

# Stress Management

## Part I

### What is stress?

Stress can be defined as a strain on your abilities to cope with demands.

Stress results from things such as:

- Many life events that result in change (for example moving to a different city or changing jobs). These can be sources of stress even when they are positive changes.
- Work and/or school can create stress by presenting challenges, difficult tasks and deadlines.
- Conflicts with friends, family or coworkers.
- Ongoing concerns about money and housing.
- Your own thoughts – for example, by setting impossibly high standards for oneself or worrying excessively about things you can create stress for yourself.
- Daily hassles, such as getting stuck in traffic, missing the bus, or misplacing your keys.
- Other things such as - drug abuse, poor nutrition, bad sleep habits, and physical health problems.

In response to prolonged stress, the body and brain chemistry change in a way that can result in numerous negative physical and mental responses.

Research has shown that chronic stress can increase the risk of developing depression, anxiety, other mental disorders and physical health problems. For a person who has experienced psychosis, the experience of too much stress increases the possibility of a relapse.

### How to Manage Your Stress

*First, you must learn to recognize stress:*

Stress symptoms include many mental, social, and physical changes.

Common symptoms of stress include:

- Feelings of exhaustion and fatigue
- Irritability or anxiety
- Changes in appetite or sleep patterns
- Headaches and/or muscle tension in the back and neck
- Increased use of alcohol and/or drugs may also be an indication of stress

Each person's response to stress is unique.

Make a note of what symptoms you experience when under stress. Be on the lookout for these symptoms. When you notice you are experiencing these symptoms – attempt to decrease your stress level by trying out one or more of the following strategies.

### Strategies for Managing Stress

#### *Anticipating Stress - Managing Stress by Preparing For It*

By anticipating stress you can prepare for it and work out how to control it when it happens.

You can do this in a number of ways:

#### **a) Rehearsal:**

This is useful strategy for any upcoming event that you are worried about. This might be a job interview or a certain social situation where you won't know anybody. Go over the event in your mind and rehearse things to say or behaviours to engage in that will prepare for you the event.

#### **b) Problem-Solving and Planning:**

By analyzing the likely causes of stress, you will be able to plan your responses to likely forms of stress. These might be actions to alleviate the situation or may be stress management techniques that you will use.

It is important that you formally plan for this - it is little use just worrying in an undisciplined way - this will be counterproductive. Your EPI Clinician will review the structured method of problem-solving with you during one of your visits.

#### **c) Avoidance:**

Where a situation is likely to be unpleasant, and will not yield any benefit to you, it may be one you can just avoid. You should be certain in your own mind,

however, that this is the case, and that you are not running away from problems or making things worse by delaying the inevitable.

***Relaxation – Adjusting Your Mental and Physical Response to Stress***

Through relaxation you can calm your body and mind and decrease the stress response. There are different ways in which you can engage in relaxation.

**a) Taking Time-Out:**

Allow yourself to engage in calming activities that you enjoy. Some examples include going for an unrushed walk, reading a book for pleasure, or taking a warm bath.

Find activities that are quiet and calming that you enjoy and put time aside to engage in them regularly. Allowing yourself the time to unwind can be very helpful in reducing stress.

**b) Imagery:**

The principle behind the use of imagery in stress reduction is that you can use your imagination to recreate a place or scene that is very relaxing.

Scenes can involve images such as lying on a beach in a deserted cove. You may ‘see’ cliffs, sea and sand around you, ‘hear’ the waves crashing against rocks, ‘smell’ the salt in the air, and feel the warmth of the sun and a gentle breeze on your body. Other images might include looking at a mountain view, swimming in a tropical pool, or whatever - you will be able to come up with the most effective images for yourself.

With imagery you substitute actual experience with scenes from your imagination. Your body reacts to these imagined scenes almost as if they were real. Use the imagined place as a retreat from stress and pressure.

**c) Progressive Muscle Relaxation:**

This is a physical technique for relaxing your body when

muscles are tense. This can help reduce your feeling of stress.

The idea behind progressive muscle relaxation is that you tense up a group of muscles so that they are as tightly contracted as possible. Hold them in a state of extreme tension for a few seconds. Then relax the muscles to their previous state. Finally you consciously relax them again as much as you can.

You can apply this technique to any or all of the muscle groups in your body depending on whether you want to relax just a single area or your whole body.

Experiment with progressive muscle relaxation by forming a fist, and clenching your hand for a few seconds. Then relax your hand to its previous tension, and then consciously relax it again so that it is as loose as possible. You should feel deep relaxation in the muscles.

**Part 2 describes some additional strategies for managing stress.**