

Care For the Caregiver

Take care of yourself. In the process, you'll become a better caregiver. Take the following steps to make YOUR health a priority.

- Find out about community caregiving resources.
- Ask for and accept help.
- Stay in touch with friends and family. Social activities can help you feel connected and may reduce stress.
- Find time to exercise most days of the week.
- Prioritize, make lists and establish a daily routine.
- Look to faith-based groups for support and help.
- Join a support group for caregivers in your situation (like caring for a person with dementia). Many support groups can be found in the community and on the Internet.
- See your doctor for a checkup. Talk to her about symptoms of depression or sickness you may be having.
- Try to get enough sleep and rest.
- Eat a healthy diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains and low in saturated fat.
- Ask your doctor about a multivitamin.
- Take one day at a time.

Stress

Caring for a dying loved one may be one of the most stressful times in your life and in the lives of family members. Identifying and coping with stress are necessary to providing good care to your loved one. The following pages give you more information about stress and how to deal with it positively and effectively.

Stress has been called the “wear and tear of life.” It comes from internal and external pressures and can be both positive and negative. Stress is the body’s natural reaction to change and adjustment and is a normal and natural process. Stress affects both your physical and emotional health. Everybody responds differently to stressful situations. Typically, when you are feeling stressed, your body responds by preparing you for either a “fight” response or a “flight” response, which typically follows these three phases:

- ALARM PHASE - recognizing and preparing to deal with the stressor
- RESISTANCE PHASE - coping with the stress and returning to normal
- EXHAUSTION PHASE - breaking down the ability to resist

Effects of Stress on the Body

Stress affects the body in many ways, both short-term and long-term. Some physical signs of stress include blushing, gritting teeth, nervousness, cold hands and feet, muscle tension, nail biting, headaches, fatigue, loss of energy, an anxious feeling, a pounding or racing heart, increased breathing, clenched fists and sweaty palms.

Mental or emotional signs of stress might include fear, anxiety, insomnia, fatigue, depression, mood swings, confusion, reduced concentration, increase in the use of alcohol and drugs, and aggravation of psychiatric symptoms.

Behavioral and life effects of stress sometimes include reduced problem-solving ability, decreased work performance, alcohol or drug abuse, irritability, annoyance or anger at others, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, surrender, and failure to cope.

Long-term effects of stress may contribute to illnesses such as headaches, ulcers, heart disease, arthritis, blood pressure, cancer, diabetes and other chronic diseases.

Types of Stress

People typically experience "good stress" and "bad stress" at some point in their lives. Good stress usually results from a positive or exciting change in our lives, such as marriage, the birth of a child, a new job, moving to a new home, or taking a vacation.

Bad stress often takes a toll on our lives during prolonged and difficult situations such as the loss of a loved one, divorce, loss of a job, financial problems, or expecting too much of oneself.

Please Note: Sometimes these signs and symptoms associated with stress may be caused by illness instead of stress. It is important to discuss symptoms with your physician or other health care provider.

Tips for Coping with Stress

There are many ways of coping with stress. The following guidelines can help reduce stress when caring for a loved one and can contribute to a healthy and fulfilling life.

1. Stay healthy through:
 - Proper nutrition
 - Adequate rest and sleep
 - Vigorous exercise
 - Leisure time activities
 - Avoidance of alcohol, drugs and tobacco
2. Manage your stress level:
 - Learn to recognize when you are under stress
 - Know what situations stress you
 - Learn to avoid stressful situations
 - Plan only what you can comfortably accomplish
 - Eliminate or reduce the "noise" in your environment
 - Ask for help from family and friends
3. Relax regularly:
 - Learn progressive relaxation - you can will yourself to relax by slowly and consciously relaxing your muscles
 - Meditate or take quiet time for yourself
 - Take time to do whatever you find fun and relaxing, such as reading, knitting, watching T.V., photography, crafts, exercise, baking, etc.
4. Change the way you think about things by:
 - Changing your "self-talk"
 - Engaging in self-behavior modification
 - Reality-based-problem-solving counseling

Breathing Exercises to Cope With Stress

1. Take in a deep, comfortable breath
2. Become aware of how you feel, and notice any tension or tightness
3. Breathe out slowly and as you do, recall the feeling of relaxation. Say to yourself “calm and quiet”, or one word such as “peace”
4. Repeat the first three steps 4-5 times or until you feel relaxed. You may do this exercise three or four times per day. It is also useful to do these exercises just prior to doing muscle relaxation exercises.

Muscle Relaxation Exercise

1. Go to a quiet place
2. Sit comfortably with arms and legs supported
3. Relax your arms and legs
4. Close your eyes
5. Focus on breathing... Inhale deeply through the nose; Exhale breath out through the mouth
 - With each exhale, think about breathing out all tension in your body
 - Think “relax”
 - Let your muscles go
6. Inhale through the nose while slowly counting to five
7. Exhale through the mouth while slowly counting to five
8. Repeat all of the above

Do this exercise for 10 - 20 minutes, if possible, but even just a few minutes are helpful.