Stress and Relaxation

What is stress?
Stress is an adaptive response, the body's reaction to an event that is seen as emotionally disturbing, disquieting, or threatening. When we perceive such an event, we experience the "fight or flight" response. To prepare for fighting or fleeing, the body increases its heart rate and blood pressure; more blood is then sent to your heart and muscles, and your respiration rate increases. While this is a natural response and helpful in metered doses, it can also greatly and negatively impact your well-being if left uncontrolled for long periods of time. Not only is the stress harmful to our bodies, it can also place you (and others) at risk through unwise behaviors such as alcohol and drug use, emotional outbursts, and violence.

What causes stress?
Major causes of stress include illness, job changes, moving, separations and divorces, school pressures, unrealistic expectations of ourselves (or others), deaths in the family, and financial difficulties. But even joyous events like a new relationships or graduation can be stressful.

Tips for stress management & relaxation
Usually, no single strategy will be effective in managing all of life's challenges. That is why we need a variety of coping skills. Most people use three of four favorite coping styles over and over again. However, some strategies have a high cost and create even more problems, such as over-eating and drinking. It is important to develop techniques that are reliable stress relievers without the negative side effects. Here are some suggestions to get you on your way to smiles:

Life management skills - While stress is a natural part of our world and likely unavoidable, consistently using life management skills greatly reduces your risk for unhealthy or prolonged bouts with stress. Gently incorporate these suggestions into your life. Notice and embrace the positive benefits so that the skills are more likely to become lifestyle changes.

- Establishing an exercise routine creates not only positive physical changes, but also positive mental changes. It is a great way to build a healthy body, expend negative energy, and produce positive feelings. Include a variety of activities such as
- Stress often results when we take on too many responsibilities and begin neglecting our own goals, desires, or projects for others. Learning to assert ourselves (i.e. saying "no") is a very effective way to gain control of our own lives and feel more satisfied. Paying attention to and asserting ourselves is not the same as being selfish.
- Proper nutrition is as important to a stress-free life as it is to a physically healthy life. Certain foods and drinks - while pleasurable - can be quite harmful - especially if used too frequently or consistently. Examples are: caffeine, alcohol, and foods high in fats, salt and sugar. Work toward limiting these potentially harmful foods while increasing your intake of vegetables, whole grains and water.
- Maintaining a balance in life refers to the importance of taking efforts not only to achieve, but also of taking efforts to find pleasure, relax, develop friendships, etc.

Relaxation techniques - Lifestyle changes are very effective in the prevention of significant levels of stress and management of daily stress. However, there are times that additional strategies may be needed to help us through particularly demanding situations. Below are brief descriptions of techniques designed to reduce the mental and physical components of stress.
Physical relaxation techniques

- Deep breathing: Deep breathing is one of the most effective relaxation techniques and can be accomplished relatively anywhere. Begin with a comfortable, but straight posture and closed mouth. Slightly constrict the soft palate at the back of your throat and passively breathe in (you should hear & feel your breath moving through the back of your throat.) Your ribs will expand, but your chest and shoulders should remain still. Hold the breath to feel the building of tension. Then release by gently but completely pushing all air out. Pause. Repeat. Complete several repetitions.

- Progressive muscle relaxation: We often don’t notice the stress we are under, until it shows itself in a tension headache, backache or stiff shoulders. Progressive muscle relaxation is designed not only to reduce muscular tension, but also to clear your mind and provide a sense of renewal. Begin by finding a quiet location where you will not be interrupted and sitting (or lying down) in a comfortable, relaxed posture. You may find it helpful to gently stretch before you begin so as to begin ridding your muscles of any excessive tension. Close your eyes and breathe slowly, calmly, and naturally. Allow your muscles to relax. Gently tense, and then relax, each part of your body, starting with your feet and working your way up to your face and head. As you focus on each area, think of warmth, heaviness, and relaxation. Allow distracting thoughts to float away and your mind to clear. Some find it helpful to develop a relaxing, peaceful scene in their mind’s eye (such as the beach or a mountain stream). When finished, remain still with your eyes closed for a few minutes longer. Take a few deep breaths and then gently open your eyes.

Thought awareness

- Rational thinking
- Affirmations: Affirmations are self-statements designed to prevent stress by focusing our thoughts and energy on our strengths as well as to remind us of what is realistically within our control to change. To be most effective, affirmations are positive, personally meaningful, focused on the present, and part of your daily routine.

Meditation & Imagery

Meditation utilizes some of the skills described above. This relaxation technique is designed to clear the mind and re-focus concentration on something beneficial. Another benefit is reduced tension in your muscles. And it is easy to do almost anywhere at any time! Begin by finding a quiet location where you will not be interrupted and sitting (or lying down) in a comfortable, relaxed posture. You may find it helpful to gently stretch before you begin so as to rid any excessive tension from your muscles. Close your eyes and breathe slowly, calmly, and naturally. Allow your muscles to relax as you gently turn your mind to a focal point....either a word or phrase (i.e., Peace, Courage, or I will be strong.). Some find it helpful to develop a relaxing, peaceful scene in their mind’s eye (such as the beach or a mountain stream). Your focal point will be most effective if it is personally meaningful, positive, and filled with many sensory images. Continue to focus and gently remove any intrusions. Practice daily for approximately 10 minutes. When finished, remain seated with your eyes closed for a few minutes longer. Take a few deep breaths and then gently open your eyes.

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