Stress

Causes of stress fall into two categories: external and internal. External stress can be caused by major life events such as moving, changing jobs, the death of a family member, or a divorce. It can also be caused by everyday pressures such as money worries, deadlines, arguments, family concerns, and not getting enough sleep.

Internal stress comes from inside. People are often less aware of internal stress, although it can play an even greater role in the stress of daily life. Internal stressors include:

- Values and beliefs
- Faith/Religion
- Goals
- Self-image

Although all these things can be positive, they cause stress when people feel they are not living up to their own expectations in these areas.

Symptoms
When you feel stressed, your body automatically increases blood pressure, heart rate, metabolism, and blood flow to your muscles. This response helps your body react to high-pressure situations.

When you are constantly reacting to stress, it can affect your health, well-being, and relationships. Too much stress can cause symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, backaches, and constipation or diarrhea.

Chronic stress can make you more accident prone; lead to alcohol, tobacco, or drug use; and contribute to high blood pressure and heart disease.

If tension, mood swings, or other bad feelings are interfering with your daily life, it may be more than stress. Stress that depresses your mood or ruins your ability to experience joy may be the result of an anxiety disorder or depression. See your doctor if you are experiencing these symptoms.

Self-Care Steps for Stress

Research has found that people who effectively manage the stress in their lives have three things in common:

- They consider life a challenge, not a series of hassles.
- They have a mission or purpose in life and are committed to fulfilling it.
- They do not feel victimized by life. They have control over their lives, even with temporary setbacks.

Steps to Manage Stress

- Identify the things in your life that cause stress. Try to avoid them, but if you can't, have a plan for dealing with them.
- Reduce internal stress by setting realistic goals and expectations for yourself.
- Share some of your responsibilities. A shared burden is lighter to carry -- and you may develop a new friendship or learn another way of problem solving.
- Exercise regularly to relieve muscle tension and stress. Stretches and walking are especially helpful.
- Find some humor in even the worst situation -- even when you have to force yourself. Organize your time and don't procrastinate. Focus on the individual steps for getting a job done, so you don't feel overwhelmed.
- Talk with a friend or family member. Sharing your thoughts and fears will make them less overwhelming and easier to handle.
- Get a pet to take care of and love.
- Practice deep breathing. Breathe in slowly from your diaphragm. Hold each breath for a few seconds, then exhale slowly.
- Learn progressive muscle relaxation to relieve tension. Tense and then relax every muscle in your body. Begin with your head and neck, and work your way down to your toes.
- Sit quietly and repeat to yourself a "cue" word, such as peace, that will make you feel calm. Listen to relaxation tapes or music.
- Relax in a warm bath.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and all street drugs.
- Help other people. The sense of well-being you receive will help you put life's events in better perspective.
- Balance the different areas of your life (work, relationships, play, spirituality).
- Sign up for a team sport or take up a new hobby.
- Take time to focus on the spiritual part of life, including nature or religion.
- Get a massage from qualified massage therapist, or possibly a good friend or family member.
- Learn more about stress and how to cope with it. Contact your local clinic or community education program to find out if they offer classes on stress management or relaxation.