

GOT STRESS? DEAL WITH IT

► BY PETE GRASSO, OHIO NORTHERN '97

It's a part of our everyday lives. Whether because of the economy, our jobs, our families, our health or even simply our schedules, we all have some kind of stress.

It's a common problem. It hits us, in varying degrees, almost every day. Stress is our body's natural reaction when we're caused to adjust to a new, major demand that's been placed on us.

It's inevitable and nearly impossible to eliminate fully in our lives. But, there is good news, because it's not impossible to reduce stress and manage it effectively.

Exercise

Jake Baker, *UM Dearborn '97*, a School Psychologist (who is a

licensed clinical psychologist as well) with the Berrien County (Michigan) Intermediate School District, says the most effective way to relieve stress is through exercise.

"There's no doubt physical exercise has a positive effect on stress and can calm the mind and relax the body," Baker says. "Sometimes, 20 minutes of exercise a day is all you need to feel better."

Studies have shown that exercising releases endorphins into the body, which help to bring balance to the body. These endorphins are a natural remedy to stress.

Exercise, according to Baker, should be something you enjoy doing. A common mistake most people make is forcing themselves to do an exercise they don't enjoy doing.

"If you don't enjoy running, then forcing yourself to run is only going to stress you out more," Baker says.

To relieve stress, you should choose an exercise you enjoy. It can be running, walking, riding a bike, yoga or even simple stretches.

"Any exercise is better than no exercise," Baker says.

Healthy Diet

Along with exercise, a healthy diet is key to managing your stress level.

"Being healthy – through diet and exercise – goes a long way in conditioning your body to handle stress," Baker says. "Eating healthy foods will naturally make you feel better."

Along with eating healthy foods, a good tip to keep stress levels low is to not skip meals or "eat on the run." Skipping meals can actually make your stress worse.

Another mistake many people make is to use food as a way to relieve stress – eating junk food as a way to comfort them. This can lead to overeating, which can lead to guilt for overeating, causing more stress.

Avoid Drugs

"An important way to relieve stress is to limit your intake of alcohol, tobacco and caffeine," Baker says. "All three can have a negative effect on your body."

Caffeine, while a temporary pick-me-up, can make stressful situations



seem more intense than they are. Caffeine – found in coffee, soda pop, energy drinks and chocolate – increases your heart rate and throws your body out of balance, which causes a strain on your system. Caffeine, and other drugs like nicotine, cause both physiological and psychological stress that continues throughout the day, oftentimes causing unconscious stress reactions.

It's important to note, though, that a sudden stoppage of caffeine intake can cause headaches and make it difficult to concentrate. If you normally drink a lot of caffeine, it's best to decrease your intake slowly.

Tobacco and alcohol have the same effect on the body – they all give you a temporary sense of stress relief. But, your body remains stressed, and could actually end up worse off than it was before.

Manage Relationships

Relationships, while in most cases help relieve stress, can actually cause additional stress if they're not managed properly.

"Poor communication, arguments and misunderstanding," Baker says, "can all lead to additional stress."

Cultivating your healthy relationships, and managing or eliminating your stressful relationships, can go a long way in reducing your stress levels.

Keep an open mind and listen to what the people around you are saying. In conflict, people want to be understood, so much so that we sometimes don't listen to what the other person has to say and the conflict remains unresolved – leading to additional stress.

Another way to relieve stress is to talk to someone about your problems. It could be a family member, friend or health care professional who will give you the emotional support you need to reduce stress.

Anger Management

Feelings of anger can cause strain on relationships, which can also lead to stress. It's natural to get angry at times, just as it's natural to get stressed.

As with stress, the trick is to manage your anger. The two really go hand in hand. It's a whole chicken-egg scenario – Does stress cause anger, or does anger cause stress?

If your body is under a lot of stress and strain, you may be more prone to anger in your daily life. No matter what caused what, getting a handle on both can go a long way in living a healthy lifestyle.

Using many of the stress-management techniques described in the sidebar can also soften, or eliminate, the anger in your life. It's important to avoid perfectionism, learn to relax and engage in positive self-talk.

Organization

"Just being organized in your everyday tasks can help you reduce your stress levels," Baker says.

When you're organized, you have a clear-cut plan for the day and, when stress-inducing problems arise, you're better prepared to face them.

Some simple ways to organize your life are to prioritize daily, work on one project at a time, avoid procrastination and reward yourself for a job well done.

Taking it one step at a time can help to ease the burden, as well as provide a well-deserved sense of accomplishment as each subsequent step is completed.

Stress is inevitable. How we handle the stress, though, will dictate whether or not it has a positive or a negative effect on our lives. Stress doesn't have to cripple us – we don't have control over the circumstances that cause stress, but we do have control over the methods for relieving it.

10 Tips For Relieving Stress

1. Get a good night of sleep

At least eight hours of sleep each night is recommended.

2. Pace yourself

Don't try to do too much at one time.

3. Think realistically

Don't allow your emotions to get out of control.

4. Plan

Set schedules and prioritize your tasks.

5. Take breaks

Get away from it for about 10-15 minutes.

6. Take walks

Walking is one of the best forms of exercise.

7. Call on your support

Ask others for help.

8. Confront problems by talking

Bring the problem out in the open.

9. Delegate

Don't try to do everything yourself.

10. Keep a positive attitude

Don't take life so seriously, laugh sometimes.