

*Maryann felt overwhelmed. Her youngest child was home sick, her boss was upset with her for missing work and her father was just rushed to the hospital. She couldn't take one more thing happening!*

*John did not get the promotion he had worked so hard for. His wife was expecting to be able to move into a bigger house. He had three children to support and now his doctor told him he has high blood pressure. What more could happen?!*

Do these high stress stories sound familiar? Stress is the disorder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is ubiquitous. Stress is the thing that motivates the Olympic athlete to achieve even greater heights of victory. Stress is also the cause of burnout and disease.

Stress is what happens to our body when there is any demand for change – whether or not that change is positive or negative. Positive stressors include the birth of a baby, marriage, family vacations or a job promotion. Negative stressors include divorce, death, financial woes and illness. Currently it may seem as if our entire nation is undergoing stress as we suffer financial uncertainty and the challenges of being engaged in war.

The effects of stress include the wear and tear that it places on the body especially when stress is prolonged or severe. Stress is the cause or contributing factor in many disease processes including heart disease, asthma, high blood pressure and arthritis. Stress is the number one cause of relapse from addictions. Stress on the job can spill over into your home life and affect relationships, cause loss of sleep and increase your risk for medical problems. Stress experienced during childhood can set the nervous system up for being on “red alert” causing depression, illness and depleting the immune system. You may not know that guilt and anger are stressors on the body as well.

Men and women deal with stress differently. Women are more likely to “tend and befriend” to seek support from friends and family and to protect their children during stressful times. Men may be avoidant or may act out their feelings with drinking, using drugs or behaviors. Most people tend to overeat or to crave comfort foods when stressed. After the 9/11 attacks, people surveyed reported eating more mashed potatoes with gravy, peanut butter and macaroni and cheese. There was also an increase in consumption of sugary foods. Eating high-fat, sweet foods cause the release of brain chemicals that make us feel better such as serotonin and the endorphins. In animals, eating these foods actually helps shut off the fight or flight reaction to stress.

So how do we make the best of our stressed out and maxed out lives? Just saying NO doesn't always work. Avoiding stress can be more harmful than facing it head on. The basic principles of dealing with stress are the same principles that people facing life-threatening illnesses or serious life issues have found to get them through tough times. Integrative medicine which combines the best of conventional medicine with complementary and alternative therapies offers some intriguing ways of handling stress as well. A plan for stress management should include four things:

- Basics first: Food, rest and moderate exercise can help your body and mind deal with the effects of stress.
  - Foods that hurt your body during stress are sugary foods, caffeine and alcohol. Foods that help are fruits and vegetables.

- Exercise should be moderate. Heavy or intense exercise can be a stressor for your body.
- Sleep is one of the more important techniques for stress management. Studies show that most of us need 7-8 hours of sleep per night.
- Social support is the key to longevity in a stress-filled life. Cultivate social support by surrounding yourself with those who are willing to offer you support. This type of support is best developed before you are in a crisis.
- Cultivate healthy practices to lower your stress. Learn to meditate, use prayer, watch the sunrise, be out in nature, practice gratitude and forgiveness or other reflective practices allow you to cope with stressful times. Find a practice you can do everyday even if only for 5 minutes per day.
- Explore alternative therapies to help you cope better.
  - Herbs such as Panax ginseng and Rhodiola rosea are “adaptogens” – they help your body deal with stress.
  - Massage, energy healing (healing touch, Reiki) and acupuncture have been shown in research to reduce aspects of the stress response.

Taking care of your self in a stressed out world means finding that corner of peacefulness where you can retreat to in order to recharge your batteries. Take vacations regularly – even if it means just taking a half day off from work to do something relaxing or fun. Learn what makes you stressed and learn what your body needs to balance itself during stressful situations. If you feel like you’re always on a tightrope, let go and allow your support network to support you. While you can’t always avoid stress, learning to maximize our body, mind and spirit’s capacity to manage it is what is most important.