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Stress

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Summary: We live in an increasingly stressful world, where we face demands at home, school and work. Having 'just enough' stress actually helps us function, but having 'too much' stress is bad for emotional and physical health. The good news is that there are many things that can be done to identify and cope better with stress...

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Introduction

You have a major deadline coming up tomorrow and you still have a ton of work to do. Your child's principal called; your child is being disruptive...again. You have 12 people coming over for dinner this weekend and you still have no idea what you're going to make. On top of everything else, your mother isn't feeling well but refuses to go to the doctor. Your muscles are feeling tense, you find yourself nervously tapping your feet as you sit at your desk. Your thoughts keep racing around in your head and the people around you are starting to avoid you because you keep snapping at them. This is stress. And most of us have been there.

What is it?

Stress is the response of your body and mind to demands being placed on you. When you feel threatened, your brain releases chemicals called hormones that send alarm signals throughout your body. These hormones prepare your body to take action. The hormones make your skin sweat, your breathing quicken, your heart rate go up, your muscles tense, and your senses come alive. It's this "fight or flight" stress response that allowed our human ancestors to survive when face to face with a threat. Unfortunately, most of our modern "threats" like workloads or family conflict are not situations we can easily fight with our fists or run away from. When we don't have a healthy way to deal with stress, it can harm us more than help.

Some common sources of stress, known as stressors, include the following:

- Physical environments – around you can raise your stress level. Traffic, noise (sirens keeping you up at night, a barking dog next door), and uncomfortable or unsafe living conditions can also cause stress. People who have lived through wars or natural disasters know too well the devastating impact that their environment can have on their well-being.
- Family and relationships – are common daily stressors. Marital disagreements, unhealthy relationships, rebellious teens, or caring for an ill family member or a child with special needs can all send stress levels skyrocketing.
- Work – can be an ever-present source of stress. Work stress is caused by things such as job dissatisfaction, an exhausting workload, insufficient pay, office politics, and conflicts with your boss or co-workers.

- Life situations – can cause stress. For example, poverty, financial pressures, discrimination or harassment, unemployment, isolation, and/or a lack of social support all take a toll on your daily quality of life.
- Major life changes — such as the birth of a baby, a divorce, a career change or move can also place a lot of stress on you—even if the event itself is positive.

In small amounts, stress is actually good for us. Stress can motivate us and push us to reach our potential. It's stress that helps you get through that presentation to your clients or forces us to do homework when we'd rather take a nap. Stress is very individual. What you find stressful may not be stressful for someone else.

It's important to know that stress in itself is not a mental illness. But when the stress keeps piling up and it starts to make you feel worse instead of motivating you, it can harm your mental health and well-being. Stress is a risk factor for someone who is already vulnerable to developing a mental illness. Stress can affect us physically too. In high amounts stress can, for example, cause high blood pressure and make it hard for your body to fight off infections.

Who does it affect?

Stress affects most of us. In a recent international poll, three-quarters of Canadians said they experienced stress in their daily lives either frequently or fairly often . But stress can affect some people differently than others:

- Women – are more likely than men to report feeling stressed. Men and women also report reacting to different kinds of stress. Women tend to react more to chronic stressors like time constraints, meeting others' expectations, marital relationships, children, and family health. Men, on the other hand, are more affected by work-related stressors like a change in job, demotion, pay cut, and financial difficulties.
- Youth – are doing more today than ever before, balancing school with other activities, friends and jobs. All of these responsibilities can lead to stress. In one survey, one in 10 teens reported regularly feeling very stressed with not having enough time in the day.
- Older adults – face stressors like major illness, changes in routine and income related to retirement, physical changes, the death of a spouse and a shrinking circle of friends. All of these stressors can contribute to increased levels of stress in Canada's elderly.
- People with chronic illnesses – like diabetes, arthritis or heart disease can experience extreme stress because they worry about their illness, their treatments and the effect that the illness will have on themselves and those around them.

What can I do about it?

Because stress is so individual, we each need to find our own way to cope. There are some things that you can do to figure out how to best deal with your stress:

- Find out what stresses you the most: If you need to, make a list of everything that's on your mind. You can't do anything to stop your stress until you know what causes it.
- Problem solve: Deal with problems effectively. Life problems, like financial issues, family conflicts or problems at work can be a huge cause of stress. Learning to deal with problems properly can make a big difference. There are a number of steps to problem solving:
    - Identify the problem
    - Set some goals
    - Make a list of possible solutions
    - Choose a solution from your list
    - Put your solution into action
    - Track your progress
- Don't procrastinate: Don't put off the things you need to do. Keeping a daily planner can help keep you organized and on track. Focus on tasks as well as decisions. Putting off making decisions can cause unnecessary stress and worry.
- Talk about it: Sometimes we just need to vent. Talk to someone you can trust. If your school, workplace or faith community offers counseling, take advantage of it.
- Share your work load: Delegate your responsibilities. This doesn't mean offload all your work onto those

around you but only take on what you need to. This applies at home too: ask family and friends for help.
- Self-care: Exercise, meditation or prayer, getting a good night's sleep, eating well, petting your dog or cat, going for a walk, laughing and stretching—all of these are great stress relievers. Unfortunately, they are also sometimes the first things we stop doing when we feel under pressure.
- Just say no: You can't please everybody. If you feel like you can't take on a task, don't be afraid to say so. If you find it hard to say no, read books or attend classes on how to be more assertive. Being assertive will help you communicate your needs firmly but nicely.

Where do I go from here?

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information
Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca. See our section on managing stress including our Wellness Modules. The Modules are full of information, tips and worksheets to help you understand stress and ways to take care of your mental health.

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division
Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on how best to manage stress.

Authors

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