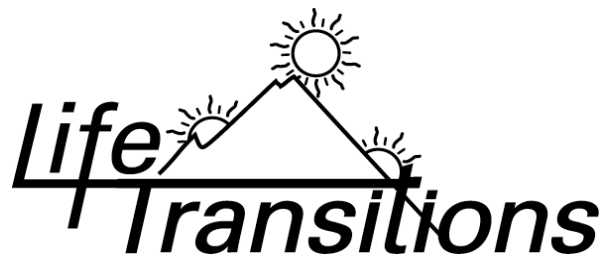


UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING
STRESS IN ADULTS, SENIORS, AND
CAREGIVERS



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“What is this one mysterious condition that the most different kinds of people have in common with animals and even with individual cells, at times when much – much of anything – happens to them? What is the nature of stress?” – Hans Selye

What is Stress?

Stress is a life event or situation that causes *imbalance* in an individual’s life. An unhealthy response to stress occurs when the demands of the stressor exceed an individual’s coping ability. Often stress results from something that is beyond our control.

Life events that we perceive as negative, such as illness, accidents, or loss of a job, cause *distress*. Life events that we generally perceive as positive such as Christmas, vacations, and job promotions, cause what is called *eustress*. Both distress and eustress can have the same negative effect on an individual’s overall health including physical and mental illness.

Is Stress Normal?

Some stress in life is unavoidable, normal, and can even be beneficial. Small amounts of stress, as experienced before a test or athletic competition can enhance our alertness and help raise our performance level. Excessive stress or an inability to manage certain stressors can cause negative physical and mental responses. Adults and children respond to stress in different ways.

What Are Some of The Physical Signs of Stress?

- Muscle tension or spasms – especially in the neck, shoulders, and back
- Headaches
- Sleep difficulty – trouble getting to sleep, wakefulness, nightmares
- Change in appetite – eating too much, or a lack of appetite
- A desire to eat as soon as a problem arises
- A feeling of constant fatigue – loss of “joie de vivre”
- Chronic diarrhea or constipation
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or medications
- Shortness of breath, high blood pressure, frequent heartburn
- A liability to fainting or nausea
- An inability to cry or a tendency to burst into tears easily
- Persistent sexual problems

- Excessive nervous energy, trouble relaxing
- Proneness to accidents

What Are Some of The Mental Signs of Stress?

- Patterns of negative thinking
- A feeling of uneasiness
- Boredom with Life
- Anxiety – shortness of breath, heart palpitations, sweating, dizziness
- A recurring feeling of not being able to cope with Life
- Irritability
- Morbid fear of disease, especially heart disease or cancer
- Fear of death – yours or others
- A sense of despair
- Feelings of loneliness
- An inability to concentrate – or struggling to remember things

How Might The Symptoms of Stress Differ in Older Adults?

Symptoms of stress may present themselves differently as we age, may be more difficult to identify, and may include some of the following indicators in addition to those symptoms listed above.

- Increased physical complaints
- Persistent fatigue
- Unexplained weight loss
- Excessive guilt and worry
- Denial of fatigue, weight loss, or sleep problems

What Are Some Specific Signs of Caregiver Stress?

More than 80 percent of all caregivers experience high levels of stress and nearly 50 percent report suffering from depression. Many caregivers do not recognize their own needs, fail to do anything about them, or simply don't know where to turn for help.

The symptoms of caregiver stress can be unique and recognizing your own stress response is the first step to better managing your stress.

- Denial - about the disease and its effect on the person affected.
- Anger - towards the person with Alzheimer's disease and others.
- Social withdraw - losing touch with friends and enjoyable activities.
- Anxiety - about facing another day and what the future holds.
- Depression - feeling sad and hopeless much of the time
- Exhaustion - barely having the energy to complete your daily tasks.
- Sleeplessness - nightmares, wakefulness.
- Emotional reactions - increased irritability, crying over minor upsets.

- Lack of concentration - trouble focusing and completing tasks.
- Health problems - losing/gaining weight getting sick frequently, body aches, and headaches.

GENERAL ADAPTATION SYNDROME

Hans Selye, MD published the classic book on stress and its effects on physical and mental illness “The Stress of Life.” In his research he detailed the “General Adaptation Syndrome,” a model of how the body responds to stress in three stages.

1. The alarm reaction – the initial response
2. The stage of resistance
3. Stage of exhaustion – a breakdown in the organism, with complete loss of resistance

MANAGING STRESS

George E. Vaillant, MD in his famous “Grant Study” researched healthy maturation and the pathways leading to physical health and joyful living. This study has followed the “normal” adult development of 268 men for sixty years. From this research Vaillant found six factors that separate the “happy-well” from the “sad-sick” later in life.

1. A stable marriage
2. A mature adaptive style
3. No smoking
4. Little use of alcohol
5. Regular exercise
6. Maintenance of normal weight

How Can I Learn to Manage Stress?

There are three general concepts that can be emphasized in helping individuals better manage stress:

- 1. Resilience and identifying triggers for stress**
- 2. Balance – physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional**
- 3. Coping skills**

I. Resilience:

In the context of stress and stress management, resilience can be described as the ability to bounce back or recover from a stressful period or event. Resilience is a quality that generally improves with age as we gain greater experience with life’s challenges.

Learning to identify your individual *triggers* for stress can be very important to developing resilience. An ability to adapt to change is important to resilience.

II. Balance:

Having a balanced approach to life is crucial to stress management. This balanced approach can be broken down into five areas – **physical, mental, social, spiritual, and emotional.**

Balance – physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual

We all have particular areas in which they are strong, such as, maintaining regular exercise and good nutrition to take care of our physical health. Few of us have a repertoire of interests, activities, or time in the day to maintain adequate overall balance.

Life’s challenges can be great and varied. When we have a variety of support and tools to face life’s challenges we are equipped to reduce our response to stress. By maintaining a balanced routine we also model healthy stress management to those around us.

ASSESS YOUR BALANCE

Comment on your current level of well being in all aspects of life. Be very specific. Use examples whenever possible.

Physical Health: I’m _____

Mental Health: I’m _____

Emotional Health: I’m _____

Social Health: I’m _____

Spiritual Health: I’m _____

Complete this sentence: I feel most alive when _____

Aspects of my healthy I would like to improve: _____

Complete the following statement: If I want my health to improve,

I need to stop _____

And need to start: _____

Brainstorm some of the health remedies you use for improving you personal well being.

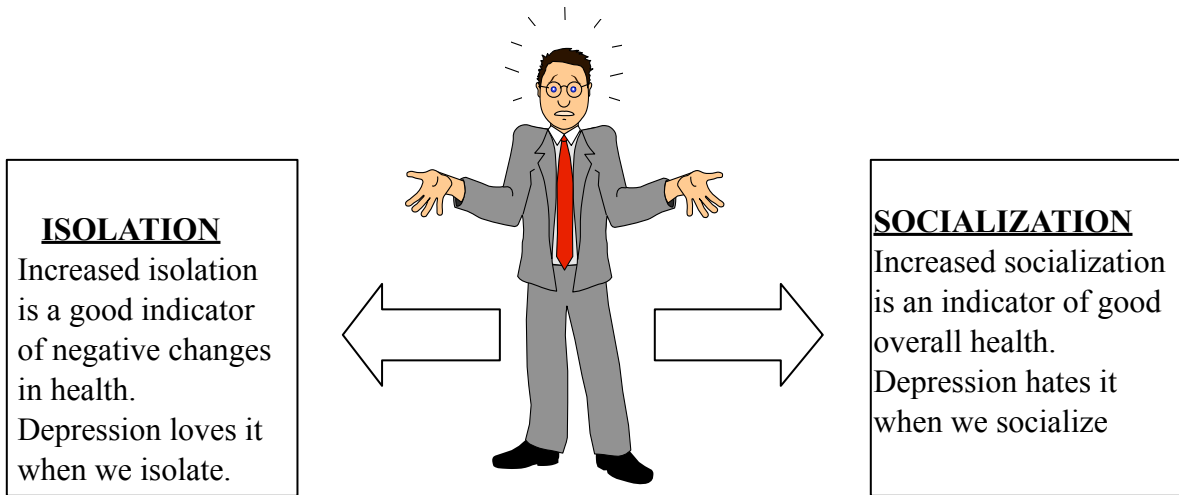
Physical	Mental	Emotional	Social	Spiritual
Walking	read a book	cry with a friend	family dinner	Attend church
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

PRESCRIPTION FOR HEALTHY BALANCE

<u>Physical</u>	<u>Mental</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Social</u>	<u>Spiritual</u>
Biking	music	acceptance	acts of kindness	be thankful
Avoid alcohol	set goals	express feelings	call someone	pray
Healthy eating	take a class	laugh	say thank you	volunteer
Swim	thought logs	don't stuff feelings	show respect	meditate
Sleep	prioritize	journal	listen	watch sunrise
Take meds.	One day at a time	Surrender	go out to dinner	go to church
Maintain hygiene	art/creativity	take a bath	eye contact	play music
Relaxation	reframe thoughts	Set boundaries	support group	childs play

** GSU 62 – Anyone 62 years of age and older can take courses in the Georgia State college system without charge. **ANY CLASS!!**

“**Anatomy of an Illness**” – Norman Cousins – Explores the author’s successful fight against cancer, through the use of laughter and the power of positive thinking.



III. Coping Skills:

Coping skills are tools, activities, and strategies for combating stress and the stress response. Examples of tools to manage stress are listed above in the discussion of maintaining balance. There are also some specific strategies caregivers can utilize to combat caregiver related stress.

What Are Some Specific Strategies for Caregivers to Combat Stress?

- Learn about the disease and giving care - then pass it on.
- Be realistic about the disease. As painful as this maybe, it will make adjustment easier.
- Be realistic about yourself and your own limitations.
- Accept your own feelings. Feelings are normal and reaffirm that you are human.
- Share your feelings

Strategies to Combat Caregiver Stress (con't)

- Look and focus on the good things. It is important to combat negative thinking.
- Take of yourself. Review the concept of “balance” and build in coping skills in the areas of Emotional, mental, physical, spiritual, and social well being.
- Look for the humor in things. Laughter is healthy and it won't lesson the sincerity of your care.
- Get help through support groups, professional agencies. Don't forget to get practical help in your duties of care giving such as house keeping help, sitters, and day care programs.
- Plan for the future. Planning for financial situations, alternative care facilities, etc., can relieve current and future stress.

Caregiver Stress Test

Respond either: Seldom, Sometimes, Often, Usually true, or always true, to the following questions.

1. I find that I can't get enough rest
2. I don't have enough time for myself.
3. I don't have time to be with other family members beside the person I care for.
4. I feel guilty about my situation.
5. I don't get out much anymore.
6. I have conflicts with the person I care for.
7. I have conflicts with other family members.
8. I cry every day.
9. I worry about having enough money to make ends meet.
10. I don't feel I have enough knowledge or experience to give care as well as I'd like.
11. My own health is not good.

If the response to one or more of these questions is “usually true” or “often true” you are likely to be experiencing physical and mental signs of a stress reaction and may need to adjust your role as caregiver, coping skills to manage stress, and find support.

“He who has health has hope, and he who has hope has everything.”

-Arabian proverb

“Health is the thing that makes you feel that now is the best time of year.”

- Franklin Pierce Adams

“Before supper walk a little, after supper do the same.”

- Latin proverb

