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## Stress, Depression and Your Health

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When you feel stress, your body reacts by releasing the powerful hormone adrenaline into your bloodstream. Adrenaline causes your heartbeat and blood pressure to increase. Your blood sugar rises to give you quick energy to do what nature intended in times of danger: fight or run away.

Engaging in that kind of physical activity would dissipate the effects of the adrenaline. Most of the time these days, however, stress doesn't lead to intense physical activity, leaving you with the effects of an adrenaline surge. As a result, stress can lead to chronic conditions over the long term such as ...

- High blood pressure
- Heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome and other digestive disorders
- Eating disorders (eating too much or too little)
- Tension headaches, neck aches and backaches
- Frequent illness as a result of a lowered immune system
- Skin problems such as hives, itching and acne
- Sexual disorders such as impotence

You may identify with one or more of these stress-related problems. While you can't get rid of all stress in your life, you can develop coping techniques geared toward either reducing the sources of stress or dealing with the adrenaline response.

- **Get regular exercise.** After all, the stress response is designed to give you energy for a burst of physical activity.
- **Take time to relax each day,** and train yourself to relax effectively.
- **Regularly assess your activities and priorities,** and be willing to eliminate activities that are unnecessary and cause undue stress.
- **Learn to let go** of situations that are outside of your control.
- **Avoid things that make your health worse,** such as excessive alcohol, caffeine, fats and sugar. Don't smoke.
- **Don't let stress rob you of proper nutrition.** Make time for three wholesome meals a day.
- **Take a vacation.** This can be a week at the beach or 20 minutes in your office chair visualizing a peaceful scene.

### Depression and Your Health

Depression can be a result of physical, genetic and psychological causes. Women are twice as likely as men

to suffer the effects of depression. Occasional blues or down times are a normal part of life. Extended bouts of depression are debilitating and destructive. Depression can be a symptom of Parkinson's disease, stroke, arthritis, thyroid problems and cancer. It also can be a side effect of some prescription drugs. It can be in response to a difficult life change, such as the death of a loved one or divorce. Symptoms are not always clear or obvious.

### Warning Signs of Depression

- Loss of interest in family and work
- Frequent crying
- Change in eating or sleeping habits
- Unexplained anxiety or irritability
- Poor self-image
- Inability to express feelings
- Loss of pleasure
- Indecisiveness
- Poor concentration or forgetfulness
- Social isolation
- Increased physical problems
- Feelings of guilt
- Suicidal thoughts

### Types of Depression

#### *Situational or Transitional Depression*

Temporary sadness as a reaction to death, divorce or other major life change is normal and expected. Time and patience are necessary to get through these feelings. Spend time with friends or family who can be supportive of your emotional needs. If feelings of depression go on for more than a few weeks or interfere with your home or work life, it might be time to seek professional help. Ask your doctor for a checkup and referral to an appropriate healthcare provider.

#### *Moderate Depression*

Moderately depressed people often feel that their lives are shaky at best. Many moderately depressed people describe their lives as being as unstable as a house of cards. They can hold a job, but feel unsatisfied. They also find it difficult to enjoy family and friends. If you're feeling moderately depressed, explore self-help skills and seek professional help.

### Severe Depression

Severely depressed people can't enjoy others around them and have lost the will to seek pleasure in life. Often, they have lost even the will to live. A depressed person sees her life as frustrating, her past as wasted and her future as futile. She often views herself as a loser. The risk of suicide is high for severely depressed people. If you or a loved one experiences any of these feelings on a regular basis or has suicidal thoughts, seek professional help immediately.

### Get the help you need

Depression and other mental health conditions have long carried social stigmas. The truth is that getting help for depression is as necessary as getting help for a heart condition or a vision problem. If you're experiencing even a few of the warning signs, you may need help. Psychotherapy (talk therapy) and psychopharmacology (drug therapy) are two types of treatment for depression.

### Ways to Help Yourself

- Seek out supportive family and friends and talk with them
- Get involved in an activity you enjoy
- Avoid isolating yourself
- Keep your daily routine
- Exercise regularly
- Eat nutritious, well-balanced meals

### Think About It

As you can see, managing stress involves both *mind* and *body*.

Which of the *body*-related techniques listed do you think could help you manage your stress and/or depression?

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How about the the *mind*-related techniques?

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### Discuss Your Response

You may find the separation of mind and body is not clear. In fact, the mind and body are intimately intertwined. When your mind is healthy, your body can resist stress and depression-related illness better. When your body is healthy, your mind copes with feelings of stress better.