

Managing Your Stress

We live in a stressful world. Whether it is more stressful now than in the past I don't know, but I do know that people deal with a lot of stress today. Even happy things sometimes add to one's stress, and unhappy things certainly do. Whatever the event, stress is often a by-product. Positive stresses may include being invited to a party where you may not know anyone or having the lead role in the school play. Negative stresses may include the death of a loved one, a bad grade on a math test, or the divorce of your parents. We can never learn too much about stress. Understanding it and learning how to manage it will not only serve you well during a terminal illness or following the death of a loved, but in all aspects of life. Stress is your body's reaction to pressures or changes in your life.

If you are feeling stressed, try to identify what there is about the situation that is causing the stress. For example, if your parent has died, what about his or her death is making it so difficult? Do you feel that you now have to take on more responsibility than you can handle? Are you feeling responsible somehow for the death? Are you feeling guilty for something that was said or not said? Do you feel that your plans for college or the future must be abandoned? Are you beset by family problems, peer pressure, or worry about grades?

How do you know that you are getting stressed out? It is important to learn what your symptoms are. For me, it is when I start losing or misplacing things and spending a great deal of time looking for them: my notes for a meeting, the keys to the car, my cell phone. When I start misplacing things or forgetting where I've put them, I know that I have to take care of myself and to slow down. Here are some other symptoms to watch for:

- You might be losing your temper more often than usual and having frequent fights with your family or friends. Your frustration level might be high, even with simple tasks.
- You might have more headaches, colds, or lingering flu symptoms.
- You might have unexplained back pain or an upset stomach.
- You might have trouble sleeping.
- You might feel sad, lonely, or unhappy, experience mood swings, feel isolated and overwhelmed.
- You might find it hard to concentrate, make decisions, or solve problems.

What You Can Do

First, there are a number of things you *don't* want to do when your stress gets out of hand:

- Don't ignore your problems. That won't work. Your problems will be waiting for you when you return.

- Don't drop out of school. Forget it! I have never known a high school dropout who didn't regret it later. High school is a very special phase of life that can't be recaptured once you throw it away. And if your future seems less than bright right now, imagine what it will be without a high school diploma.
- Don't turn to drugs or alcohol. These things may give you a temporary fix, but they can inflict physical harm and make you feel worse and even more stressed.
- Don't turn to sex. You may think, "If I can be really close to someone, I will feel better." That's rationalization to do something you know that you shouldn't. There are reasons for intimacy, and they all have to do with love. Relief from stress is not one of them. Premature sex will simply add stress to your life while leaving your problems unresolved.

Now that we have the *don'ts* out of the way, let's look at the things you *can* do to help with your stress:

- Find someone to talk to. Talking is magic! Just sharing your worries with someone who will listen and offer suggestions will help. You will still have the same problems, but they will feel lighter and more manageable.
- Take responsibility for your actions. If you have done something wrong- like breaking a vase in a fit of anger- own up to it.
- Take time occasionally to do something for yourself, such as a walk, watching a movie, calling a friend, writing in your journal, playing your guitar, etc.
- Try to be more positive in your thinking. Now, this is easy to say, but difficult to do. I try to look at the stress I am feeling and wonder if anything good can come out of it. It also helps to have an upbeat attitude, but don't go overboard- you have to remain realistic. Keep in mind that laughing is a good tension reliever, and a sense of humour is one of the world's best antidotes for stress.
- If you know that some upcoming event will be stressful, prepare for it the best you can. If it is a deadline for a school project, don't wait till the last minute, get started early. A lot of the stress in life stems from procrastination. Avoid it!
- Learn a method of problem solving. Identify the problem and write it down. Is it one big problem or are there a lot of smaller, secondary problems? What are possible solutions? Find someone to talk to who is not directly involved. That person's approach will be freer because it will lack the emotional investment you have. It is easy to have tunnel vision when you are facing a problem; it helps to have the problem seen by someone outside the tunnel! Once you have settled on a solution, look at the best plan of action and get to work. But have patience, because some problems take time to work out.
- Remember, you don't have to be perfect. We learn from the times when we make mistakes or fail at something. Sometimes our failures are better teachers than our successes.
- Regardless of what avenue you pursue, keep up with the basic good habits of eating healthfully, getting enough sleep, and keeping up with your exercise routine.