

Stress Management

What is Stress?

It seems easy to recognize stress, but it's hard to define it, because the word "stress" really has at least two distinct meanings. One type of stress is the *external demand* placed on us—the events or forces in our lives that put pressure on us. Mental health professionals call these demands *stressors*.

Another type of stress is our *internal response* to these stressors—the thoughts and feelings of anxiety, tension, or frustration produced by our perception of the external stressors. This internal physical reaction to change is *strain* or *stress reaction*.

It appears that the important factor is not necessarily the *number* of stressors we face, but rather the way we *perceive* those stressors. Our perception or appraisal of a particular situation—as either a threat or a challenge—is what determines how much strain we feel.

Is Stress Always Bad for Us?

Much research has focused on the negative aspects of stress, especially the health consequences of chronic stress: headaches, suppression of the immune system, and increased risks for hypertension, heart attack, and cancer.

But some stressors may be good for us, especially in the short run. Some studies have documented a positive impact of short-term stress on performance; the mobilization of the body's "fight-or-flight" response produces improved alertness and concentration, increased strength and endurance, and a higher motivation to succeed.

Everyone experiences stress. Most of us learn to deal with stressors without causing great disruption or pain in our lives. We may not feel any effect of stress when it first starts to occur, but after a while it starts to mount up and we do feel the results of too much stress over time. Stress causes our bodies to go into overdrive and can result in fatigue, nervousness and a variety of physical and emotional problems.

Signs of Stress

- **Persistent tiredness**
- **Persistent feeling of being nervous or jumpy; difficulty relaxing**
- **Headaches**
- **Drinking more or using drugs, including prescription drugs, to relax**
- **Feeling confused, panicky, or helpless some of the time**

- **Feeling isolated from friends and family**
- **Sleep problems**
- **Increased smoking to relax**
- **Anxiety**
- **Depression**

What causes stress?

Usually, stress is caused by some kind of change in your life – a loss of a loved one, the severe illness of a family member, a divorce, a change in job or a change in family finances. Sometimes stress can be caused by a change in responsibilities or having too much to do and too little time to do it. A change in alcohol or drug use also causes stress.

Even positive changes such as marriage, a new baby, a promotion or retirement can bring about changes that are stressful.

Stress Reducers:

- Exercise
- Healthy eating
- Relaxation tapes
- Humor/Laughing
- Visualizing a pleasant place
- Praying
- Crafts/Gardening/"Busy Work"
- "Time-Out" to cool off before reacting
- Reading
- Delegating and asking for help
- Talking with a friend

Treatment

When stressors seem to be happening too often or if feelings of stress, depression and anxiety linger on for weeks, and self help techniques aren't working, it may be time to get some professional help. Professional counselors can help a person identify the issues that are causing stress, get things in perspective, organize needed resources and make plans for taking control of the stressors. If stressors involve the whole family, professional counselors can help family members communicate more effectively and to take responsibility for their role in the family.

It is important to work with behavioral health professionals who can specifically assess your situation and tailor treatment to your particular needs. Please call CONCERN at 513-891-1627, or 800-642-9794 outside the Cincinnati area, for confidential assistance with assessment, short term

counseling or referral to an appropriate treatment provider in your insurance network.

References and Websites

Books:

Coping with Stress in a Changing World, 2nd ed. Richard Blonna McGraw-Hill

Websites:

www.stress.org American Institute of Stress

www.teachhealth.com Medical aspects of stress

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/new/releases/stress.cfm> National Institute of Health

Stress Screener

http://www.geocities.com/beyond_stretched/holmes.htm Holmes & Rahe life changes stress calculator