

Daily Union Article
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Title: Relax – It's a New Year

Too often we over pack our holiday season full of festivities, meal preparations, shopping, and travel. Although we see a lot of friends and family and have a great time with them, the hectic schedule usually increases our stress level and fatigue.

While a minimal level of stress is considered healthy, moderate and extreme stress has various emotional and physical effects including depression, heart attack, stroke, hypertension, and a compromised immune system. In addition, stress can affect your skin, gastrointestinal system, and cognitive ability.

Some of the common signs and symptoms of stress identified by the American Institute of Stress include: frequent headaches, gritting or grinding teeth, stuttering or stammering, shaky hands or lips, body aches and pains, light headedness or dizziness, heartburn, excess anxiety, overreaction to petty occurrences, fatigue, forgetfulness, increase in illness, weight gain or loss, and the list goes on.

Now that the holiday season is winding down, you can reflect on how your schedule effected your health and well-being. Perhaps you are still trying to catch up on sleep, obills, or simply the rest of your daily routines. It's not too late to make a new year's resolution for improved health. If you haven't determined what resolution you want to make for the New Year, I suggest a single word as your mantra – RELAX.

Relaxing is easier said than done. However, when you consider the short and long-term effects of moderate to extreme stress, the stakes are high. Here are some ideas to help you reduce the effect of stress on your health and well-being:

- 1) Make relaxation a daily priority. Set aside some time each day to be intentional in your efforts to relax. This time can be carved out of your morning schedule, during your lunch break at work, or as you sit in your car before you pick up children for day care.
- 2) Make healthy choices. This includes exercising, eating healthy, and getting enough sleep each night. Taking care of yourself improves the odds that you will not be afflicted by some of the health conditions associated with prolonged exposure to moderate or extreme stress.
- 3) Take breaks and use them wisely. When I worked in food manufacturing, the company required that a "short shifter" be present on each shift. This person's role was to move from station to station covering the production line while employees took their breaks and/or had lunch. This should be the model for any full-time or part-time employee. Too often employees plow through the day without taking a break from their work. Taking a 5 minute relaxation break every few hours is a quick and simple way to reduce stress.

- 4) Turn down the caffeine. The U.S. Federal Drug Administration reports that over 90% of the world's population consumes caffeine in some form. In the United States, 80% of adults consume caffeine each day! However, caffeine is a stimulant that changes your brain's chemistry. It can make you jittery, increase your heart rate, cause headaches, increase blood pressure, and make you dehydrated. If completely cutting out caffeine seems unrealistic for you, try to limit it to 100-200mg per day. For coffee drinkers, that is about 8 – 12 fluid ounces of coffee a day (or 1½ c. per day.) For tea drinkers, that is about 12 – 15 fluid ounces of tea a day (or up to 2 c. per day.)
- 5) Recognize what stresses you. By knowing the things that tend to give you stress, you can work your relaxation plan alongside them. If you have a meeting coming up that you know will be full of tension, prepare for it early so that you can take 5 minutes before the meeting to relax.
- 6) Prioritize tasks. Keeping a calendar and/or schedule will help you manage your time and emotions more effectively. By identifying what needs to be done first, you can reduce the stress that comes with feeling overwhelmed. Be realistic about what you can get done in a specified amount of time. If you get more done than what you thought, you will have even less stress!
- 7) Avoid negative "self-talk." Recognize your skills and accomplishments and make a mental note to praise yourself for a job well-done. Avoid dwelling on things that you don't know or can't control. One of the significant lessons my dad taught me from childhood to adulthood was the Serenity Prayer and accept the things I cannot change.
- 8) Get answers to questions that you might be wrestling with (e.g. finances, health, or retirement.) Sometimes our stress is caused from emotional strain of everyday life. As our lives continue to change over the life-cycle, the decisions and concerns we are faced with change. Finding answers to situations that we are concerned about can reduce the level of stress we experience from these "unknowns."

Many of us think we are too busy to take time out of our schedules to relax, but that simply isn't true. The payoff for taking time each day for relaxation is better health and we all desire that for ourselves. What can you do in 5 minutes or less to reduce stress?

- Take a walk
- Journal your thoughts and feelings
- Listen to relaxing music
- Use breathing exercises and focus on keeping muscles loose, limp, and relaxed
- Stretch – stretch the part of your body that your stress targets

Knowing the effects of stress on our emotional and physical well-being is incentive to find and use stress-reduction techniques each day. For more information stress

reduction or other health and wellness topics, contact me at Geary County Extension 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!