadlines, commuting, competition, working with others, meeting client needs, changing shifts … the workplace is a source of stress for many people. Take charge and meet the challenges. Solutions:

Separate your work life from your personal life. Having a healthy work/life balance can help you keep job stress in perspective.

Take time to rest and recharge; build healthy relationships outside of work; sleep and eat well, and develop personal hobbies and interests.

Ease up. Delegating work, asking for help, and setting realistic priorities and deadlines can help release the pressure.

Exercise. When you're bearing down on a problem or feel you're at the boiling point, 30 minutes of movement can do wonders for you mentally and physically.

EVERYDAY STRESS: There's no escaping traffic jams, lines at the store, fender benders, unexpected rainstorms and dozens of other minor, commonplace events that can add up to big stress. Solutions:

Visualize. If the situation you're in is too much to bear … leave. Maybe you can't physically walk away, but your mind is free to wander. Think of a peaceful place, real or imagined. Focus on every detail — the air on your skin, the smells, the sounds. Allow yourself to escape and feel calm.

Breathe. Clearing stale air out of the lungs counteracts the stress response, which makes breathing shallow. Take at least 10 deep breaths, exhaling for twice as long as you inhale.

STRESS

Your Guide to Better Mind/Body Health

SPOTLIGHT ON STRESS:

IT'S MORE HARMFUL THAN YOU MAY THINK

The word "stress" has become so much a part of daily language, it's easy to take it for granted. However, stress does more than just make you feel anxious or give you a headache that goes away after taking a couple of aspirin.

4 Ways Stress Affects Your Health

1. Suppresses your immune system. Stress causes your body to produce a hormone called cortisol, which may make you more susceptible to colds, flu and infections.

2. Puts your heart at risk. Stress speeds up your heart rate and raises blood pressure. Chronic stress puts you at higher risk for chest pain (angina), irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia), heart attack and stroke.

3. Causes digestive problems. Ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, colitis and other gastrointestinal conditions are worsened by stress. Even short-term stress can cause diarrhea, constipation or intestinal pain.

4. Adds to breathing difficulty. If you have bronchitis, asthma or another lung problem, stress can make it worse. It can even bring on an asthma attack.

To protect your health, you must learn to manage stress in a positive way. Read on to find out how.

When to See Your Doctor

If you have panic attacks, sleep disturbance, anxiety, appetite loss, fatigue or other problems that last for more than two weeks and interfere with your ability to function, talk with a health professional.

3 Techniques for a Calmer Life

1. Meditation. University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers found that mindfulness meditation, long believed to reduce mental anxiety, actually produces physical changes in the brain and immune system. Try it: Sit in a quiet place. Focus your attention on the present moment. Take note of thoughts and feelings as they come up, but do not judge or act on them. This may be difficult at first, and you may feel restless. Start out with just five or 10 minutes, and work up to an hour over time.

2. Biofeedback is a technique that trains people to change their stress response using their bodies' signals. It is performed in a health care setting with a trained biofeedback coach and uses a machine that senses body changes, such as muscle tension or temperature. For more information, visit the Biofeedback Certification Institute of America (BCIA) at ***www.bcia.org*** or call the BCIA at 303-420-2902.

3. Talk therapy. Sometimes problems are too big for you to work out on your own, and an objective third party can listen and help you devise coping strategies. Talk with your doctor about finding a counselor or therapist who specializes in stress-related issues.

This information is not intended as a substitute for professional care. Medical Editor: Zorba Paster, M.D.
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