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Stress

Michigan State University Extension Service

Fitness 7

Russel M. Peters, Head, Extension Family Living, Alabama Cooperative Extension Service

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STRESS

Where does all that stress come from?

What can you do about it?

Stress, like body temperature, cannot be avoided. Even while fully relaxed and asleep you are still under stress. Your heart must continue to pump blood; your intestines digest last night's meal; and your lungs move your chest for respiration. Even your brain is not at rest while you are dreaming.

Complete freedom from stress is death. However, the stress we will be discussing in this program is your body's physical, mental, and chemical reactions to circumstances that frighten, excite, confuse, endanger, or irritate you.

Some reactions to stress show themselves clearly, such as when a car wheels around the corner toward you or when a long-wanted baby is born. Others are so subdued that you are not aware of them or do not think of them as stress—for example, your body's reaction to invading disease germs.

Stress from drastic changes in life may include the death of a loved one, divorce, marriage, job loss, or a lengthy illness.

Stress can also come from uncertainty when starting a new job, moving into a new community, living with disorganization, and receiving vague or unclear instructions.

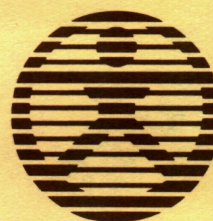
Handled well, stress is a friend that gives strength for your next encounter. However, when handled poorly or allowed to get out of hand, stress becomes an enemy which can cause disease like hypertension (high blood pressure), ulcers, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, or an over-active thyroid gland. Unbridled stress can also contribute heavily to heart disease and the weakening of other organs in the body.

A recent survey indicated that 82 percent of Americans think they need to reduce stress in their daily lives.

Levels of Stress

Dr. Hans Selye, an authority on human stress, divides reaction to stress into three levels.

ALARM. On this level, a person experiencing stress reacts by fighting, running away, or freezing up.



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ADAPTATION. On this level, a person develops ways of adapting, coping, or handling the stress. In other words, she/he learns to live with it.

EXHAUSTION. This level is where a person gives up. This may result in giving up on life.

Some people never get beyond the first level. They fight, run away, or try to ignore the fact that stress exists. And then there are people who move into the exhaustion level and just give up. However, this particular program focuses on the adaptation level of stress reaction. We'll look at some of the ways to handle or cope with stress.

Stress-Relieving Exercises

Exercise is an excellent way to relieve tension and to relax. The exercise may be physical, such as gardening, housework, walking, swimming, or bicycling. Or it may be mental, such as prayer, meditation, self-hypnosis, deep breathing, or taking a mental vacation.

You'll be better prepared to cope with the stress that comes your way if you keep your body healthy. Eat nutritionally balanced meals, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly. Then try some of the following special ways to relax. You may be surprised at how well they work.

DEEP BREATHING. Slowly take a long deep breath; hold it for a few seconds; then gradually exhale while mentally saying to yourself, "Relax." Do this for several minutes if necessary. If you close your eyes, the calming effect will be increased.

SLOWER RESPIRATION RATE. Slow down your breathing rate by seeing how few times you can breathe each 60 seconds. When you begin to get tense, take a few minutes and simply slow your breathing down to about three to six breaths per minute. You'll find that you will feel much calmer.

PHYSICAL EXERCISE. Even a brief walk often helps relieve unwanted stress.

LAUGHING OR SINGING LOUDLY. These activities are incompatible with tension. For example, it's hard to laugh heartily and be very tense at the same time.

A WARM BATH OR A COLD SHOWER. A cold shower is particularly helpful in handling tension associated with anger. Soaking in a warm bath may also be very relaxing.

NATURE TIME. Spend a little time (in reality or even in your imagination) with an aspect of nature which you particularly enjoy, such as a grassy field, your favorite beach, or a beautiful flower.

Exercise may be physical or mental.



SHOULDER EXERCISE. Let your shoulders slump. Next, move them up and down and then in a rotating motion. Rotating your shoulders is a good tension release when you've been driving for a long time without a stop.

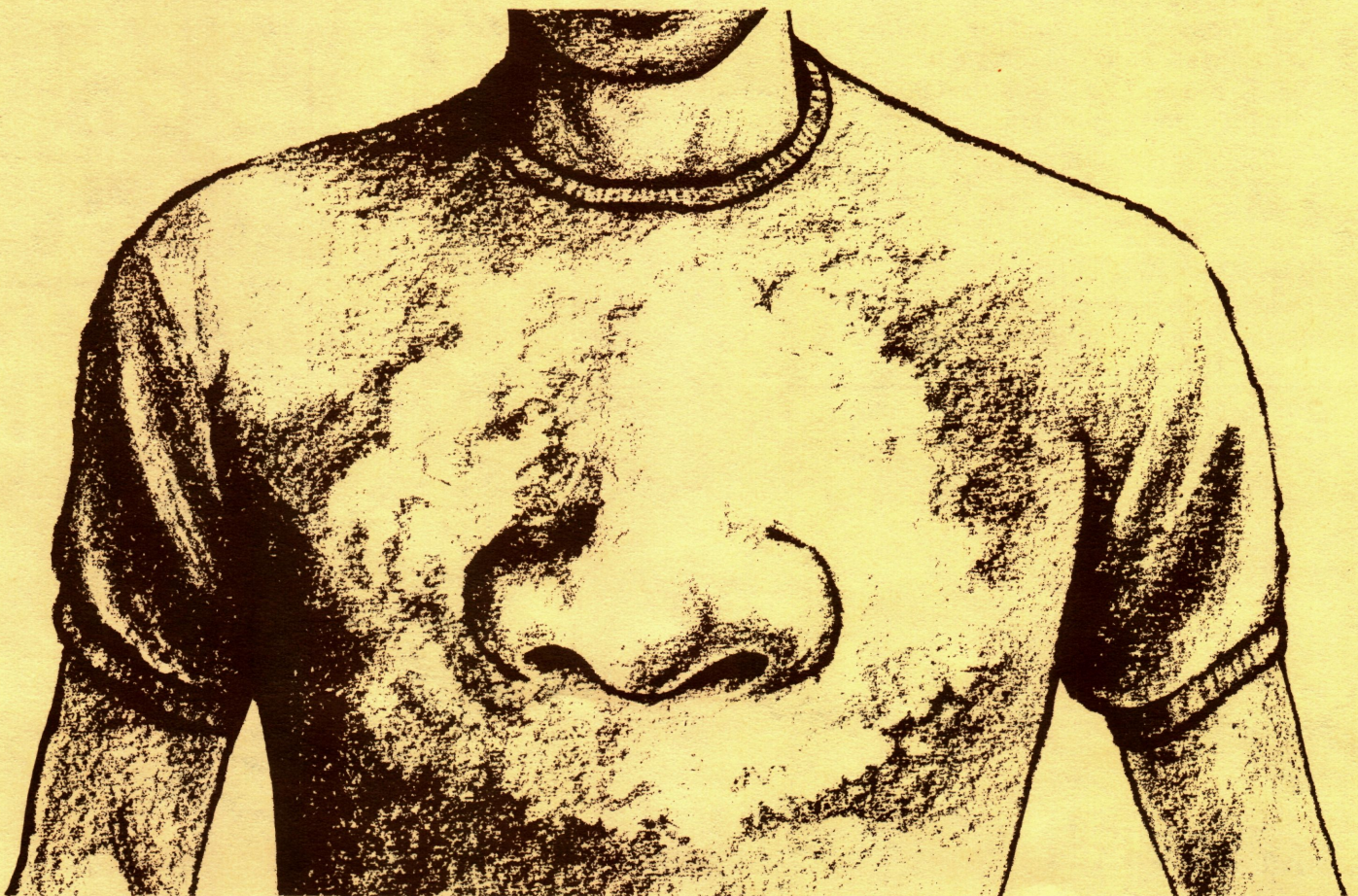
TENSION AND RELAXATION. Do this exercise only if you are in good physical condition. Place your right hand and forearm on your lap or on a flat surface. Then slowly tense all the muscles in your right hand and forearm. Continue until you are tensing your arm and hand muscles as tightly as you can, but do not overstrain yourself. Hold this high tension for a count of six; then *gradually relax* and feel the pleasant sensation of calmness spread throughout your forearm and to the tips of your fingers. Without rushing, repeat this procedure several times. Try using this procedure to tense and relax your whole body instead of just your arm. In addition to relaxation, this procedure "energizes" your body. (Note: Do not exert high tension in any diseased or weak part of your body.)

IMAGINATION. Sit comfortably, breathe through your nose, and take slow, even breaths. Gently close your eyes and continue breathing through your nose. Now imagine that you have a

set of nostrils right in the middle of your chest. While you continue to breathe through your nose, imagine that you are breathing in and out of the heart area in the center of your chest. Next, imagine that you are surrounded by a very fine golden mist—peaceful and relaxing. Imagine breathing into your heart this peaceful, pleasant, ever-so-fine mist. When you exhale, imagine that you are breathing out all of your tensions. You may continue breathing in the relaxing mist and breathing out all your stress for as long as 5 or 10 minutes if you wish. When you have finished, you may notice a feeling of lightness which comes as the heaviness of tension evaporates.

RELAXING PHRASE. When you begin to sense unwanted stress, continually repeat in your mind, at any speed, "I am peaceful, I am calm." In most cases you can continue this repetition as you go about your normal activities.

COMMAND OF YOUR BODY. Practice commanding parts of your body to relax. Believe that they will relax and give the process time to happen. We can control our bodies much more than most of us realize. One way of using this method is to lay down or slump in a chair and



Stress can contribute to heart disease.

concentrate on each part of your body as you mentally command that body part to relax. It's usually best to start with your toes and work up to the top of your head. Many people find that as they begin to better recognize and get in touch with their feelings of relaxation, they are able to merely say, "Relax," in their minds and their bodies respond by immediately becoming more relaxed. For another variation, when you're involved in an activity such as driving or writing, pick out your body parts that are not being used and selectively command that those areas become calm and peaceful.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES. For those who are spiritually tuned, various types of prayer, as well as the disciplines of meditation and yoga, can be uplifting and relaxing.

MENTAL VACATION. When you don't have the time or the money for a real vacation, you can at least enjoy its pleasures through your imagination. First, close your eyes and think of some place where you would like to be. Then go there in your mind's eye. Perhaps you will go alone. Or you might imagine being with your spouse, a friend, the family, or the "old gang." You may be quietly watching the sunset, mountain, woods, or ocean. Or you may be active in hiking, hunting shells or rocks, playing some sport or game, climbing a mountain, or cycling. Enjoy the experience.

There are many other exercises or ways to relax that you can practice. Find out which ones help you the most. Then use them when your stress becomes too much to bear.

Stress-reducing and life-releasing ideas

Handling your stress effectively involves more than learning the techniques of certain mental or physical exercises. It also includes a certain way of thinking; that is, an attitude toward yourself and life in general.

Be aware that you control your feelings! You can learn to create at will a calm and peaceful

state of relaxed alertness. Some ideas or guidelines which may help you are listed below.

BE IN CHARGE. You control your feelings. When you realize that you create most of your own tensions, you have taken a major step toward reducing them.

WORK ON YOURSELF. You are not likely to change other people. Work on changing you.

ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY. Don't blame others or yourself (guilt). Work positively with the existing circumstances.

LIVE IN THE NOW. It's okay to learn from the past and to plan for the future. However, the present is the only time you have for living.

BE AWARE. Learn to recognize your feelings and use relaxing exercises when you become aware of too much stress.

CATCH STRESS EARLY. The sooner you catch your signs of stress, the sooner you can do something to calm down.

PRACTICE WAYS OF RELAXING. Try different ways of relaxing. Then use the ones that work best for you.

SET PRIORITIES. Don't let urgent matters keep you from finishing important tasks. Put first things first. New demands may need to wait their turn.



DIVIDE JOBS INTO LITTLE TASKS. Do one part of a job at a time. Remember this philosophy:

"Life by the mile is quite a trial,
Life by the inch is quite a cinch."

TALK OUT YOUR PROBLEMS. Talk with the person or persons involved. Agree to disagree agreeably. You may need to talk to someone else—a friend or a counselor.

WORK IT OFF. Physical activity helps relieve tensions. Recreation, hobbies, gardening, and other activities will help "work off steam."

TAKE A BREAK. Let it cool for a while. Get away from the situation. If you can't do this in reality, take a mental vacation.

GIVE IN SOMETIMES. Often winning an argument leads to losing in a relationship.

HELP SOMEONE ELSE. Share yourself with a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a church class, a youth club, an older person, or anyone who is lonely and needs a friend.

BE NICE TO YOURSELF. Give yourself time to do things you enjoy. Plan for quiet time, hobby time, and fun time. Learn to loaf a little. Regularly schedule some time that you can use for yourself in any way you wish.

LOOK FOR SOMETHING POSITIVE. You can learn something from every person and every situation. Use your experiences positively and constructively.

Keep growing!

Summary

Stress is a part of everyone's life. Some stress is necessary for life and achievement. But too much stress can harm you physically and emotionally. Stress is caused by fear, overload or underload, life changes, and uncertainty. People react on one of three levels—alarm, adaptation, and exhaustion.

To handle stress effectively, you need to learn how to recognize the symptoms early. When you become aware of stress symptoms in your life, practice a relaxing mental or physical exercise until you are calm.

Accept responsibility for your own feelings and actions. Take charge of your life. Develop a positive attitude toward yourself, other people, and life in general.



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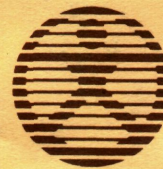
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Russel M. Peters

Head, Extension Family Living
Alabama Cooperative Extension Service
Auburn University, Alabama 36849

Michigan State University Contact: Doris Richardson,
Program Leader, Extension Family Living Education

**NUTRITION
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