UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS
DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE
Cooperative Extension Service

Managing Stress

Dr. Steven A. Dennis
Extension Family Life Specialist

Dr. Russ Kennedy
Extension Health and Aging Specialist

Hamilton McCubbin, a stress researcher, defines **stress** as **our body's physical and emotional reaction to circumstances or events that scare, aggravate, confuse, excite or endanger us**. Not all stress is bad. A certain amount of tension or stress is necessary to keep us active and alive. Even when we are relaxed and asleep, we are under some stress.

Individuals must decide for themselves how much stress they want in their life. This varies from one person to another and from situation to situation. How much stress is currently being experienced also makes a difference. If an individual has just experienced a major stressful event, adding additional stressors is unwise.

What Causes Stress?

Too many changes over a short time cause stress and possibly illness. You can't escape these changes, nor would you want to escape them. For example, vacations, job promotions, retirement and outstanding personal achievements are goals most of us strive toward. The key is to pace yourself.

Reaction to Stress

An event or situation that is stressful for you may not be stressful for someone else. On the other hand, your friend may consider an event highly stressful, while that same event may only be a minor inconvenience for you.

Whether or not a person views an event as stressful may depend on the following things:

- **The meaning of the situation**. The things that are most important to people are things that they value. For example, a person may value independence, having lots of friends and being good at his or her job (among other values). The things that are the most important to a person are likely to be a source of stress, since there is more at stake. Our values, interests and goals all play a part in determining how stressful a situation is.
- **The resources available to cope with a crisis**. Money can be a resource, but time, friends, family members and a state of health are also resources. These can all be useful when faced with a stressful event. Other important resources for coping with stress may include learning some stress management skills. These are resources that we can develop and learn to use more effectively. Our resources and skills help us cope with stressful situations.
- **Our past experiences with stress**. The more success one has had dealing with stressful situations in the past, the more confident one feels about handling new stressful situations. A person who had a successful experience making new friends after moving to a new town is likely to find moving less stressful than a person who

Arkansas Is Our Campus

Visit our web site at:
http://www.uaex.edu

hasn't successfully experienced that kind of change. People who feel good about themselves are more likely to think that there is something they can do to handle new situations. Our self-esteem level can influence our ability to handle stress.

– **The amount of control we feel**. We can more easily deal with a situation that is stressful if we feel we have some control over the outcome. A situation over which we have no control is one that makes us feel there is no use in trying. For example, a person who wants to buy a house but doesn't have any money may feel there's nothing he/she can do about the problem. This situation is likely to be stressful until the person discovers and thinks through possible options and actions. The more helpless you feel in a situation, the more stressful the situation is to you. Our feeling of control is important in determining which events will be stressful to us.

– **The number of stressful events that have occurred during the past few years**.

Stress tends to accumulate and stress symptoms become more severe as we experience more than one stressful event. For example, research suggests that most people require several years to recover from a divorce. During the adjustment period, if another crisis occurs such as the death of a close family member, stress may accumulate greatly.

Stress Symptoms

A person experiencing a stressful situation may experience any or all of the following symptoms of stress:

– Crying
– Depression
– Increased smoking
– Drug/alcohol misuse
– Dry mouth/throat
– Grind teeth
– Nail biting
– Back tightens up/aches
– Restlessness, fidgeting
– Feeling exhausted/fatigued
– Withdrawal from people
– Aggression
– Boredom
– Can't concentrate
– Sleep or go to bed to escape
– Inability to sleep
– Headaches
– Dizziness
– Face feels hot, flushed
– Loss of appetite
– Neck/shoulders tighten up/aches
– Heart beats faster
– Hands and/or feet feel cold or sweaty
– Heartburn
– Stomach upset/nausea
– Cramps
– Increased urination/defecation
– Diarrhea
– Legs get shaky or tighten up
– Tapping fingers/feet

How Stressful Is Your Life?

The following Social Readjustment Rating Scale, or Life Change Scale, developed by Holmes and Rahe is useful in helping you understand how stressful certain events can be.

Life Change Scale

	Life Event	Value
1.	Death of a spouse	100
2.	Divorce	73
3.	Marital separation	65
4.	Jail term	63
5.	Death of close family member	63
6.	Personal injury or illness	53
7.	Marriage	50
8.	Fired at work	47
9.	Marital reconciliation	45
10.	Retirement	45
11.	Change in health of family member	44
12.	Pregnancy	40
13.	Sex difficulties	39
14.	Gain of a new family member (a birth, adoption, oldster moving in)	39
15.	Business readjustment (e.g., merger, reorganization, bankruptcy)	39
16.	Change in financial state (a lot worse off, better off than usual)	38
17.	Death of a close friend	37
18.	Change to different line of work	36
19.	Change in number of arguments with spouse (either a lot more or a lot less than usual regarding child rearing, personal habits)	35
20.	Mortgage over $50,000 (e.g., purchasing a home, business)	31
21.	Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
22.	Change in responsibilities at work (promotion, demotion or lateral transfer)	29
23.	Son or daughter leaving home (e.g., marriage, attending college)	29

24.	Trouble with in-laws	29
25.	Outstanding personal achievement	28
26.	Spouse begins or stops work	26
27.	Begin or end school	26
28.	Change in living conditions (e.g., building a new house, remodeling, deterioration of home or neighborhood)	25
29.	Revision of personal habits (dress, manners, associations, etc.)	24
30.	Trouble with boss	23
31.	Change in work hours or conditions	20
32.	Change in residence	20
33.	Change in schools	20
34.	Change in recreation	19
35.	Change in church activities	19
36.	Change in social activities (e.g., clubs, dancing, movies, visiting)	18
37.	Mortgage or loan less than $10,000 (e.g., purchasing a car, TV, freezer)	17
38.	Change in sleeping habits (a lot more or a lot less sleep, or change in time of day when asleep)	16
39.	Change in number of family get-togethers	15
40.	Change in eating habits (a lot more or a lot less food intake, or very different meal hours or surroundings)	15
41.	Vacation	13
42.	Christmas	12
43.	Minor violations of the law (e.g., traffic ticket, jaywalking, disturbing the peace)	11

Scoring the Life Change Scale

This is an example of the changes occurring in one person's life over a two-year time span.

Change in health of family member	44
Death of spouse	100
Change in living conditions	25
Change in social activities	18
2 vacations (2 x 13)	26
Christmas (2 x 12)	24
Change in financial state	38
Revision of personal habits	24
	279

Several life changes occurred in this person's life during the last two years. Additional life changes should be carefully considered. This score of 279 is considered a high stress score.

To figure the amount of change in an individual's life, think back over the past two years and add up the value of life changes.

How Stress Affects Us

Some doctors attribute more disease states to stress than others do, but most agree that stress is associated with mind and body (psychosomatic diseases).

They are physical disorders that have their origin in or are worsened by psychological or emotional processes. In other words, in psychosomatic diseases the mind affects the condition of the body. Some of the psychosomatic conditions that are related to stress are ulcers, diarrhea, constipation, allergies such as asthmatic reactions and migraine and tension headaches.

Other doctors believe that conditions such as hypertension (high blood pressure), coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes mellitus, obesity and accidents are caused in part by stress. There is agreement among doctors and researchers that stress is a factor in 50 to 80 percent of all illness. More than half of all people who visit doctors with physical complaints have emotional problems that are partly or wholly responsible.

Researchers divide the body's reaction to stress into the following three stages:

Stage 1: Alarm

This stage occurs when the body recognizes that a stressor is lurking and mobilizes the body's biological/chemical defenses to cope with it.

Certain hormones are pumped into the bloodstream which speed up the heart rate, increase respiration and slow down digestive activity.

The body is ready for fight or flight!

In animals or primitive man this alarm system triggers physical action (fight) or running away (flight) which releases tension.

If there is neither fight nor flight, then there is NO RELEASE for the stress. Such a situation can lead to stress-related illnesses such as ulcers, headaches, backaches, palpitations of the heart, rashes and various other ailments.

Stage 2: Resistance and Adaptation

In this stage, the body tries to repair the damage caused in Stage 1 and bring the body back to a "normal" condition.

This defense system works so well that most of the time we are not even aware of it. We are all bombarded by stress – but we are not all sick.

It is only when stress is not positively dealt with that Stage 3 results.

Stage 3: Exhaustion

A person's body cannot be under stress all the time. Release must occur or illness may result.

As both functioning of the mind and the working of the body become better understood, their effects upon one another become more evident and support the old cliche "a sound mind is a sound body." However, the really important thing is to teach yourself ways you can control stress rather than giving in to it. By controlling reactions to stress, we can turn stress into a positive force and even let it make life more interesting.

Techniques for Managing Stress

No single technique is effective for managing all stressors. Therefore, you may need to use a variety of positive coping techniques.

If you want to manage your stress more effectively, consider the following suggestions:

- **Accept responsibility for your health and well being**. Understand that stress influences your behavior and health. Listen to your body. What symptoms do you feel when you're stressed? Learn to recognize these signals and take preventive steps to reduce stress-related conditions.
- **Identify and analyze your current stressors**. What's causing your stress? What resources do you have for managing it? Determine your plan of action and carry it out. Change the situations that can be changed.
- **Have a positive attitude**. Accept that your lifestyle produces stress and that you can control unwanted aftereffects. Look for trouble spots and change what you can. Accept what you cannot change. Look at your situation from a different perspective and give it a positive label.
- **Discuss stressful situations as a family**. Work together to develop family coping skills and increase family strengths. Set priorities and goals as a family. Clarify family members' roles and responsibilities.
- **Accept responsibility for your own feelings**. No one else can make you feel a certain way. You choose to feel that way.
- **Be realistic in your expectations of yourself**.
- **Avoid too many life changes in a short period of time**.
- **Talk about your problem(s) with someone you trust**. Research indicates that those who cope best are those who have someone close to talk to. A stressed person needs someone to listen to them, to support them and to allow them to express their feelings.
- **Improve your time management skills**.
- **Begin a regular exercise program**. Exercise should be aerobic, performed at least 4 times per week for a minimum of 20 minutes while sustaining a specified target heart rate. Brisk walking, swimming, jogging, rowing, progressive treadmill, cycling and aerobic dance are excellent examples of aerobic exercise. The American College of Sports Medicine advises that anyone under 35 who has no known coronary-heart disease risk factors or previous history of cardiovascular disease may begin an exercise program without a special medical checkup. Anyone over 35 should have a medical checkup prior to beginning an exercise program.
- **Learn to relax**. Relaxation techniques include: deep breathing, creative escape, self-talk, progressive muscle relaxation, relaxation response, autogenic relaxation, imagery and fantasy, neck exercises, loosening the knots and biofeedback. Complete instructions on how to do these techniques are provided in the fact sheet, FSHEI28, *Techniques for Managing Stress*.

References

Holmes, T. H., and R. H. Rahe, "The Social Adjustment Rating Scale," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11, 1976, pp. 213-218.

McCubbin, H., and J. Patterson, *Family Stress, Resources and Coping*, Family Stress Project, University of Minnesota, 1983.

Acknowledgment is given to **DR. BETTY YOUNGMAN**, retired Extension family life specialist, and **CHARLOTTE MILLS FANT**, retired Extension health education specialist, who were the original authors of this fact sheet.

DR. STEVEN A. DENNIS, Extension family life specialist, and **DR. RUSS KENNEDY**, Extension health and aging specialist, are located at the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, Little Rock.

FSHEI27-PD-3-03R

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Arkansas. The Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service offers its programs to all eligible persons regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, gender, age, disability, marital or veteran status, or any other legally protected status, and is an Equal Opportunity Employer.