

STRESS

Taking Charge

All About Stress

One of the most important stressors is change. Ron wakes up in the morning feeling worried. By noon his head aches. By evening he can hardly talk to his wife. With Kim finally off to college, his promotion to foreman, and his wife's new job, they have all they've been waiting for. Ron thinks he should feel on top of the world, but that's not the case.



Change Comes from Within Families

At each new stage of life, expected and normal changes occur in families, and can result in stress. Changes, whether they seem good or bad, involve readjustment and often some loss. Sometimes expectations about the results of a change are unrealistic. It's stressful to find that what happens is different than what was expected.

Unexpected changes such as death, disabling injury or illness, divorce, and job loss can turn life upside down. Readjustment can be slow and painful.

Handling a stressful event well depends on:

- How severe the event is and how long it lasts
- What one has learned from past experiences
- How family members relate to and support each other
- How much support comes from friends and the community
- The level of financial resources and skills available within the family

Influence of Outside Changes

Changes in the world can threaten one's sense of order and security, and require one to learn new skills, accept what seems unacceptable, or take in more information than what is manageable. Outside changes may include:

- Natural disasters
- Political and economic trends
- Restructuring or technological changes at work

Change creates new opportunities, but also may involve losing:

- Comfort of daily routines
- Sense of being useful, skilled, or needed
- Presence and companionship of loved ones
- Dreams for a future now changed
- Health
- Security or confidence

What Happens under Too Much Stress?

Most of the time automatic physical reactions take over during everyday hassles, problems, worries, or crises. In an emergency these automatic stress responses help people act quickly. Automatic changes in body chemistry, heart rate, and blood pressure tense the body for action and resistance. As the threat is resolved, human bodies adapt and return to normal function.

Many life stressors continue for such a long time that they aren't recognized as sources of stress. Over time the constant physical and emotional adaptations to these stressors can take a toll. Physical or emotional symptoms, changes in behavior, or changes in mental health can be signals of living with too much stress.

Rene's job gets harder as her company hires fewer people. She feels resentment and anger at her boss. Even though she takes work home at night and often gets little sleep, she says "yes" whenever she's asked to take on another task. She's been sick a lot this year.



What Is Known about Managing Stress?

We can't eliminate all stress, but we can find ways to reduce it. Below are ideas that may help.

- Do something about one small part of a problem.
- Exercise to relieve physical and emotional symptoms.
- Do something enjoyable each day.
- Take time to meditate.
- Eat well and avoid drugs, alcohol, and tobacco.
- Accept change as part of life.

Barriers to Managing Stress

Even when a change is needed, it's hard to take the steps that might help. Anxiety, worry, lack of time, and too many responsibilities make taking charge seem impossible. The more stressors that come, the more the symptoms of stress prevent people from taking charge.

Behaviors that can prevent people from making changes that can lessen stress include:

- Trying to solve too many problems at once makes change overwhelming.
- Blaming others, "the system," or "fate" prevents action.
- Letting stressors build up affects our judgment and initiative.
- Using drugs or alcohol instead of resolving problems increases stress.
- Believing nothing can change ensures that nothing will change.

Ideas for Managing Stress

- Focus on what you and your family do well.
- Positive relationships can help lessen the impact of stressful events.
- Practice appreciative communication as a family. Each person deserves to be listened to.
- Take care of your health—a protective factor in stressful times.
- Strengthen spiritual resources.
- Let your values drive your choices.
- Delay taking on new commitments.
- Strengthen your money and time management skills.
- Reach out to others for support.

Take charge of stress by paying attention to the symptoms below.

Physical

- Headaches
- Muscle aches
- Appetite or weight changes
- Changes in sleep habits
- Frequency of fatigue or illness

Behavioral

- Increased drug or alcohol use
- Reduced concentration
- Postponed decisions
- Reduced productivity
- Increased forgetfulness
- Frequent boredom

Emotional

- Anger or irritability
- Sadness (crying spells)
- Anxiety or lack of direction
- Discouragement
- Hyperactivity
- Search for magic solutions

Relationships

- Intolerance of others
- Avoidance of friends
- Nagging
- Drop in sex drive
- Loneliness
- Resentment

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