

STRESS MANAGEMENT RESOURCE PACKET

NOVEMBER 2008

MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Myth #1: Stress is the same for everybody.

Completely wrong. Stress is different for each of us. What is stressful for one person may or may not be stressful for another; each of us responds to stress in entirely different ways.

Myth #2: Stress is always bad for you.

According to this view, zero stress makes us happy and healthy. Wrong. The only time you have zero stress is when you're dead. Stress can be the kiss of death or the spice of life. The issue, really, is keeping it under control. Controlled stress makes us productive and happy; uncontrolled stress can hurt or even kill you.

Myth #3: Stress is everywhere, so you can't do anything about it.

Wrong again. You can plan your life so stress doesn't overwhelm you. Effective planning involves setting priorities and working on simple problems first, solving them and going on to the more complex difficulties. When stress gets out of control, it's difficult to prioritize where you're going to devote your energies. All your problems seem to be equal and stress seems to be everywhere.

Myth #4: The most popular techniques for controlling stress are the best ones.

Again, not so. No universally effective stress control technique exists. We are all different; our lives are different; our situations are different; and our reactions are different. Only a comprehensive program tailored to the individual's needs is going to work most effectively.

Myth #5: No symptoms, no stress.

Don't be fooled by this one. Absence of symptoms does not mean the absence of stress. In fact, camouflaging symptoms with medication may deprive you of the signals you need for reducing stress-related strain on your physiological and psychological systems.

Myth #6: Only major symptoms of stress require attention.

This myth assumes that the "minor" symptoms, such as headaches or heartburn, may be safely ignored. Wrong again. Minor symptoms of stress are the early warnings that your life is getting out of hand. They indicate that you need to do a better job of managing stress.

Claremont distributes this information to provide employees with general behavioral health information. If you have concerns about these or other behavioral health issues, you can call Claremont to arrange for assistance. You will be directed to an appropriate, experienced professional who can offer guidance in a variety of work and personal matters.

For confidential help, call 800-834-3773 or visit www.claremonteap.com.

THE DIFFERENT KINDS OF STRESS

Stress management is complicated and confusing because there are different types of stress--acute stress, episodic acute stress, chronic stress, and traumatic stress--each with its own characteristics, symptoms, time course, and treatment approaches.

Acute stress is the most common form of stress. It comes from demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Acute stress is thrilling and exciting in small doses but too much is exhausting. A fast run down a challenging ski slope, for example, is exhilarating early in the day. That same ski run late in the day is taxing and wearing. Skiing beyond your limits can lead to falls and broken bones. By the same token, overdoing on short-term stress can lead to psychological distress, tension headaches, upset stomach, and other symptoms.

Episodic Acute Stress occurs in people who suffer acute stress frequently, whose lives are so out of control they are studies in chaos and crisis. They're always in a rush, but always late. If something can go wrong, it does. They take on too much, have too many irons in the fire, and can't organize the slew of self-inflicted demands and pressures clamoring for their attention.

Some people's personalities seem to set them up for **Chronic Acute Stress**. If the descriptions describe what you're doing to yourself, think about how you can make some personal changes to get your life back under control. You might even want to think about contacting Claremont EAP for a referral to a professional who can help you make some changes to help manage your stress level.

Traumatic Stress, if not handled properly at the outset, overpowering trauma — accidents, abuse, being in the presence of extreme violence, a brush with death, natural disasters (hurricanes, earthquakes, floods, landslides), death of a loved one, imprisonment — can become a special kind of chronic stress known as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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FRIENDS ARE GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

Everybody needs friends, but not everybody knows how to make friends and keep them. Demands from job and family can leave many people with little energy for bringing new people into their lives or for nurturing the relationships they already have. But friends are important to your health.

"Research has shown that people who do not have strong support from friends and family live shorter lives and suffer more from stress," says Cheryl A. Richey, Ph.D., professor of social work at the University of Washington. "Support from friends can give people the strength to make positive changes in their lives, like staying away from drugs or leaving an abusive relationship."

Some people may find it difficult to make friends because they lack the skills needed to interact effectively with other people and build supportive social contacts. People are not born with these skills; they need to learn them.

Where do you begin?

"Rather than setting a broad goal like 'making new friends,' break that goal down into small steps you can tackle," Dr. Richey suggests. The first step may be to make a vow to start one conversation each day with someone you don't know well, for example, the new person at your office or a visitor to your church. It may help to rehearse ahead of time, by figuring out a topic and opening line, and even practicing with a supportive family member or trusted friend.

For some, meeting new people may be the easy part. The difficulty is knowing how to advance from being acquaintances to becoming friends. Disclosing information about yourself is one way to build trust in a friendship. Another is reciprocating -- for example, by listening carefully when others disclose information about themselves, or more concretely, by trading baby-sitting for other favors.

Cultivate friendships

Some people find themselves without support not because they can't initiate social contacts but because they've burned out their friends by asking for help too often and not returning it, or by violating trust such as telling others a secret shared in confidence.

To reconnect with a strained social network, Dr. Richey recommends initiating contacts during times when you are not in need of support. This can begin with a simple, problem-free conversation. "To rebuild relationships, it's important to become more reliable, responsible and reciprocal in your daily associations," Dr. Richey says.

Even if your social network is supportive, having too many people around all the time may interfere with private time for you and your family. Part of social skill-building is setting limits in a relationship, or keeping a relationship on an acquaintance level rather than pursuing close friendship.

In the end, the number of social relationships isn't nearly as important as their quality. "It's more than just a body count," Dr. Richey said. "Look at the kinds of exchanges you have with the people in your network, and whether these people can provide the kind of assistance or support that will be helpful."

CONTROL BREATHING, CONTROL STRESS

You're stuck in rush-hour traffic, glancing at your car's clock every few minutes as you strain to get to work on time. You may not notice, but your breathing is shallow, your pulse rate is high and your chest feels tight. In fact, you feel this way in many stressful situations.

Sound familiar? Modern society creates more than its share of stress. It's difficult to change some situations -- but you can manage how you feel about them, experts say.

Begin with something you take for granted -- your breathing. If you're on that busy highway, pay attention to what's going on around you, but pay attention to your breathing, too. It's one of the few things you can control. "Focusing on your breathing is one of the highly effective ways of reducing stress," says cardiologist James Rippe, M.D., author of 10 books on health and fitness, including "Healthy Heart for Dummies." "It brings you into the here and now," distracting you from your worries.

"We've become addicted to moving and thinking at hyper-speed," adds Stephan Rechtschaffen, M.D., wellness expert and author of the book *Timeshifting*. "When we're under stress, our breathing is short, high up in the lungs. More relaxed breathing doesn't rely on the chest wall, but rather on the abdomen."

Abdominal breathing, experts say, provides the lungs with more oxygen and is more rhythmic. It's something that opera singers and other performers have known for years: Abdominal breathing allows them to control of their breath, to sing or speak with greater power, and to help them focus on the moment.

Breathing is just the beginning. If you can adjust your breath, you can adjust other things in your life. Slow your breath down when you walk into your office or home and you'll notice that you won't jump at the first problem that hits you. When your breath is quiet, you are quiet.

Practice your breathing

Believe it or not, most of us could use a breathing lesson. Practice at home a few times when you're not under stress. Then, try putting these techniques into practice when a stressful situation occurs. In a relaxed setting, take three really deep breaths, focusing on your exhalations. "Really let it out," says Dr. Rechtschaffen. "It may feel unnatural at first, but stick with it."

Now, begin focusing on where your breath is coming from, experts say. Here's one practice method:

- Sit on the edge of a chair, feet flat on the floor.
- Place one hand on your lower back and the other hand on your abdomen, with three fingers below your navel.
- As you breathe in, your abdomen should rise, like a balloon inflating.
- As you breathe out, your abdomen should fall, with the sensation that the balloon is losing its air.

Concentrate on your abdomen, not your chest. Practice from a few minutes to 20 minutes each day. Soon, it will come naturally.