

## Stress Management

### **Your body and stress**

A great deal of research suggests that exposure to long-term stress can harm your body. Chronic stress influences high blood pressure, heart disease, asthma, gastro-intestinal disorders, cancers and ulcers. You can avoid or ease the negative effects of stress through relaxation techniques and cognitive therapy.

The *first step in dealing with stress* is recognizing when it is occurring. There are three basic components of stress: **physiological, behavioral, and cognitive.**

### **Signs of physical stress:**

- shallow, rapid breathing
- heart racing
- increased perspiration
- nausea or stomachache
- increased muscle tension
- headache, backache
- tightness in chest
- dry mouth
- increased urge to urinate
- cold hands or feet

### **Signs of behavioral stress:**

- Increase in conflicts with others (irritability, sarcasm or hostility)
- Emotional sensitivity
- Loss of patience
- Rushing, being careless or forgetful
- Change in eating or sleeping habits
- The use of substances (e.g. alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, medications)

### **Signs of cognitive stress:**

- Difficulty with concentration or easily distracted
- Intense or intrusive worry
- A tendency towards negative, self-defeating, or perfectionist thinking
- “Worst-case” thinking patterns

### **Managing your stress:**

Once aware of your stress, it is helpful to *identify the situations or experiences that typically evoke tension or worry*. An effective way of pinpointing stressors is by keeping a stress diary in which stressful situations are recorded as they occur. This process will involve you being more aware of your individual physiological, behavioral and cognitive signs of stress. A diary will include date, time of day, location, who you were with, what you were doing, symptoms of stress and stress rating (e.g. 1 to 10). By noting these experiences, you can come to understand your own personal stressors and your unique stress pattern. This will help in formulating a plan to reduce the level of stress in your life.

*The following guidelines are suggested to help you manage stress:*

1. Set realistic, clear goals and prioritize your time. Evaluate goals periodically, and have the flexibility to modify them when appropriate. If you find yourself overly stressed, consider letting go of some of your activities that you are only doing because you feel you “should.” Try new approaches to problems. For example, try “chunking” – tackling one issue at a time or breaking larger tasks into smaller, more attainable goals. Develop assertiveness by being more direct in asking for what you need, and learning to delegate responsibilities.
2. Deal with both success and failure with a balanced attitude. Recognize that disappointing/negative experiences are a natural part of the cycles of life. Use crises as opportunities for growth, and to reaffirm values and break unhealthy patterns.
3. Don’t “drift along” in troublesome or emotionally draining relationships or situations. Take steps to resolve the problems, or consider ending the relationship or experience. Surround yourself with a support network to help you cope in positive ways.
4. Make time to be with significant others in relationships that are trusting and reciprocal, and that leave you feeling energized.
5. Find time every day for some form of relaxation or fun, such as watching your favorite show, exercising, laughing with a friend, or spending needed time alone.
6. Take care of your body. Exercise and eat regularly. Avoid excess caffeine and drugs. Learn relaxation exercises like abdominal breathing and progressive muscle relaxation. Practice these techniques regularly!
7. Decrease negative self-talk. Challenge negative thoughts about yourself such as “my life will never get better” and develop more rational beliefs such as “I may



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feel hopeless now, but my life will probably get better if I work at it and get some help.” Learn to feel good about doing a competent job rather than demanding perfection from yourself and others.