



Stewardship of the Body

“I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made” (Ps. 139)

STRESS

What is “stress”? According to Taber’s Medical Dictionary, stress is “any physical, physiological, or psychological force that disturbs equilibrium”. In other words, anything that interferes with or affects our peaceful state, whatever that may be.

What causes stress? One of the main causes of stress is change. It can be a loss of something: death, divorce or separation, moving, loss of a pet, etc. It can be an illness or injury, a lifestyle change, job change, money problems, family changes, even retirement.

What is the effect of stress on the body? The body is remarkable in the many things that go on automatically within it. One of the systems in the body is the “sympathetic nervous system”. When we experience stress, this system produces hormones that prepare our body for action. We become more vigilant, our pupils dilate, our heart beats faster, we may have palpitations, we may have a tremor (shaky hands), sweating, the large arteries to the arms & legs dilate bringing more blood to them, the bronchioles (small tubes in the lungs) dilate to allow more air into our lungs. In other words, our body is being prepared for “fight or flight”.

Are those effects good or bad? Those effects are good when we are confronted with an emergency or a situation that requires action. Those effects are bad if we are constantly under stress and the body doesn’t get a chance to relax.

What is good stress? Good stress is what gets us out of bed in the morning. When we first wake up our adrenal glands pump out some epinephrine and our heart rate, blood pressure and blood sugar go up. This is what gives us the energy to get up and get going. Good stress is the moderate stress that motivates us to do what we need to do every day.

What is bad stress? Bad stress is usually very severe or acute stress or chronic stress. Chronic stress is bad because it causes the changes in the body to continue over time. Eventually the stress hormones can be quite detrimental. Constant elevated heart rate, blood pressure, and blood sugar can cause damage in our bodies. It has been noted that clotting factors increase and platelets get stickier during stress. All of these effects can lead to cardiovascular disease, memory problems, weight issues, lowered immunity, loss of calcium from bones, and faster aging. Continual chronic stress can result in decrease of a hormone that gives us energy so we experience lack of energy, lack of enjoyment of day-to-day activities and, eventually, depression.

There is a tool for predicting the likelihood of a stress-related illness. It gives points for various stress-inducing events. For example, the highest points (100) are given for the death of a spouse. Being fired rates a 47, foreclosure rates a 30, changing schools rates a 20, and Christmas rates a 12. If a number of these events coincide, the score can get high and the likelihood of a stress-related illness increases.

How can stress be controlled? The problem is that stressors are different for everyone. It's all about perception; what we perceive as stressful. What may cause stress in one person doesn't necessarily cause it in another. Also, everyone handles stress differently and we handle different stressors differently. We all have stress. It is how the stress is handled that makes the difference. The stress associated with a driver who cuts you off at the intersection is different from the stress of daily caring for a loved one. The key is, first, to recognize that you are experiencing stress.

What are some unhealthy ways that people try to cope with stress? Some of the unhealthy ways of coping with stress include overeating (especially women, especially carbs) and abuse of drugs or alcohol. Other unhealthy ways of coping include: denying there is a problem or minimizing the problem, blaming others, angry outbursts, self-pity, etc.

What are some healthy ways of coping with stress? Although this differs for people, some of the more healthy ways of coping with stress include:

- Seek out someone to talk to, whether it be a friend or a professional.
- Look for resources to help with the problem. Accept help when offered.
- Humor. Laughter truly is good medicine. Funny books, funny movies, sitcoms. Try to find humor in everyday activities.
- Hang around with people that make you happy. It's called "emotional contagion". We tend to "mirror" or copy the responses of those around us.
- Get some sunshine; 10-15 minutes 3-4 times a week without sunscreen.
- Exercise. It boosts serotonin and endorphins that make us feel better. It increases blood flow to the brain, builds bone strength, and helps to lose weight.
- Get a pet. A study by the University of Minnesota Seenat Qureshi Stroke Research Center in 2007 found that owning a cat may cut your risk of heart attack. Their study subjects with cats were found to be 40% less likely to die from a heart attack than their catless counterparts. Dogs will work, too. According to Ben Williams, "there is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face."
- Get more sleep. Some helpful hormones are increased with sleep which gives us more energy and decreases our appetite.
- Turn off the TV, especially the news of violence, corruption, war, recession, etc.
- Listen to some music instead.
- When all else fails, get a prescription.

