Stress, What is it?

Stress related medical problems are becoming increasingly common.

The body has a built-in physical response to stressful situations. Faced with pressure, challenge or danger, we need to react quickly. Our bodies release hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline to help do this. These hormones are part of the "fight or flight" response and affect the metabolic rate, heart rate and blood pressure, resulting in a heightened, stressed state that prepares the body for optimum performance in dealing with a stressful situation.

It is likely that early man required these mechanisms to stay alive, but usually modern stresses do not call for this, and the same hormones released in today's world can damage health and reduce coping ability.

SOME OF THE PROBLEMS WHICH CAUSE STRESS ARE:

- Pressure to perform at work, at school or in sports.
- Threats of physical violence.
- Money worries.
- Arguments.
- Family conflicts.
- Divorce or separation from significant other.
- Bereavement.
- New job or unemployment.
- Changes in location.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.

SOMETIMES, THERE IS NO PARTICULAR REASON FOR DEVELOPING STRESS.

Almost all people are at risk of being stressed at some time in their lives. It is important to know some stress is temporary and some is long term.

- Temporary stress will go away when a situation is resolved. Most people can cope with short periods of stress, and it can often be relieved by relaxing, taking a walk, chatting through issues with friends, or having a good night's sleep.
- *Chronic* (long-term, continuous) stress is much harder to deal with. It can be psychologically and emotionally damaging. It can be harmful both for an individual and for friends and family.

THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Everyone reacts to stress differently. There are some common effects that help us recognize it. In times of **extreme** stress, people may:

- Shake uncontrollably.
- Breathe faster and deeper than normal (*hyperventilate*).
- Vomit.
- For people with asthma, stress can trigger an attack.

For others, stress can trigger migraine headaches, ulcers, and body pain.

PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF STRESS INCLUDE.

- Loss of energy.
- Skin problems.
- Aches and pains resulting from tense muscles, including neck ache, backache and tension headaches.
- Increased pain from arthritis and other conditions.
- Irregular heart beat (*palpitations*).
- Periods of irritability or anger.
- Apathy or depression.
- Anxiety (feeling uptight or worrying).
- Behavior that is not usual.
- Loss of appetite.
- Comfort eating.
- Lack of concentration.
- Loss of, or decreased sex-drive.
- Increased smoking, drinking or recreational drug taking.
- For women, missed periods.
- Ulcers, joint pain, and muscle pain.

Post-traumatic stress (This is the stress caused by any serious accident, strong emotional damage, extremely difficult or violent experience such as rape or war).

Post-traumatic stress victims can experience mixtures of emotions such as fear, shame, depression, guilt or anger. It may include recurrent memories or images that may be haunting. These feelings can last for weeks, months or even years after the traumatic event that triggered them. Specialized treatment, possibly with medicines and psychological therapies, is available.

If stress is causing physical symptoms, severe distress or making it difficult for you to function as normal, it is worth seeing your caregiver. It is important to remember that although stress is a usual part of life, extreme or prolonged stress can lead to other illnesses that will need treatment. It is better to visit a doctor sooner rather than later. Stress has been linked to the development of high blood pressure and heart disease, as well as insomnia and depression.

There is no diagnostic test for stress since everyone reacts to it differently. But a caregiver will be able to spot the physical symptoms, such as:

- Headaches.
- Shingles.
- Ulcers.

Emotional distress such as intense worry, low mood or irritability should be detected when the doctor asks pertinent questions to identify any underlying problems that might be the cause. In case there are physical reasons for the symptoms, the doctor may also want to do some tests to exclude certain conditions.

If you feel that you are suffering from stress, try to identify the aspects of your life that are causing it. Sometimes you may not be able to change or avoid them, but even a small change can have a positive ripple effect. A simple lifestyle change can make all the difference.

STRATEGIES THAT CAN HELP DEAL WITH STRESS:

- Delegating or sharing responsibilities.
- Avoiding confrontations.
- Learning to be more assertive.
- Regular exercise.
- Avoid using alcohol or street drugs to cope.
- Eating a healthy, balanced diet, rich in fruit and vegetables and proteins.
- Finding humor or absurdity in stressful situations.
- Never taking on more than you know you can handle comfortably.
- Organizing your time better to get as much done as possible.
- Talking to friends or family and sharing your thoughts and fears.
- Listening to music or relaxation tapes.
- Tensing and then relaxing your muscles, starting at the toes and working up to the head and neck.

If you think that you would benefit from help, either in identifying the things that are causing your stress or in learning techniques to help you relax, see a caregiver who is capable of helping you with this. Rather than relying on medications, it is usually better to try and identify the things in your life that are causing stress and try to deal with them.

There are many techniques of managing stress including counseling, psychotherapy, aromatherapy, yoga, and exercise. Your caregiver can help you determine what is best for you.

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