

Stress doesn't stop at home

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the third of a three-part series on stress and how to cope with it.
By GREG COATES
Staff Reporter

While stress-related problems are prevalent in the workplace, they don't necessarily end when you get home.

Family stress is serious and part of the reason why one in every two marriages end in divorce.

Dr. Doug Smith, regional director of the Ontario Psychological Association for York Region, says stress in the family is very serious and often difficult to deal with. It begins with marriage.



DR. DOUG SMITH

"Marriage can be very stressful. We must adjust to living with another person from a different background," said Dr. Smith. "Someone who has a different way of doing things. We have to somehow mesh all these differences together."

A stressful factor that also comes along with marriage is the spouse's family.

"It's a package deal," he said. "We must get along and deal with the spouse's family and friends."

Dr. Smith, 39, explained that following marriage, the biggest family stressor of all comes into the picture — children.

"We've had to deal with each other's differences and now must give up our time to take care of a baby," he said. "It's a 24-hour job which completely changes our lifestyles. It's very difficult to raise children. It's something we're not trained for, but must adjust to."

He noted that the more children you have, the more stress there's going to be.

Grow apart

After raising your children, the next stressful situation takes place when they leave home. Dr. Smith says this creates all kinds of problems.

"Through the years parents often grow apart and must deal with living alone together again," he said, describing this as "an emptiness syndrome." "They must be creative in the way they relate to each other again."

He said this is often the time when many couples end up in divorce, which itself is very stressful. They discover they no longer have any common interests and can't cope living with each other.

Hostilities and irritabilities, which until now the children have kept in check, build up and be-

come too much," said Dr. Smith. Retirement is another time when families must make major adjustments. Dr. Smith explained that couples must adjust to spending all their time together and often, to living on a fixed income.

The death of a family member or spouse is another stressful time which must be dealt with carefully.

Signals

Signs of stress in the family include parents and children arguing, often with no resolution; a conspiracy of silence, people simply agreeing not to communicate; power struggles within the family; or too much noise and confusion within the family; i.e. frequent chaos at bedtime or meal time.

Other individual signs include a lack of affection, affairs (which can be with other people, work or a hobby) and sexual problems.

"There's no question that families under the most stress are ones with children," said Dr. Smith. "It's much easier to deal with the problems of just two people. Children add on a great deal of stress."

Dr. Smith's advice to young couples is to plan their children and spread them out, not have them all together.

"However, there's no right age to have children," he said, noting there are advantages and disadvantages to having them at any age.

Dr. Smith says dealing with stress in the family is similar in many aspects to dealing with stress in the workplace. Keeping fit and taking part in relaxation

exercises is a key to fighting the effects of stress.

Communication

Within the family, Dr. Smith says communication plays a major part in coping with stress.

"Good clear communication is a must," he said. "People are not mind readers. If you want something, say it directly to the person. Don't expect them to know how you feel — no matter longer how long you've lived together."

"Families that cope well with stress tend to be open and communicate well," he added. "They also tend to respect each other's individuality."

While family outings are often a

good way to handle the pressures of family life, Dr. Smith said they can also be a sign of stress within the family.

"Some people feel the family should go everywhere together, which just isn't so," he said. "They're should be some escape routes. Every man and woman should have at least one night a week to themselves."

"The key to all this is variety," said Dr. Smith. "Don't use the same techniques all the time. They wear out."

Dealing with the everyday pressures of work and family life is hard and takes practice, says Dr. Smith.

Opportunities

"We must see stress and conflicts as opportunities for growth.

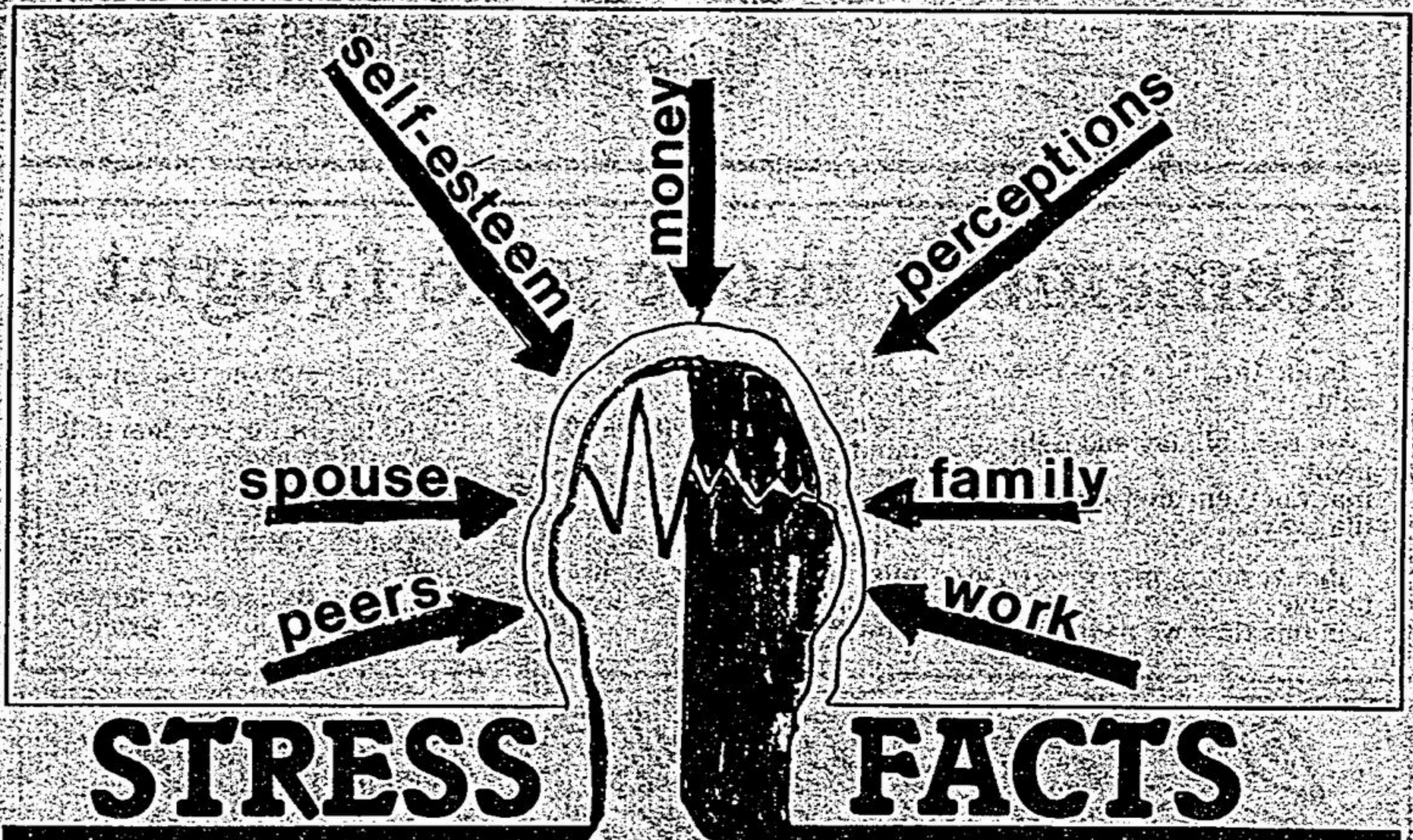
They're part of reality," he said. "However, when someone feels like they're in a pressure cooker and the heat is on too high, they should seek professional help and not feel there's a stigma or that it's a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength."

Dr. Smith said it's better to seek professional assistance when the problems are small.

"If you wait until it's a crisis situation, it's often too late," he said.

"Stress is not harmful," said Dr. Smith. "We just need to learn how to harness it and make it work for us."

"If we fight it, we're just asking for more trouble," he added. "We have to distinguish between the situations we can change and the situations that we can't."



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