

Coping With Stress in Hard Times

A variety of physical, behavioral and emotional symptoms are normal reactions to stress. You may experience:

1) Physical complaints where medical illness has been ruled out or is seen as only part of the problem

- Musculo-skeletal problems such as tics, headaches, backaches and cramps
- Gastrointestinal difficulties such as frequent indigestion or nausea

2) Behavioral irregularities

- Withdrawal
- Increased alcohol and drug use
- Change in eating habits and weight (increase or decrease)
- Change in sleeping habits (increase or decrease)

3) Emotional discomfort

- Chronic fatigue
- Irritability
- Feeling "out of sorts"
- Crying for no apparent reason
- Depressed mood; sadness
- Non-specific anxiety; worry

Coping With Stress:

The following suggestions have helped many people reduce the anxiety in their lives and improve their ability to function in stressful situations:

- **Take stock of your physical health.** Some symptoms of stress can also be indications of physical illness. See your physician for a physical examination.
- **Practice good nutrition.** Limit caffeine, nicotine and sugar because they are central nervous system stimulants that can aggravate anxiety. Avoid excess alcohol and food intake, especially during demanding times.
- **Exercise moderately.** Appropriate exercise (e.g., even 30 minute walks daily) facilitates the exit of the body's stress hormones and stimulates well-being. Highly competitive exercise adds more strain.
- **Learn a formalized relaxation method.** Meditation, breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation and self-hypnosis can positively affect blood pressure, metabolic rate and immune function when practiced over time.
- **Eliminate stressors from your physical environment.** Noise, pollution, uncomfortable room temperature and poor lighting are subtle stressors and can affect your ability to concentrate.
- **Manage your time.** Establish priorities based on your primary goals and schedule time for those pursuits as well as time for relaxation. Job loss can suddenly leave you with time on your hands. Try joining an organized activity through a church or community center. You may find great satisfaction volunteering for a charitable organization.

- **Set realistic expectations.** Are you putting unrealistic demands on yourself? Don't expect to be able to do everything and please everybody. Learn to speak up and set necessary limits.
- **Know when you need to ask others for help.** Accept the fact that you are not responsible for everything and everyone.
- **Recognize anxiety messages.** Don't burden yourself with messages like "Always be strong..." "Be perfect..." and "Everyone else seems to be coping better."
- **Accept the full spectrum of feelings.** Be aware of pressure to feel only joy and happiness without acknowledging the complexities of human experience. Sadness, anger and disappointment may be present alongside hope and other positive feelings.
- **Learn new ways to express feelings.**
Talk honestly with friends. Begin a journal of thoughts, ideas and feelings to give yourself an open forum. Learn to use art or music to express yourself.
- **Allow recollections.** Recent or even old losses may emerge more poignantly during times of stress. Permit memories to co-exist with the present.
- **Return to basic values.** Quiet time with friends or family, showing appreciation through thoughtful gestures rather than material tokens can help you focus on the meaningful aspects of your life and enjoy the warmth and caring of human relationships.
- **Enjoy simple pleasures.** We all need to refuel regularly with some pleasure and relaxation. It might be as simple as taking a walk or a hot bath, calling a friend, or turning on some music.
- **Seek self-help materials.** Many useful books and tapes are available such as *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Davis, McKay, and Eshelman.
- **If you need more, seek consultation from a therapist who is familiar with the stress response.**

The Anxiety and Stress Disorders Institute of Maryland, LLP: www.anxietyandstress.com