What Is Stress?

Stress refers to two different things: situations that trigger physical and emotional reactions, and the reactions themselves. A stressor is any physical or psychological event or condition that produces physical and emotional reactions known as the stress response. The sympathetic nervous system is activated in the fight-or-flight reaction when a stressor is introduced. Chemical messages and the actions of sympathetic nerves cause the release of key hormones, including cortisol and epinephrine. The term general adaptation syndrome (GAS) describes a universal and predictable response pattern to all stressors and occurs in three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. During the alarm phase, a lower resistance to injury or illness is evident. With the continued stress, resistance to injury or illness is actually enhanced. With prolonged exposure to repeated stressors, exhaustion sets in, with a return of low resistance levels seen during acute stress.

Stress Affecting Your Health?

Acute stress (stress immediately following a stressor, may last only a few minutes and a problem could arise such as a cold or a headache. When the stress continues on for days, weeks or longer, it is known as chronic stress. This stress may cause prolonged secretion of cortisol and may speed up the course of diseases that involve inflammation, including cardiovascular disease, hypertension, impaired immune function, multiple sclerosis, and type 2 diabetes.

Common Responses to Stress

- Aches and Pains such as headaches, stomach aches, tight muscles, or clenched jaw.
- Energy Level and Sleep such as feeling tired without a good reason or trouble sleeping.
- Feelings such as anxiety, anger, depression, helplessness, out of control, or being tense.

Negative Responses to Stress

- Eating to calm down
- Speaking and eating fast
- Drinking or smoking to calm down
- Working too much
- Procrastinating
- Sleeping too little, too much, or both
- Trying to do too many things at once

Techniques For Managing Stress

- Eating healthy (sweet potatoes, bananas, eggs, tomatoes, avocados all are “good mood” foods)
- Exercise or any physical activity
- Time Management
- Positive Self Talk: It can be even more impactful if you learn to turn negative thoughts into positive ones. Ex: “I can’t do this.” → “I’ll do the best I can.”
- Emergency Stress Stoppers:
  - Count to 10 before you speak
  - Take 3 to 5 deep breaths
  - Go for a walk (walk in a happy, confident style)
  - Smell a rose, hug a loved one or smile at your neighbor
  - Having a cup of tea or chewing gum
- Finding Pleasure: When stress makes you feel bad, do something that makes you feel good. (Ex: starting a hobby, reading, going to lunch with a friend, listen to music, playing cards, or a game of bowling.)
- Daily Relaxation: To relieve stress, relaxation should calm the tension in your mind and body. Some good forms of relaxation are yoga, tai chi, and meditation. Go to your “Happy Place!”
References

• American Heart Association. (2014, June 16). Take Action To Control Stress