**Address Your Stress**

**By Andrea Raischel, RN**

“Stress” has become the buzzword we often use to describe how we are feeling about our jobs, relationships, money or even life itself. For our ancestors, stress was a survival skill that lasted during brief, life-threatening situations. Once the danger passed, their stress levels lowered. These days, we are constantly bombarded by stressors, such as work deadlines, traffic, and family obligations. We rarely relax long enough to relieve the stress. In fact, The American Institute of Stress reports that 60% to 80% of all primary care doctor visits are related to stress, yet only 3% of patients actually receive stress management help.

Stress is a physiological response to your perception of a circumstance or experience that causes mental and/or emotional strain and tension. According to the Mayo Clinic stress not only affects your body, but also affects your thoughts, feelings, and behavior. A typical stress reaction, which most of us experience dozens of times a day, begins with a cascade of 1,400 biochemical events in your body. If these reactions are left unchecked, we age prematurely, our cognitive function is impaired, our energy is drained, and we are robbed of our effectiveness and clarity.

People often become numb to their stress. Some have become so adapted to daily pressures, irritations and annoyances of life, they develop unconscious stress response patterns that start to seem “normal.” Small stressors can accumulate quickly, and we may not realize how much they’re impairing our mental and emotional clarity and our overall health until it shows up as a bad decision, an overreaction or an unwanted diagnosis at the doctor’s office.

Being able to recognize common stress symptoms can give you a jump on managing them.

**Common effects of stress on your body**

* Headache
* Muscle tension or pain
* Chest pain
* Fatigue
* Change in sex drive
* Stomach upset
* Sleep problems

**Common effects of stress on your mood**

* Anxiety
* Restlessness
* Lack of motivation or focus
* Feeling overwhelmed
* Irritability or anger
* Sadness or depression

**Common effects of stress on your behavior**

* Overeating or undereating
* Angry outbursts
* Drug or alcohol abuse
* Tobacco use
* Social withdrawal
* Exercising less often

Millions of Americans unsuccessfully use the “binge-and-purge approach” when it comes to stress. They stress out all day, believing they can wait to recover when they go to an evening yoga class, go to the gym or “chill out” over the weekend. Unfortunately, by failing to manage our stress in the moment, our bodies have already activated the stress response, and it’s our health and well-being that suffers.

We cannot always control the stress in our lives, but we can control how we respond to it. We can become more sensitive to stressful situations and how they are affecting us before the stress manifests as a physical, mental or emotional complaint. Researchers have found the best way to manage stress is to deal with it the very moment you feel it come up. In order to do that, you have to become aware of what stresses are present and how you habitually deal with them. Once you have that awareness, you can then learn how to rewire your stress response. This has been scientifically proven to be the most beneficial approach to relieving -- and even eliminating -- stress.

Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to become more aware of your stressors and how you manage stress in your life.

* 1. What are some of the stressors in your life?
  2. What common symptoms do you experience as a result of stress?

3. What do you do to reduce stress?

* 1. Is it working?
  2. Are there other ways you could view the stressors? A different, less stressful, more honest perspective.
  3. Do you communicate openly and honestly about things that bother you?
  4. How do you contribute to the stressors? Do you feed them or starve them?
  5. What would your life look like if you reduced the stress?

Once you recognize your own stressors, you are empowered to act on them as they occur, and you can begin to rewire your responses. There are numerous ways to deal with stress as it is happening, or shortly thereafter, but these are some of my favorites:

1. Breathe – Take a few slow, deep breaths, focusing on your heart area. This will help you shift your focus, relax your mind and bring clarity to the situation.
2. Move – Literally just shake it off. Shaking your body or dancing relieves stress very quickly by releasing endorphins, the feel good hormones.
3. Laugh – even forced laughter will interrupt the stress response pattern, relieving stress quickly. If you can’t bring yourself to laugh, just hum or sing a favorite positive, perky song.

Stress is a very serious issue that should not be ignored. If you are experiencing stress symptoms, please join me for a free presentation – “Stress Less” -- at Pathways to Healing in the upstairs classroom on Tuesday, April 18th at noon. We will cover what stress is, how it affects our bodies, the life-threatening symptoms you may be ignoring and innovative steps you can take immediately to lower your stress level. Please call Andrea Lyle at 970-903-6047 to reserve your space.

*Andrea Raischel, RN and Whole Self Wellness Coach, is now offering services at Pathways to Healing, including Stress Management, Body Talk – Symptom Analysis, Wellness Strategies and Prescription Arts. You can reach her at 970-903-6047 or by email at* [*andrea.raischel@gmail.com*](mailto:andrea.raischel@gmail.com)*.*