

Daily Union Article
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Topic: Stress Strategies

A stress test, for many people, is a test that shows how your heart works during physical activity. Because this type of test, also called an exercise stress test, makes your heart pump harder and faster, it can show the physician if there are blood flow problems with your heart. This test is an excellent tool in helping a doctor know what direction to take your care plan and potentially avoid life-altering health events.

Wouldn't it be great if we had a similar diagnostic tool that could measure our mental and/or emotional stress before we end up in the doctor or therapist's office? Granted, our health professionals most certainly have great tools that can help us minimize or better manage the stress levels we are experiencing, but all too often we wait until our stress is at a critical level of stress before we seek out those resources.

Perhaps we are too busy to do a self-evaluation of our stress level and how it might be impacting our personal and professional life. However, it is important to spend some quiet time in self-reflection or simply quiz yourself about how you are feeling and living. Here are a few questions that you can ask yourself to get a pulse on your stress level:

Am I neglecting my diet? It isn't uncommon for people who are under a high level of stress to overeat, binge eat, or even minimize or completely stop eating. If you find yourself in this situation it is best if you take a few moments each morning to think about what you will eat – making sure your choices include fresh fruits and vegetables where we get a lot of the nutrients our bodies need for energy and alertness. Round out your daily food choices with healthy whole grain bread, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy products.

Am I easily agitated? When your mind and body are under a lot of stress it is more difficult to regulate your emotions and filter your thoughts and conversations. As a result, you tend to say things that are more abrasive than you meant them to be. You are also more likely to lose your cool and burst out responses, or "blow up."

Do I fail to see the humor in situations that others around me find funny? This is part of the social withdrawal that often occurs when a person is under a lot of stress. You lose your facial affect and your emotions become muted as you try to interact with family and co-workers.

Have I become less physically active? In heightened states of stress, you will feel overwhelmed by a lot of different things, including getting any or some amount of daily physical activity. When you don't exercise, you quickly lose energy and tire more easily.

How do your responses to stress affect the people you work with and live with? When you are under stress, you often feel overwhelmed, tense, angry and frustrated. You find yourself struggling to keep your moods and emotional reactions on an even keel. These are normal responses to stress and the people you are close to most certainly recognize your reactions.

These feelings can lead to arguments and relationship strain at both work and home. Here are some suggestions on how to navigate these dangerous waters and allow those around you to remain working with you as part of the team.

First, recognize the feelings you are having and be open to those around you. Be prepared and open to listening to their feelings as well. Everyone handles stress differently and our emotional responses to stress are different.

Once you have recognized the source of stress and expressed it appropriately, you should find ways to take care of yourself. Make your health a priority. Eat nutritious meals and keep your body adequately fueled, ensure you get enough sleep and that you maintain healthy sleeping patterns, and exercise regularly.

You can find ways to take a break from the stressful situation. Try taking a walk, watching a movie, working in the yard, or picking up the hobby you put down when life got too busy. Another suggestion is to find time to practice relaxation techniques. You will need to find a quiet place where you can get into a comfortable position. Place yourself in a seated position with your legs uncrossed or you could lie down. Concentrate on smooth, natural, and easy breathing while you focus on letting your body's muscles relax. You can do this several times a day to keep the emotional response of stress at bay.

If you find that things are simply too difficult to deal with, or that you feel out of control, you may need to get some help. How do you know when you need to find additional help and resources? Some of the more common indicators include: feeling depressed, sleep patterns have changed, disciplining your children too harshly, feeling guilty that you are not being a good parent, or misusing alcohol or drugs, feeling overwhelmed by life, just to name a few.

Many of us live with too much stress in our lives. However, when we are rested and feeling we are in a good place with our stress, we need to help those who have been juggling life's stress too long. Offering to help watch a neighbor's children for an hour or two would allow the parent(s) time to go grocery shopping alone, give them time to go for a quiet walk, work in their yard, or get housework done. These are all tasks that, without distraction or additional responsibility, can help you relax. It doesn't necessarily solve the cause of the stress you are facing, but it gives you more energy to keep moving forward!

If you need more information on coping with stress, handling financial challenges, or providing economical and nutritious meals feel free to contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension Office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!