

In the last issue, you learned about some of the physiological ramifications of chronic stress. You now feel more compelled to take the necessary steps towards stress reduction. Each person's stressors differ as do their attitudes and reactions to stress. What may be invigorating for one may be infuriating to another. Not all stress management techniques work for everyone, hence the evolution of an \$18 billion a year "stress management" industry. One thing is certain and inevitable...*change in something will be required.*

It is often challenging to counsel patients on stress management because of this seemingly universal reality...people seem to inherently know what their stressors are and what needs to be done to properly address them. However, many are paralyzed by their false perception of lack of control over these stressors. The key to stress management is to begin the arduous task of *changing your attitude and reactions* towards stressors and stressful situations. Although it is not always possible to *eliminate* specific stressors, just as our behaviors and attitudes have been learned, we can *adjust* our perception of, reaction to, and attitude towards stressors to *change their impact on us*. Changing behavior and attitude is challenging but possible with education, determination, patience, and consistency.

Employment and finances are currently the two most stressful issues Americans face. Extensive information is available to those seeking ways to alleviate work related stress. Reducing stress at work can include enrolling in company sponsored stress reduction programs, limiting the number of unnecessary daily phone calls, delegating responsibilities to other qualified individuals, allotting enough time in the work day to accomplish the most important tasks, taking breaks during the day, taking time to eat lunch, and taking time off from work for rest and relaxation. Communication with employers and co-workers and early conflict resolution are also important.

Medical journals have reported a rise in the number of stress related patient visits to physicians. Physicians are meeting this increased demand by providing patients with the appropriate education and treatment. Many patients desire immediate symptom improvement which typically includes receiving prescriptions for one or more prescription medications. In some cases, the long term consequences of this approach may be detrimental. Behavioral and lifestyle modification are essential. Patients can actively participate in improving their health by addressing the following:

1. Sleep

Sleep is essential for optimal health and longevity. Chronic partial sleep loss has been associated with diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity, disrupted thyroid function, short term memory loss, mood disorders, and premature aging. Getting six to eight hours of uninterrupted sleep is considered ideal. Avoidance of

caffeine, alcohol, refined sugar, and late night exercise can improve sleep onset. Prescription sleep aids may be a temporary band-aid and typically do not solve the underlying cause of insomnia. Additionally, they can actually contribute to sleep disturbances and have numerous side effects. There are other, non-pharmaceutical ways to safely effectively correct insomnia.

2. Exercise regularly

The extent to which exercise improves health and prevents disease is widely known. Consider the importance of exercise from the perspective of Mother Nature. If you are the zebra under attack, your instinct is to *run!* Blood flow is diverted to muscles to allow for this flight response. Chronic stress without appropriate levels of exercise can thus result in a non-physiologic stress response and disrupted health, sleep, mood, and maintenance of normal body weight, not to mention premature aging. Surprisingly, the resolution of many adult onset diseases, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, could be avoided if patients simply exercised and consumed a sensible diet. At least 60 minutes of exercise five times a week is a reasonable goal.

3. You are what you eat

Fast food restaurants seem to be flourishing despite the current economy. Could it get any better than cheap and fast! It is unfortunate that those who attempt to consume a healthier diet are penalized with higher grocery bills. Our food is laden with sugar, preservatives, dyes, artificial sweeteners, chemicals, and trans-fats. Our body chemistries were never designed to withstand such an assault. Ways to improve nutrition include: shop the periphery not the center aisles of the grocery store, avoid over cooking food, drink filtered or distilled water only, avoid fast food, avoid eating packaged and highly processed foods, and eat organic.

4. Practice stress reduction techniques

Options are numerous and include massage, Tai Chi, pilates, biofeedback, Qigong, meditation, imagery, prayer, and yoga. Lexington has an excellent selection of establishments to assist in this regard. One of these is *Seasons Salon and Spa*. The owner, Pam Nystrom, has noted an increase in the number of clients coming for massage and other stress reducing therapies with the worsening recession. Stress reductions techniques are of paramount importance, and often sleep, proper nutrition, and proper exercise are difficult to attain if the brain continues to perceive stress. Extensive medical research has confirmed the beneficial effects on health and an increase in longevity with stress reduction techniques.

People have much more control over their stressors than they realize. In attempting to modify stressors, set realistic goals and proceed with education and awareness. To ensure success, make gradual changes and modify one area at a time. The process of stress reduction should not be stressful.