Mental Health: Managing Stress

Everyone experiences stress – it's a normal part of life. It can even help you focus and accomplish your goals. But when stress is frequent and intense, it can strain your body and make it difficult to function. Finding effective ways to deal with stress is crucial to living well.

How Stress Affects You

Stress affects your entire body, mentally and physically. Some common signs include:

- Headaches
- Trouble sleeping
- Jaw pain
- Changes in appetite
- Frequent mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling overwhelmed

When you experience long-term stress, your brain gets exposed to increased levels of a hormone called cortisol. This exposure weakens your immune system, making it easier for you to get sick.

Stress can worsen symptoms of a mental health condition. For example, in schizophrenia, it can bring on hallucinations and delusions, while in bipolar disorder, it can provoke episodes of both mania and depression. Knowing what situations are stressful for you is an important step in learning how to minimize stress.

When Are You Most Vulnerable to Stress?

You are most susceptible to stress when you are:

- Not getting enough sleep
- Lacking a strong support network
- Experiencing a major life change such as moving, the death of a loved one, starting a new job, having a child or getting married
- Experiencing poor physical health
- Not eating well

Sources of stress differ from person to person. For example, some people don't like large crowds and noisy environments, while others react negatively to silence and free time.

Ways to Reduce Stress

Developing a personalized stress management approach can improve your quality of life. Once you've learned what stresses you out, try different strategies to help you deal with it. Some common ones include:

- **Recognize what your triggers are**. What situations make you feel physically and mentally agitated? Once you know, you can avoid them when possible, or take care of yourself when you can't.

- **Manage your time.** Prioritizing your activities can help you use your time well. Making a daily schedule helps ensure you don't feel overwhelmed by everyday tasks and deadlines.

- **Practice relaxation.** Deep breathing, meditation and progressive muscle relaxation are good ways to calm yourself. Taking a break to refocus can have lasting benefits.

- **Exercise daily.** Schedule time to walk outside, bike or join a dance class.
- Whatever you do, make sure it's fun. Daily exercise naturally produces stress-relieving hormones in your body and improves your overall physical health.

- **Set aside time for yourself.** Schedule something that makes you feel good. It might be reading a book or taking your dog for a walk.

- **Eat well.** Eating unprocessed foods, like whole grains, vegetables, and fresh fruit is the foundation for a healthy body and mind. Eating well can also help stabilize your mood.

- **Get enough sleep.** Symptoms of some mental health conditions, like mania in bipolar disorder, can be triggered by getting too little sleep.
- **Dedicate time for prayer and meditation**. If faith is important to you, schedule time for prayer and meditation.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs**. They don't actually reduce stress: in fact, they often worsen it. If you're struggling with substance abuse, learn more and get help.

- **Talk to someone.** Whether to friends, family, a faith leader, a counselor or a support group, talking can help. Consider attending a NAMI Connection Recovery Support Group.

Getting Help

If the steps you've taken aren't working, it may be time to share your experiences with a mental health professional. He or she can help you pinpoint specific events that trigger you and help you create an action plan to change them.

For more information visit www.nami.org.