

STRESS:

Boon Or Bane?

The Choice Could Be Yours

By Carolyn Lentz

*You have to believe in happiness,
Or happiness never comes –
Ah, that is the reason a bird can sing –
On his darkest day he believes in spring.*

– Douglas Malloch

Everyone faces stress. It's a normal and unavoidable part of life. The ability to manage or cope with stress enables some people to absorb demands and hardships into a happy, healthy and productive life. Some people, like springs, seem to be made of tougher material that can bounce back under a heavy load, while others get "bent out of shape" under the same pressure. Learning to manage or cope with stress can help strengthen people to resist the bad effects of stress.

Good and Bad Stress

Many people assume that all stress is bad. However, stress can be good or bad, depending on the individual and the source of stress. Short-term or moderate levels of stress lead to increased motivation, creativity and accomplishments. The damaging kind of stress is the long-term or continuing high levels of stress. The bad kind of stress is called *distress*, and it can literally make people miserable and/or sick. Distress is associated with many illnesses and diseases, such as high blood pressure, heart attacks, ulcers, diabetes, headaches, and backaches to name a few. Thus, the current concern about stress is a largely health-related issue.

Sources of Stress

Stress is the bodily reaction or response to changes, demands, pressures or fear of threatening situations. It may help to understand stress by distinguishing stress from the causes or sources. Some pressures and demands come as a normal part of life events or the world in which we live, including pleasant and unpleasant events stemming from family, work, friendships, etc. Other pressures and demands come from deep within each person's unique personality. Differing personalities cause people to be ambitious, competitive, aggressive, anxious or outgoing. However, the important point is that the sources of stress can come from many events and feelings, some from within the personality and others from avoidable or unavoidable events. Thus, the causes or sources of stress are many and will differ for each person and his situation. Furthermore, individuals respond differently to stressful situations. Some people seem to enjoy challenges such as public speaking, while others would find it frightening. These differences in response to a situation are like the terms of an old saying, "one man's meat is another's poison." One stress expert has often said, "It's not what happens to you that matters but what you make of it."

Warning Signs

Most people are aware of continuing high levels of stress when they are experiencing it. But there are a few com-

mon signs most people have when the pressures or demands get to be more than they can tolerate well. Some of them are:

- general irritability, nervousness or depression
- general worry or a fear – without knowing what you are afraid of or worrying without an apparent cause
- impulsive behavior, emotional instability or "flying off the handle"
- overpowering urge to cry or run and hide
- inability to concentrate
- feelings of unreality, weakness or dizziness
- feeling tired and weak
- feeling tense, keyed up, jittery or a tendency to be startled by small sounds
- insomnia
- diarrhea or indigestion
- headaches or backaches
- loss of appetite or compulsive eating
- increased smoking or drinking
- nightmares
- accident proneness

Remember these are only common distress indicators. Since each person reacts to stress differently, they will each show differing symptoms or combinations of symptoms.

Stress Management

The most widely recognized means of dealing with distress is physical exercise. It helps keep the body healthy, clears the mind, and aids in rest, relaxation and sleep. A physician's approval and direction is widely recommended for persons over 35 years of age who are resuming or undertaking a physical fitness program. Appropriate physical fitness programs can be designed for almost any age level or range of abilities.

Relaxation techniques and meditation are popular forms of stress management for some people. It helps to take a break and get away from pres-

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