WellPATH
Your Path to Better Health
Joint Health Management Board

Monthly WellPATH Spotlight

December 2019: Stress Management

STRESS CAN SOMETIMES GET THE BEST OF US

Holiday season is a time of sharing, celebrating, and joy! Unfortunately, during this time of year there are also added holiday pressures. Making plans to spend time with one's family and friends and gift-giving can all lead to higher levels of stress. Having unrealistic expectations of what you can accomplish and comparing yourself to others can lead to temporary feelings of sadness and distress.

STRESS CAN AFFECT EVERYONE – EVEN SANTA!

Everyone feels stressed from time to time but some people may cope with stress more effectively or recover from stressful events more quickly than others. There are different types of stress—all of which carry physical and mental health risks. A stressor may be a one time or short-term occurrence, or it can be an occurrence that keeps happening over a long period of time. Examples of stress include:

- Routine stress related to the pressures of work, school, family and other daily responsibilities,
- Stress brought about by a sudden negative change, such as losing a job, divorce, or illness, or
- Traumatic stress experienced in an event like a major accident, war, assault, or a natural disaster where people may be in danger of being seriously hurt or killed. People who experience traumatic stress often experience temporary symptoms of mental illness, but most recover naturally soon after.

Sources: National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov)
WebMD (https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-management-topic-overview#1)

THE IMPORTANTCE OF MANAGING STRESS

We all know that exercising and eating a balanced diet is important for our health, but what about our minds? Mental health is just as important as physical health, yet we often give it less attention. Stress is a normal part of life, necessary to respond to experiences from your environment, body, and thoughts. It can be positive because stress keeps us alert, ready to avoid danger, and motivates you to perform well. But stress can become negative when a person experiences continuous challenges; allowing stress to elevate without alleviation between challenges. Ongoing stress without any relief or relaxation can cause a person to become overworked, building stress-related tension. Stress can take a toll on our mood and our bodies, so managing them is an important aspect of overall wellness.

A long-term activation of your body's stress system and a prolonged exposure to cortisol and other stress hormones, may put you at risk for health complications such as:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Digestive problems
- Headaches
- Heart disease and stroke
- High blood pressure
- Sleep problems
- Weight gain

HOW DO YOU MANAGE YOUR STRESS?

Did you know that stress has long-term *negative* health effects? Stress symptoms may be affecting your health even though you might not realize it. You may think illness is to blame for that nagging headache, your frequent insomnia or your decreased productivity at work. Nevertheless, stress may actually be the culprit!

Stress symptoms can affect your body, your thoughts and feelings, and your behavior. Being able to recognize common stress symptoms can give you a jump on managing them. Stress that has left unchecked can contribute to health problems such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Most psychologists agree that

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some stress is good, because it provides you with a guide on what your body and mind can handle. Check out the stress busters below for ways to help you manage the stress that is part of your busy and productive life.

Get Active

Exercise can be a great stress reliever. Aim for 30 minutes most days of the week, however any amount will help. Try walking around the block with a friend or your dog, working in your garden, going for a swim, or playing a favorite spot like golf, tennis, or basketball.

Connect

Don't feel like you have to figure it out on your own. Confiding in friends is a great way to release stress. Talking about challenges offers a distraction and helps you gain support. Sometimes it just feels good to get things off your chest!

Relax and Recharge!

Don't shortchange yourself. Take 5 minutes to relax and recharge to repair the toll stress takes on your body and mind. When you are in a stressful situation, take a moment to close your eyes, inhale deeply, feeling your stomach expand. Hold your breath for a few seconds, and then slowly exhale, visualizing tension leaving your body. Find a relaxation technique that works for you and practice it regularly.

Laugh!

There is power in laughter! Having fun can reduce stress hormones. No matter how much you have to do, take some time during your day to do what you love!

Make Art

Draw, color, paint or play an instrument.

Find a Hobby

Work on a scrapbook, sewing, knitting, making jewelry, read a book or magazine.

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MANAGE YOUR TIME

Work on time management. When you're stretched too thin and running behind, it's hard to stay calm and focused. Temptation will kick in and you will avoid or cut back on the things you love or all the healthy things that will keep you stress levels in control.

Don't over-commit. Learn to say no! Avoid scheduling things back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day. We often miscalculate how long things will take to get them done.

Prioritize tasks. When possible make a list of all the tasks you need to tackle. When you are ready to take on your busy day tackle them in order of importance. Do the high-priority items first. If you have something stressful to do or that you don't like, get it over with early. The rest of your day will be more enjoyable, as a result.

Break projects into small ones. If a large project seems overwhelming, make a step-by-step plan. Focus on one manageable step at a time, rather than doing everything at once.

Delegate tasks. You don't have to do it all yourself, whether at home, school, or on the job. If other people can take care of the task, why not let them? Let go of the desire to control or oversee everything.

PLAN FOR A STRESS FREE HOLIDAY

Factors that can cause the holiday blues include fatigue, financial constraints, work pressure, demands of houseguests and shopping. The good news is that we can prevent the temporary feelings of sadness and depression by following the tips below:

- **Set realistic goals and expectations** for yourself
- **Limit alcohol intake**
- **Go outside**: Sunlight/fresh air can boost your mood

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- **Don't go into debt**: give small gifts
- Get enough **sleep & exercise**
- **Eat a healthy** snack before you go to a party and if you're the host offer delicious and healthier options
- **Spend time with friends and loved ones**
- **Allow yourself to grieve** if you've lost a loved one
- **Volunteer** and give back to your community
- Shop online or shop ahead to **avoid the crowds**

IF YOU'RE OVERWHELMED BY STRESS,

ASK FOR HELP FROM A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

You should seek help right away if you have suicidal thoughts, are overwhelmed, feel you cannot cope, or are using drugs or alcohol to cope. Your doctor may be able to provide a recommendation. You can find resources to help you find a mental health provider by visiting www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp.

Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Anyone experiencing severe or long-term, unrelenting stress can become overwhelmed. If you or a loved one is having thoughts of suicide, call the toll-free National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org) at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The service is available to anyone. All calls are confidential.

It is important to understand how your body reacts to stress and which stress management techniques work best for you. If you would like additional information about stress management, please contact Claremont EAP at **800-834-3773** or www.claremonteap.com.

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