What is Stress?

Individual perception of stress is a complex process involving the immediate response and reactions to the environment or situations. Stress may be positive and provide energy for handling emergencies or meeting challenges. Inability to handle a situation and loss of control creates a negative stress. Stress has been linked to negative outcomes of illness, absenteeism, performance deterioration, and decreased productivity. High levels of major stress hormone, cortisol, is known to have an impact on the immune system. Stress can be a factor in disorders such as hypertension, digestive problems, and acute and chronic pain. A number of studies implicate stress as a contributing factor in diabetes, cancer, AIDS, and Parkinson’s disease. Long-term stress is extremely damaging to the physical, mental and emotional capabilities and behaviors of an individual.

Stressful events can be seen as obstacles or opportunities. When the amygdala, located in the limbic center of the brain, senses a threat, alarm signals trigger the sympathetic nervous system to release nor-epinephrine into the brain and epinephrine into the body, resulting in increased stress hormone release. This is a critical response for dangerous, frightening experiences. However, it also occurs with any highly stressful moment that is not life-threatening. If stress is constant, depleting the reserves and limiting ability to respond to stress, the consequences can be detrimental to your overall well-being. Fortunately, our bodies have a natural, automatic protection against stress, which allows us to balance and regulate our responses.

What is Mindfulness?

To understand why things are stressful and learn better ways to prevent and manage the results takes time and energy. By using simple stress-reducing techniques, such as deep breathing, muscle relaxation, or focused imagery, we can purposefully “unhook” from stressful situations and create a more relaxed state of mind. Laughing, playing, exercising, and taking time for your self requires commitment. It begins with willingness to take an honest look at yourself and take responsibility for your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. By being aware of your thoughts and living consciously in the moment, grounding yourself in the present, and effectively sensing the world around you, you can make your life more satisfying. This concept is sometimes referred to as mindfulness.

An interesting and unique way of living and dealing with stress, mindfulness is the practice of simply being aware of thoughts and emotions, rather than being caught in them or analyzing their meaning. It originated as a Buddhist concept, but it is now incorporated into many stress-management programs as well as the complementary health/disease prevention options now available through medical centers. One such program, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, a recognized researcher at University of Massachusetts, uses meditation practices that teach participants to respond to stressful situations in a focused manner, while simultaneously observing their own reactions and emotions in a non-judgmental way.

Does that sound like a new age cliché? It is really just a way to learn to relax and settle the mind—an informal habit of cultivating awareness in all areas of our daily lives and a technique to improve both physical and mental resilience in the face of stress and pressure. Much of our anger, dissatisfaction, suffering, anxieties, and unhappiness starts with our thoughts. Engaging in the practice of mindfulness trains our minds to be in the present. Self-calming and relaxation is a quality that is built around noticing where you are and what you are doing at any given time. Stop a moment, cease your work and look around you. Focus on letting go of self-judgment, analysis, expecta-
tions, and just be in the present moment. Slowing and deepening your breathing can serve as a direct connection to the body, sending a message to relax while at the same time increasing awareness of how you occupy space from moment to moment.

**Bringing Mindfulness into Your Life**

Mindfulness can be incorporated into many aspects of your daily routine; you can bring about increased awareness with any activity. Understanding of what you eat and why (bored, hungry, anxious), provides support for weight-loss efforts or diet restrictions. Gentle stretching and strengthening exercises can result in improved flexibility and vitality. Mindful walking, combined with conscious breathing with each step, helps focus the mind and allows you to momentarily let go of problems. Take time for “non-doing” and enjoy your own presence. Check in with your body by taking a moment to visualize how you feel. Sit quietly and listen to the silence. Notice your thoughts and how they influence your feelings and your body’s reactions.

You can practice training yourself to focus on awareness of your surroundings, seeing and feeling things as they truly are, without distraction. Try this simple exercise: Concentrate on your breathing—breathe in deeply through your nose for a count of 7, hold your breath for a count of 4, let it out for a count of 9. Deep breathing is a quick way to break the stress cycle. With mindful meditation practices, it is the “home” to which you return. As you practice your breathing, allow your mind to notice sights, sounds, and feelings. If unwanted, persistent thoughts intrude, simply notice them, and return to your “home” awareness of your breath. With meditation, the awareness we apply to our breath (or whatever the focus) can be expanded to include all physical and mental processes so that we may become practiced in relaxing and reducing stress.

Mindful meditation is a way to quiet and calm the mind and helps restore and maintain a sense of personal balance and develop the skills to avoid emotional and physical depletion. This is important not only for persons who are facing stress-related conditions, but also anyone who wants to avoid physical or professional burnout.

**Conclusion**

We need to understand that in order to care for our patients we must attend to our own health and well-being. Learning to balance the emotional demands of the patient relationship and other personal and professional pressures is vital to our health and longevity. Mindfulness can help you reduce stress and enjoy life more. When you are mindful, you are very cognizant about what is going on around you and how you feel about it. And when you are very aware of people, things, and situations, you are able to make a skillful choice about how to respond.

At those times when we stand wearily at the center of a circle bristling with tasks, burdens, problems, annoyances, and responsibilities rush upon us, moments are lost in the clutter and chaos. Moments are gone that you can never get back. Mindful awareness, a condition of “being” rather than “doing,” and paying attention to the moment rather than the past, the future, or the multitude of distractions around you, provides an opportunity to step back, breathe, and take a moment to care for yourself. All we really have is this moment. Live it intentionally and be mindfully aware.

**Resources**


