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COPING
WITH
STRESS

Coping With Stress

Liver NORTH
LIVER PATIENT SUPPORT

information leaflet 7
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What is stress?

We all feel stressed at times even when we don't have the added worry of illness. Stress is how we feel when we are overwhelmed by the demands of our lives. Not all stress is bad for you though, a certain amount of stress is good because it gets you going and gives you the energy to do something.

What am I feeling when I am stressed?

The way your body responds physiologically to any stressful event is the SAME whatever the threat is. Centuries ago humans lived in a dangerous world where the threat of attack from fierce animals was a real and daily possibility. This 'fight-or-flight' response has evolved to keep you safe and alive. Your body immediately and automatically produces adrenaline, the heart beats faster, blood pressure is raised, muscles tense and you breathe faster, all of which causes blood to be pumped rapidly to the muscles and brain. This makes the body very alert, with high levels of energy being produced, so that you can respond to the threat and use up this energy by either running away or fighting. However, our stress in the 21st century tends to be due to things we can't fight or run away from, so we never use that pent-up energy produced by the 'fight-or-flight' response. Over time this inability of the body to return to a balanced state has negative consequences for our health. One of the effects of the 'fight-or-flight' response is to temporarily suppress the functioning of the immune system. This can leave you vulnerable to infection and illness if your body remains on high alert (and with lowered immune system function) for long periods of time.

What am I thinking when I'm stressed?

Your thoughts have an important effect on how you feel about yourself and your capabilities. Negative thoughts are usual when you are stressed and can be very difficult to ignore. These thoughts interact with your emotions and make you feel worse about yourself and what is happening to you. On the other hand positive thoughts can lift your mood and make you feel much better and more able to cope with the situation. For example, if you wake up one morning feeling tired and unmotivated due to the effects of your illness, you could think that this is how you will always feel from now on and that the active life you had before is now impossible. These negative thoughts lead on to more negative thoughts and at the same time decrease your motivation so that it becomes even more difficult to get out of bed. On the other hand you could think that this morning is just a particularly bad day and that tomorrow you will feel better. Getting out of bed becomes a challenge and this thought motivates you to sit up on the edge of the bed. After a short rest you focus on the next step - standing up and walking to the bedroom door. You set yourself small targets and each time you achieve a target you feel a wave of satisfaction which slowly lifts your mood. Instead of immediately thinking 'I can't do this

because….' say to yourself 'I can do this because ' Thinking positively makes you feel stronger and more motivated.

What can I do to help myself?

The doctor may prescribe anti-anxiety drugs, which you may not want to take because of the possibility of side effects and reactions with the medication you are already taking. Other methods of dealing with stress which do not have these disadvantages include learning relaxation techniques using biofeedback, the cognitive therapies which involve changing the way people think about their problems and encouraging social support from families and friends. Right now you can learn some straightforward relaxation techniques which have an immediate effect on the 'fight-or-flight response'. Not only are these effective self-help strategies to deal with your stress but they put YOU back in control, which also reduces your feelings of anxiety and panic.

Breath control -

How you breathe is linked to your state of mind. If you are relaxed your breathing will be slow, deep and regular. When you are stressed your breathing becomes fast, shallow and irregular. Over-breathing (or hyperventilation) like this alters the way in which oxygen and carbon dioxide enter and exit the body. The balance of these gases within you is altered and this can cause other symptoms like chest pain and muscle spasm and eventually collapse. By consciously monitoring how you breathe and deliberately slowing down your rate of breathing you will become relaxed. An important strategy for managing your stress is to practise monitoring your breathing WHEN YOU ARE NOT STRESSED and then over a period of time learn to control your breathing rate so that you will be able use this relaxation technique easily when you feel yourself becoming tense and stressed.

When you do feel stressed try the 7-11 breathing exercise: 'Breathe in through your nose to the count of 7 and out through your nearly closed lips to the count of 11. Do this several times until your breathing rate has decreased and you feel more relaxed.

Count silently in your head and try to breathe into your stomach rather than only into your lungs.

Muscle relaxation - When your muscles are tense deliberately relax your shoulders and any other muscles that feel tight. Learn to recognize the difference between tense muscles and relaxed muscles by tightening all the muscles in your body and then slowly relaxing them one group at a time.

How does what I eat affect my stress levels?

Some foods have a calming effect and can lift your mood by providing tryptophan which the body converts to serotonin, a hormone known to enhance mood. Bananas, pineapple, dates, avocados, walnuts, tomatoes, wholemeal bread, pasta, rice,

beans, potatoes, fish, low-fat cheese, eggs and poultry together with herbs such as basil, rosemary, lemon balm, thyme, marjoram and nutmeg would form the basis of a stress reducing diet. In contrast other foods like caffeine, alcohol and sugar should be avoided. To keep your blood sugar level stable, be a 'grazer' and during the day try to have a carbohydrate snack every couple of hours.

Why can my friend cope when I can't?

We are all individuals and we respond to stressful situations in different ways. It may be that personality helps some people to cope with illness more effectively than others. It could be that people who have previously had stressful experiences and coped, are stronger and more able to deal with future stress. Try not to compare yourself negatively with other people because there are many reasons why other people seem to be coping better than you.

What situations stress me?

We are all unique, so what stresses one person may not stress another. Something only becomes stressful when people define it as a stressor and feel they are not able to cope with it. Try to identify those situations which are particularly stressful for you and discuss these with a friend or a member of the medical team who you feel comfortable talking to.

When am I likely to become stressed?

STRESS AT THE DIAGNOSIS STAGE:

Problem: - you cannot understand or remember what the Doctor said after he told you the diagnosis.

Ways to deal with this:

- Take a friend or a relative with you.
- This reaction is a form of denial and is a useful coping strategy, but only in the short-term.
- The dedicated nurse can explain again after you have left the doctor.
- Make another appointment at a later date with the doctor or the dedicated nurse.

STRESS AT THE TREATMENT STAGE:

Problem:- the treatment is unpleasant, painful, you cannot even contemplate the treatment procedures or the treatment routine interferes with your life style or embarrasses you in front of your friends.

Ways to deal with this:

- Talk to the dedicated nurse.
- Discuss your feelings with a friend or relative and if possible have them attend the treatment sessions with you.
- MRI scans - cope with the panic associated with being enclosed and the noise of the machine by taking your favourite music on CD with you to be played.

- Blood tests - fear of needles, unpleasantness, pain - prepare by reminding yourself that it will be unpleasant but is a necessary part of getting you well again; take a friend or a relative with you; use the 7/11 breathing exercise to keep your stress levels under control; arrange to have coffee or tea afterwards quietly in the café.
- Operations - talk through the procedure with a professional e.g. a dedicated nurse; tell yourself about those things you will be able to do after the operation which you can't do now; use the 7/11 breathing exercise to calm yourself; arrange a social event to take place after the operation and keep reminding yourself about this enjoyable event to come.
- Treatment at home - try to develop a routine which fits in with your life, if necessary ask for help from the nurse or a relative or a friend.

PROBLEM - THE AFFECTS OF THE ILLNESS ITSELF AND/OR THE TREATMENT ON YOUR FEELINGS OF WELLBEING.

Ways to deal with this:

- Become aware of the limitations your illness and/or the treatment place on you, accept these limitations and work within them - you can still find enjoyment in life between periods of feeling unwell.
- Continue your previous interests as far as possible and/or develop new interests which you can follow during periods of feeling well.

PROBLEM: - COMMUNICATING WITH MEDICAL STAFF.

Ways to deal with this:

- Insist that medical staff explain the treatment procedures fully to you, do not be afraid to ask them to explain again.
- If you don't like something, tell the staff and ask them to help you.
- If you are caring for someone who is ill. you will have specific problems associated with looking after an ill person - ASK FOR HELP if you need it.

PROBLEM: - NOT KNOWING WHAT TO SAY TO COMFORT THE PERSON WHO IS ILL

Ways to deal with this:

- Sometimes it is better to listen and not say anything.
- Offer some practical help.
- Be prepared to be flexible when the ill person is having a bad day.

LIVErNORTH is indebted to Dr Sue Vidler, PhD, BA, PGCE, Stress Management Consultant for her authorship of this leaflet. For further information on courses, presentations and personal consultations - email: svidler@tiscali.co.uk

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ORGAN DONATION

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Many people don't realise that their family's support is needed for organ donation to go ahead.

Information Service provided by:

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Tel & Helpline: 0191 3702961

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LIVERNORTH is a national liver patient support charity and has provided this leaflet free of charge

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