

# What About Stress?

We all talk about stress, but we are not always clear about what it is. This is because stress comes from both the good and the bad things that happen to us. If we did not feel any stress, we would not be alive! Stress becomes a problem when we are not sure how to handle an event or a situation. Then worry sets in, and we feel "stressed".

The things that cause stress for you may not be a problem for your neighbour, and things that bring stress to your neighbour's life may not worry you at all. It is how you think about and react to certain events that determine whether you find them stressful or fairly easy to deal with. Your reaction to stress can affect your mental and physical health; so it is important for you to learn how to deal effectively with stress as it occurs.

## Understanding stress

Your feelings about the events in your life are very important. By understanding yourself and your reactions to stressful events, you can learn to handle stress

effectively. The best place to start is by figuring out what produces stress in you, such as:

- Major events in your life: getting married, changing jobs, moving your home, getting divorced, or coping with the death of a loved one,
- Long-term worries: concern about your children's future, financial or economic problems, or an ongoing illness,
- Daily hassles: traffic jams, rude people, or



machines that just don't work when you want them to.

## The stress response

When you find an event stressful, your body undergoes a series of changes, called the stress response. There are three stages to this response. They are:

### Stage 1 – Mobilizing Energy

At first, your body releases adrenaline, your heart beats faster, and you start to breathe more quickly. Both good and bad events can start this reaction: the night before your wedding or the day you lose your job.

### Stage 2 – Consuming Energy Stores

If, for some reason, you do not escape from the first stage, your body begins to release stored sugars and fats from its resources. At this stage, you will feel

driven, pressured and tired. You may drink more coffee, smoke more, and drink more alcohol than is good for you. You may also experience anxiety, memory loss, catch colds or get the flu more often than normal.

### Stage 3 – Draining Energy Stores

If you do not resolve your stress problems, the body's need for energy will become greater than its ability to produce it, and you will become chronically stressed. At this stage, you

may experience insomnia, errors in judgment, and personality changes. You may also develop a serious sickness, such as heart disease, ulcers or mental illness.

## Coping with stress

Because each of us is different, there is no one "correct" way to cope with stress. However, there are a number of different things that can be done, and it is helpful to look at both short and long-term solutions to reducing stress.

- Identify your problems. Is your job, your relationship with someone, or money worries causing you stress? Are unimportant, surface problems masking real, deeper ones? Once you are fairly sure you know what the problem is, you can do something about it.
- Solve your problems. Start thinking about solutions. What can you do, and what will be the consequences? Should you be looking for a less stressful job? Do you need marriage counseling? Should you talk to a financial expert about money management? What will happen if you do nothing? If you follow this problem-solving strategy, you should be able to make some changes to take the pressure off your-

pressure off yourself. This long-term way of reducing stress in your life is something everyone, sooner or later, will need to do.

- Talk about your problems. You may find it helpful to talk about your stress. Friends and family members may not realize that you are having a hard time. Once they understand, they



may be helpful in two ways; first, by just listening to you vent your feelings and second, by suggesting solutions to your problems. If you need to talk with someone outside your own circle of friends and relatives, your family doctor may be able to refer you to a mental health counselor.

- Learn about stress management. There are many helpful books, films, videos and courses to help you cope with stress. There are also counselors who specialize in stress; ask your family doctor for a referral to one. There may also be community college courses and stress management workshops available in your community.
- Take your mind off your problems. You may be able to get rid of stressful feelings temporarily by getting busy. If you get

involved in hobbies, sports or work, you can give yourself a "mental holiday" from your stress. Not thinking about your problems for a while can give you a little mental distance from them and make them easier to solve later on.

- Reduce tension. Physical activity can be a great stress reducer. Go for a walk, take up a sport, dig in the garden, clean the house. You may find it helpful to learn some relaxation exercises. These can be as simple as deep breathing – slowing inhale through your nose until you cannot take in any more air, and then

exhale through your mouth. Another simple exercise is stretching – stretch and relax each part of your body, starting from your neck and working downward; exhale as you stretch, and inhale as you release the tension.

- If you make a habit of taking pressure off yourself by getting rid of your tension, you will find yourself less stressed and more able to solve the problems that caused your stress in the first place.

**Preventing stress**

Once you have lowered your stress level, it is wise to look for ways to prevent excessive stress from building up again. The best way to cope with stress is to prevent it. Some good ways to do this are:

- Make decisions. Not making them causes

worry and, therefore, stress.

- Avoid putting things off. Make a weekly schedule, including leisure activities as well as chores.
- Delegate. Get others to do tasks that they can handle so that you are not trying to do everything by yourself.

Remember, it is impossible to have a completely stress-free life. Your goal should be to avoid getting to the third stage of stress where your energy stores are drained. As long as you do not get stuck in the third stage of the stress response, you will avoid becoming chronically stressed.

If you or someone you know is feeling too much stress contact The Canadian Mental Health Association which can help you find additional support or Sherwood Park Mental Health Clinic, 2 Brower Drive, Sherwood Park, AB, T8H 1V4. Call: 780-467-6562.

**Questions or concerns?**

Call Strathcona County Family and Community Services at 780-464-4044.