

Good Self-Care is Fundamental

Pull the plug on a pressure-cooker lifestyle before an overload of stress takes a toll.

to meet changing environments, said Amy Smith, DO. Smith is a physician at BroMenn Family Health Clinic.

"To a certain extent, stress is healthy," Smith said. "It gives us motivation to get things done. It lets us know if things are important. It becomes unhealthy when we get overloaded or develop negative coping mechanisms."

Health experts often refer to the "fight or flight" mechanism as the basis for stress activation. In early days of human development, the mechanism helped humans survive actual threats of death. Although the circumstances of modern life have changed the scenario, the body still responds to stressful situations in the same way.

Today the "foe"—a hectic schedule, a deadline, the gas pump, a full inbox—may not be actually life-threatening, but our mind and body don't recognize the difference. We go on alert as stress hormones are released into our bloodstream. Our muscles get tense, our pupils dilate, our heart rate increases, we have heightened awareness, we start to sweat. It all makes sense in the context of enhancing our ability to beat the heck out of the threat or literally slip away, which is why it is believed our bodies sweat more under duress, making



Successful people are on the go and so are their children. But if keeping up with your life is stressing you out, take heart. Though the pace of life, rate of change, and concern about the economy,

price of gas, and housing and job markets may be draining you, you don't have to settle for frazzled nerves and strained relationships, said Kevin Krippner, Ph.D. Krippner is a clinical psychologist at Twin

Cities Behavioral Health, which is part of BroMenn Medical Group.

"I think everyone can learn to manage stress effectively, doing the things that are needed to reduce stress and stressful events," Krippner said. "It's usually a combination of taking care of problems rather than becoming paralyzed, and not letting things bother you at an emotional, cognitive level."

Fight or Flight

Stress is normal, and all humans experience it. In fact, stress is what helps us perform our daily tasks and learn to grow

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us more slippery for a foe to hang onto.

But today we're usually not going to physically take any action. We're not going to fight, and we're not going to run away. And since we live in a very sedentary, structured, and goal-oriented society, we have little natural means to discharge the stress, Smith said.

"There is the feeling that we have to be perfect. And we want the best for our children. We want to be the best parent, the best spouse. We want to be the best at work. So we tend to stuff a lot into a short period of time and we tend to set very high goals," she said. "If we feel like we're not meeting the goals and achieving all that we need to, we feel stress. So the stresses are ongoing. The amount of pressure we put on ourselves is unrelenting today."

The Pressure Cooker

If you find that planning a family trip or balancing your checkbook makes you snap at your kids, it may be a sign of stress. If your thoughts start cycling in fear and you clench your jaw as you drive to work, it may be time to assess your stress load. Unrelieved stress can cause havoc with your emotional and physical well being. It can disturb your job performance. It can eat away at your relationships and erode the functioning of the family unit.

"We can ignore the signs that we've got too much going on. ...That's when we get upset easily and our emotions are more labile. That's a sign that we're overstressed. The body is saying it needs time out," Smith said.

Undue stress can prompt tension headaches, an upset stomach, and insomnia, among other things. Long-term stress or generalized anxiety can create permanent changes in our bodies and may lead to insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes, suppressed immunity, elevated blood pressure, ulcers, and depression, Smith said.

"If your body is always fighting stress, your immune system becomes a lot less effective," she said.

People of all ages, including children, can suffer from an overload of stress. Parents can go a long way towards helping the family function well by taking care of the adult relationship—providing a stable foundation for the children—and paying attention to how children are coping with their lives. Just like adults, children who are under duress become edgy and tearful, have stomach upsets and headaches, and experience nightmares and insomnia. When these types of things show up, it's time to stop, and

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look at doing things differently, Krippner said. It's time to find more balance.

“There are a lot of reasons to feel stressed out,” he said. “But if you're not going to try to take control of stress, then stress takes control of you.”

A Sense of Balance

When your life is in balance, you feel that you have a good divide of energy between your home life and your work life. You feel you can keep up with your life. So the first step to pulling the plug on an overload of stress is to notice what's happening in your body, Krippner said.

“People need to have awareness of how they're doing physically and emotionally,” he said. “Notice what's going on that is causing anxiety or tenseness.”

From that paused position of awareness, you interrupt the fight or flight mechanism and shift into a more relaxed, healthier state. From that more reflective place, you can consider your options. If necessary, you can seek helpful modalities to ease your stress, all of which begin with a good self-care plan.

“Once people learn to use good skills and have a self-care plan in place, they find it's highly effective,” Krippner said. “They get a higher quality of life because they're able to be more effective in their life. But they're also able to do the things that are truly important to them and let go of the things that are not.”

Good self-care supports individual health and healthy families, Smith said.

“I think you can set goals and reach them and still have time to relax and enjoy life,” she said. “There is a balance and each person and each family has to find out where it is for them.”

Smith said you shouldn't hesitate to talk to your physician, because just talking about your feelings of overwhelm can help. Your doctor can give you helpful tips and refer you to appropriate resources and professionals.

A Workable Strategy

It's never too late to implement healthy stress-busting behavioral management practices in your life. One simple place to start, Krippner said, is to think outside of the box. When you're worried about the economy, probably the last thing on your mind is doing yoga, but it's actually an excellent way to gain perspective. Interrupt negative spirals by going for a walk with your children and talking about their day, really giving undivided attention. Gather your spouse and children in the kitchen



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to make a family dinner, then sit down and share conversation. These types of activities enhance communication and help build the healthy sense of belonging everyone needs, particularly in times of stress.

Other effective strategies that can help you achieve more balance in your life include integrated medicine such as biofeedback and guided imagery, aromatherapy, music therapy, and meditation. Practices such as these help us reframe, gain focus, pay attention, and reflect on the larger picture of how to make change and achieve more peace. It's at this place of balance that we all function better, Krippner said.

"Having a clear mind helps us remember what is important in life," he said. ■■

Stress-busting tips from Dr. Krippner and Dr. Smith

- Have regular family meetings and keep an up-to-date family calendar. It's easier to make sure you have the 40 cupcakes your son needs for school when you learn about it a week ahead rather than the night before.
- Avoid overscheduling yourself and your children. Learn to set priorities and recognize that you have to let some things go for the sake of quality living.
- Keep track of how you spend your time. Time management is key to not overloading your life. Studies show that people typically underestimate how long it takes to do things.
- Practice good self-care by eating healthy food, exercising regularly, and participating in quality leisure-time activities.
- Examine how you typically appraise situations. If you tend to make dire predictions, you may be expending too much energy on feared outcomes that may or may not happen.

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