

## DEALING WITH STRESS IN A STRESSFUL SOCIETY

(adapted from Margin by Richard M. Swenson, M.D.)

Many of us struggle with the question of why we cannot seem to handle stress as well as we once did. We often translate this change as some sort of weakness on our part. The fact of the matter is that although stress has increased, the things that were once part of our lifestyle as a society to deal with stress are not.

When we talk about stress, we are often making reference to something that in our eyes is bad for us. Stress is a normal part of all our lives. A true definition of stress is the normal internal physiological mechanism that responds to and adapts us to change. Stress is our bodies' response to a stimulus that creates change in our environment called a stressor.

Distress is the bad side of stress that has a negative, often destructive, aspect to it. Distress is what causes wear and tear on us mentally, emotionally, and physically. Eustress, the positive, constructive side of stress is what allows us to complete an important task. This is the stress created when a football player gets ready for the big game. Our bodies respond to stress through something called the "Fight or Flight" response.

Very often, we experience something called Hyperstress. This is a condition whereby the stress response is stimulated too often for too long. The longer this occurs we face the possibility of burnout. As we approach burnout, we often adapt a different response called the freeze response. We can become paralyzed with indecision from the exhaustion hyperstress creates.

### CONTEMPORARY STRESSORS:

We often talk about "the good old days" when life was more stress free. A more accurate description of that time may be that our lifestyles contained more stress reducers, not less stress. People in that time worked hard, ate regularly, slept with the sun's movements, etc.. Today we can work 24 hours a day, eat in our cars, and use machinery to reduce our physical labor. But at what cost?

Some contemporary stressors include:

Change	Mobility
Expectations	Time pressure
Work	Control
Fear	Relationships
Competition	Overload
Illness and Death	Frustration and Anger

This overload helps to create many unhealthy symptoms.

Psychological Symptoms:

- Depression, withdrawal and isolation
- Mental fatigue
- Chronic anxiety
- Feeling that things are slipping out of control
- Negative thinking
- Difficulty making decisions
- Exaggerated worrying
- Paranoia
- Impatience
- Forgetfulness
- Apathy
- Confusion
- Anger and hostility

Physical Symptoms:

- Stimulation of cardiovascular system, (i.e. chest pain, high blood pressure)
- Gastrointestinal overactivity, (i.e. ulcers)
- Tightening of the muscles especially of the head, neck and/or low back
- Headaches
- Weight changes
- Increase in infections and cancer due to compromised immune system
- Rashes, itching
- Insomnia
- Unexplained fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Perspiration or cold, clammy hands
- Nervous tics or tremors
- Teeth and jaw-clenching

Behavioral Symptoms:

- Irritation with friends, family and colleagues
- Bossiness
- Outbursts of temper
- Withdrawal, detachment
- Changes in sleep pattern and eating pattern
- Decreased sexual drive
- Accident proneness
- Reckless driving
- Road rage
- Inappropriate laughings

Reversals in usual behavior  
Compulsive shopping  
Increased use of tranquilizers, alcohol, and cigarettes

All of these can add up to burnout. Burnout looks like this:

Exhaustion  
Depression  
Irritability, hostility  
Paranoia, suspiciousness  
Withdrawal, noninvolvement  
Psychosomatic (imagined) illnesses  
“I can’t stand this anymore.”  
“I dread going to work”  
“I’d rather be alone”  
“I don’t care”  
“I hate it”

#### WHAT CAN I DO?

Realistically we cannot change society and we cannot slow progress. There are two important things that we can do to help deal with stress in our lives. We can work to reduce our stress load, and we can learn to practice stress management. Stress reduction may require rearranging our life such as changing jobs, setting boundaries, etc. Stress management involves learning to do things to change our response to stress. These can include:

Practicing gratitude  
Generating goodwill  
Doing volunteer work  
Setting realistic expectations  
Laughing, and learning to play again  
Meditating  
Praying  
Accepting what cannot be changed or controlled by us  
Avoiding frustration  
Exercising  
Learning relaxation techniques  
Putting more control in your life  
Reconciling conflict in our personal relationships  
Dealing with anger appropriately  
Learning to practice forgiveness

None of the above suggestions are necessarily easy, but each can contribute in a reduction in the symptoms discussed previously. Any move we make toward healthiness requires commitment and choice on our part. Which of these can you begin practicing today?