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NF98-388 How to Manage Daily Stress

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How to Manage Daily Stress

By Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

Purpose: *To learn about stress and coping, and to develop a stress management plan.*

Stress has become a catch-all term to describe things that make you feel tense or angry. It can even cause you to become physically ill. But it is not "things" or events themselves that cause stress. It is how you **interpret** and **react** to those situations. If the source of your stress is **within your control**, you can take action to change the situation. If it's **beyond your control**, you can learn to accept it or find ways to minimize the symptoms.

Most of us feel anxious or stressed from a pile-up of small aggravations and frustrations that happen daily. Experts agree that high levels of stress over long periods tend to be paralyzing and reduce your ability to cope. It can lead to serious illness or depression.

So what are some situations in your life that cause you stress? Not having enough money to pay your bills? Family chaos every morning? Relationship problems? Worrying about your kids all the time? Being evicted from your house? Not being able to find a job that pays enough?

How do you manage stress? Choosing a low-stress response to life's bumps and bruises will not only preserve your sanity but also your physical health. There are three major ways we can deal with stress: **alter** it, **avoid** it, or **accept** it.

- **Alter** your life by **removing the source of stress**. Better planning, being more organized in your personal and family life, and becoming more efficient in your use of time are common techniques for altering stress. Have a backup plan for any emergency.
- **Avoid** stress by **removing yourself from the stressful situation**, or figuring out how not to get there in the first place. Sometimes it is OK to walk away, to let go, to say "no," to withdraw, to know your limits so you can "live to fight another day."
- **Accept** the situation by equipping yourself physically and mentally for stress. You can build:
 - **physical health** by eating a proper diet, doing regular exercise and having regular health

checkups. A body that is physically stressed because of sedentary living and poor eating habits is more likely to buckle under the additional weight of mental stress.

- **mental health** is bolstered by (1) taking a few minutes a day for yourself to "recharge your batteries"; (2) getting clear about your own goals and priorities in life; and (3) becoming the best person you can be.
- **social health** is strengthened by building friendships, and strengthening relationships with parents, children and/or your intimate partner.
- **spiritual health** is especially important in times of high stress. Prayer, meditation, worship, faith and commitment can strengthen you for tough times.

When your physical, mental, social and spiritual cupboards are full, they keep your stress levels in check.

Here are some other approaches to dealing with everyday stress that you may find helpful:

- **Take a problem-solving approach** to a potentially stressful situation. Has this happened before? If so, what did you learn from it? Decide what's the worst that can happen, and consider your options. Ask yourself: "Will I even remember this incident five years from now?"
- **Think about these things.** Take stock of your worries and fears. Look back over the last year and see how many things you worried about that came true and how many never happened. Listen to the way you talk-to yourself and to others. Do you create unnecessary stress by overdramatizing situations and making things seem worse than they are?
- **Tune up your attitude.** Do you dwell on criticism? Jump to conclusions? Expect the worst? Beware of negative thinking. Most stress you will experience will come from your attitude and "self-talk."
- **Talk to yourself in a positive way.** Say whatever helps you to calm down. "Some day I'll laugh about this..." "things could be worse..." "this is a character-building experience..."
- **Pay attention to signs of stress overload.** When stress is taking over our lives, we get headaches, colds, have indigestion, don't sleep well, act cranky and often feel angry. This is the time to look for patterns of stress in your daily life and try to get rid of them.
- **Don't try to be perfect.** Parents should "worry less, criticize less, preach less. Listen more, have more fun, be more honest with your own feelings, develop your own joys and friendships and don't sweat the small stuff (which is nearly everything). The goal is not to be a perfect parent, because no such thing exists. The hope is to be good enough so that your children can leave home as responsible adults who are able to take care of themselves."

Your Stress Management Plan

1. Describe the **most stressful experience** you had in the past month.
2. What were your **symptoms**? How did stress affect you physically and emotionally?
3. If it happens again, what could you do to **alter** the source of your stress?
4. What could you do to **avoid** the source of this stress?

5. What could you do to ***accept*** the source of stress by equipping yourself physically and mentally so you can tolerate the stress through better developing your:

- ***physical health?***
- ***social health?***
- ***spiritual health?***

6. How can you ***change*** your unrealistic expectations, irrational beliefs and negative self-talk?

Remember: "*If it is to be, it's up to me.*" If you are to enjoy life more fully you must take charge.

File NF388 under: FAMILY LIFE

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