

Faculty and Employee Assistance Program

NEWSLETTER

Managing Stress Effectively

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“Stress is a natural reaction of the body to any demand (pleasant or unpleasant) placed upon it. Although physical demands such as removing ourselves from danger or jumping into a cool lake on a hot day are certainly stressors, psychological demands (worry, embarrassment, deadlines, getting a promotion, etc) are seen as the major stressors of modern times” – Hans Selye, MD

The origins of the human stress response go back to our early development where a threat to our safety and well-being caused a portion of the brain to stimulate the release of hormones, increase oxygen circulation, slow digestion, and increase alertness so we could effectively fight or flee. When facing down a saber tooth tiger, these reactions were helpful. In today’s world of pagers, FAX’s, email, multi-tasking, commuting, trying to balance work and home...the brain can still be triggered to *defend* even though the threat may be multiple small stressors. So how we manage these stressors is key.

Stress Myths:

- 1) Only unpleasant situations are stressful. False! Many of life’s sought after and desired pleasant situations are also stressful. New babies, weddings, a new job, falling in love can create a stress response physically and emotionally.
- 2) A lot of stress makes you less productive. False! Too little stress results in boredom and a loss of productivity too. Each person has their own optimal level of stress so that *enough* is there to motivate, create and produce but *too much* results in loss of productivity as well.
- 3) “Workaholics” should slow down or they’ll get sick. False! What is too stressful and chaotic to me may be stimulating and energizing to you so each person must find her own level of comfort. The high energy person who takes care of himself may be better off than the low key person with few stress reduction strategies.
- 4) What is stressful for me is stressful for you. False! Situations are rarely stressful in and of themselves, it’s how we perceive the situation that either creates a stress response or not.

Know thyself

Each of us handles stress and stress inducing situations differently because we perceive them from our own standpoint in life. “I didn’t get that promotion because I’m incompetent” is more stressful than “I tried for it and perhaps will be more successful next time.” “That waitperson is deliberately ignoring me” is more stressful than “They are quite busy here today.” With every situation we take it in, apply perceptions and judgments to it and respond based on those perceptions and judgments. As noted above we have a choice in HOW we perceive it. Not everything in life is a threat to our safety and well-being requiring a defensive physical and emotional response.

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Stress Building Beliefs – answering “yes” to these questions suggests that you increase your own stress rather than creating beliefs which support yourself and reduce your stress.

- Do you feel constant pressure to achieve?
- Do you feel you haven’t done enough no matter how hard you try?
- Do you criticize yourself when you’re not perfect?
- Do you have to be in control at all times?
- Are you uncomfortable delegating projects to others?
- Does your self-esteem depend on everyone else’s opinion of you?
- Do you keep negative feelings inside rather than expressing them to resolve conflict?
- Do you feel you can never do as good a job as other people?
- Do you feel like an imposter when told your work is good?

Strategies

- Change your framework for thinking – be positive about yourself and what you can do.
- Give up perfection and control
- Allow others to help – delegate cheerfully
- Say “no thanks” to invitations, tasks, projects that are optional and don’t hold value for you.
- Better Time Management – scheduling in time for your projects, errands, etc – Don’t create a situation where you must rush. Prioritize, Plan ahead. Don’t procrastinate.
- Take care of yourself: yoga, massage, a good book, a new class or hobby, time with a good friend, add more of whatever nurtures you!
- Don’t use alcohol or drugs to soothe yourself.
- Eat right and feel good about your choices.
- Exercise, walk, run, expend some physical energy.
- Breathe deeply

To talk to someone about your stress and stress management strategies, call FEAP for a free and confidential appointment.

Symptoms of too much stress

- Neck, back, muscle tension
- Nervous habits like nail biting or lip biting
- Difficulty concentrating
- Headaches
- Skin problems
- GI distress, heartburn
- Sweating, clamminess
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Fatigue
- Irritability and anger
- Shallow breathing
- Increased heart rate
- Sleep disturbance

Many of these symptoms occur in minor ways from time to time but an increase in them suggests that the methods you usually use to manage stress are becoming *insufficient*.

