

CENTER STAGE

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Ten Caring Points about Stress

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- 1. The Body:** The body is the vehicle through which we experience the world. The body is our partner in understanding and responding to stress. Every system in the body responds to stress, and certain systems are more vulnerable. Each person has a unique pattern of responding to stress. Listening to and being attentive to our bodies is an important part of managing stress.
- 2. The Brain:** Our brain's neo-cortex is the source of our ability to perceive danger – a very important survival function. While adaptive, it is sometimes hard to turn off this danger-detecting part of the brain. As a result we may see danger where none exists or we over-respond to situations, sometimes to our detriment.
- 3. The Mind/ Body Link:** Our minds and our bodies are remarkably related and interwoven. Indeed, there is really no boundary between the mind and the body. Allowing our minds and bodies to work together can help us to manage our stress.
- 4. Types of Stressors:** There are external stressors that we experience in the world around us: we find the copy machine broken two minutes before a big presentation or we are confronted with an unleashed, growling dog. But there also are internal stressors that we carry around in our heads – fears, doubts, insecurities – distorted echoes of concerns from long ago. They can be fed and kept alive by a misunderstanding of what we can control or change and what we can't.
- 5. Stress & Balance:** Stress is not always bad. A certain amount of stress can motivate us to action: think of an athlete preparing for a game or a student studying before an exam. But too much stress can be unhealthy and even dangerous. It can deplete our energy, distract us from what is really important, and it can “take us out of our game.”
- 6. Identifying Levels of Stress:** One way to achieve and maintain a sense of balance is to non-anxiously monitor our levels of stress. Periodically taking a stress inventory or keeping a weekly stress log can be helpful practices. Biofeedback equipment can also provide a revealing window into our experience of stress by monitoring symptoms such as brainwaves, heart function, breathing, muscle activity, and skin temperature.
- 7. Symptoms of Stress:** The symptoms of stress can take many forms. There are *physical* symptoms, like gastrointestinal problems, high blood pressure, and headaches. There are *emotional* symptoms, like irritability, inability to concentrate, and depression. And there are *behavioral* symptoms such as disrupted sleep habits, social isolation, and increased use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.

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8. **Stress Management Practices:** Activities that can support less stressful lives include:

- Taking stock of our world, identifying what is important and what is not;
- Exercise that channels stress through a productive physical release;
- Connecting with others, the healing intimacy of being with people and being known by them.

9. **Mindfulness Practices:** We have the ability to refocus our minds away from the stressors that demand our attention. Intentional and watchful breathing and guided visual imagery are some examples of practices that can be used to slow ourselves down and to calm our minds.

10. **The 21st Century Illness:** Stress may well be the disease of the 21st century. The world is getting smaller as we become more and more mobile. We are also taking in and trying to sort out ever-increasing amounts of information and communication – all at a pace that could not have been imagined even a few years ago. In these complicated and challenging times, the ability to know our own stress and to manage it with care and attention will be a tremendously useful skill and a grounding comfort.

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