

Health Information Sheet

Stress Management and the Relaxation Response

Do you experience higher than normal levels of anxiety, headaches, stomach distress, sleep difficulty, decreased muscular strength, decreased or increased appetite, lack of motivation at home or in family activities and decreased ability to cope?

Do you find yourself becoming easily angered, and make snap decisions that you refuse to change even if proven wrong? Do you abstain from making decisions and let things build up because of fear of questioning others?

If you answered yes to many of these, you may be suffering from a Stress Response Syndrome (SRS). This Syndrome (Illness) has become well understood since 1926 when Dr. Hans Selye, Walter B. Cannon and others identified these often complained about symptoms as the *Stress Response* and anything that seems to produce the response as the *Stressor*.

Much time and effort has been spent in understanding the external pressures with which we all deal that cause stress. It is the fast pace, noise, pollution, poor lighting, “the deadlines”, transitional pressures of maturation, seasonal changes, health, job, financial and family pressures, to name a few. In therapy we spend hours reviewing the past and present conflicts but once understood and solutions are implemented, people do feel better.

But what is less generally understood is the tendency of the Stress Response Syndrome (SRS) to continue to affect the quality of life independent of what your life circumstances are. From successful parents, students and businessperson to a person who has learned to cope with prolonged illness. This (SRS) may continue long after dealing with the stressful situation, that has resolved itself, or even after learning how to cope with prolonged and chronic problems with satisfaction.

It is extremely important for you to understand not only what a Stress Response is, but also how you experience it, what leads to a (SRS) and the ways in which to prevent it.

Briefly, the Stress Response is an “emergency reaction” or a fight or flight response since its main purpose is to protect and guarantee survival. When a threat or danger is experienced, the choice would be to face the threat or danger, or flee from it. There is a complex response within the body that affects, for example, the involuntary everyday body functions like heartbeat blood pressure. It is the continual reactivating of this response by the mind remembering the event or the extreme unpleasant body changes that can lead to a Syndrome. (A person remembering a son being killed in an auto accident; a person worrying about constant conflict with a family member; a person who cares for the aging parent or dying relative; “the deadline” or remembering the dizziness or heart palpitations during the height of stress. If the level of neural activity continues for too long a time, its tendency is to stay despite vacations, exercise, diet and the conflict being resolved.

What can interrupt this pattern once it has reached the Syndrome stage is the Relaxation Response. Herbert Benson, MD’s book entitled *The Relaxation Response* first published in 1975 and others too numerous to mention have given detailed and well documented research findings that prove that the use of meditation and relaxation can reverse the Stress Response Syndrome. It can in fact, as he states, assist in stabilizing high blood pressure.

The use of meditation, relaxation and even prayer – the goal which is: to be consciously aware, and remember, what

a relaxed feeling is; and the mind's inner absorption of the relaxed feeling to the point of no longer making an effort to worry at all. It is imagining positive thoughts and feelings despite the pressure to get up out of the chair and get to work. Even though we know how effective it is, few people continue to practice it regularly. Of the hundreds of people who knew some technique, about 25% said yes and only 1 to 2% practice it regularly. The purpose and end point of relaxation is not the freedom from anxiety or tension which are necessary in dealing with danger, but to decrease neural activity so that your mind can be ready and willing to deal with life's challenges that we have to face on Mondays or after vacations.

Why people do not value learning and applying such techniques is that we live in a fast-paced, upwardly and outwardly mobile society where we value stimulant breaks (coffee, etc) to keep going, throw-away and fast foods.

To combat this people are encouraged to practice daily part of a technique that only takes a few minutes. Here are some helpful suggestions to be used at different times or in combination:

- Close your eyes for 1 – 2 minutes and feel your heart beat, the rate of your breathing, the pain in your muscles, or maybe your mind being so busy with worries. Just remain still for a few more minutes until you feel some lessening. This may be your blueprint to where and how you experience stress. Don't be afraid if you remain tense during and after. It will get better.
- Take five deep breaths slowly and think that the tension is getting less each time you exhale.
- Think of a time when you were on vacation – feel the sounds, sights and smells of nature, the sky water, trees, etc. Continue to think more about nature despite worrying. (You do sometimes worry when on vacation.)
- Suggest that all muscles in your body are going to relax by just thinking about them from the bottom of your feet to the top of your head. Then think of each part of your body.

Believe it or not, if you continue practicing these and other techniques even for a short time you will stop being so negative and only responding with the fight or flight "danger" response. The response will become a guide or question to be answered and as neural activity decreases, you can think more clearly without blowing things up out of proportion...you might even have time to laugh and find simpler challenges humorous.

Remember, deadlines and demands will always be there but so can your relaxed state if you practice.

Stress management is also the art of planning as in any successful business. Some ways that are found to be helpful by many people are:

- Plan a time weekly to worry and examine ways in which you can deal with problems. (If you are grieving the loss of a loved one, plan to cry if that is what you feel like.) Structured time weekly can help you gain control over your life and learn to let go of things that you cannot control.
- *Present concerns to others regarding problems and demands.* Remember everyone is entitled to their own opinion, even the ones opposite from yours. Don't get caught up in small things and don't expect immediate results. (Look what happened in South Africa as a result of economic sanctions forced by the concerns of people.)?
- *Accept responsibility for your day.* Work on organizing it and stop complaining. Good self-image is based on your work.

- *Use humor.* Hope to find new and bigger challenges and imperfections in your day and I am absolutely sure you will not be disappointed. It is hard to know now when people say, “I had a terrible day”, until they laugh, that they really mean everything is going well.
- When fellow workers and friends ask how you feel and there is time, tell them the truth. Healing comes from sharing and hugging.
- *Practice reacting positively like you would like others to do.* Relatives and fellow workers are apt to do or say the same thing for the 1,000th time and upset you. Whose problem is it if you act surprised for the 1,000th time.
- Plan your leisure time with plan A, B and C in case one does not work. It is very important to play and be child-like. We don't always have to be adult and sophisticated in all situations. Laughter is one of the greatest ways of relieving tension.

Coping Test

Simply follow the instructions given for each of the 14 items listed below. When you have completed all of the items, total your points and place that score in the box provided.

- _____ 1. Give yourself *10 points* if you feel that you have a supportive family around you.
- _____ 2. Give yourself *10 points* if you actively pursue a hobby.
- _____ 3. Give yourself *10 points* if you belong to some social or activity group that meets at least once a month (other than your family).
- _____ 4. Give yourself *15 points* if you are within five pounds of your “ideal” body weight, considering your height and bone structure.
- _____ 5. Give yourself *15 points* if you practice some form of “deep relaxation” at least three times a week. Deep relaxation exercises include meditation, imagery, Yoga, etc.
- _____ 6. Give yourself *5 points* for each time you exercise 30 minutes or longer during the course of an average week.
- _____ 7. Give yourself *5 points* for each nutritionally balanced and wholesome meal you consume during the course of an average day.
- _____ 8. Give yourself *5 points* if you do something that you really enjoy which is “just for you” during the course of an average week.
- _____ 9. Give yourself *10 points* if you have some place in your home that you can go in order to relax and/or be yourself.

- _____ 10. Give yourself *10 points* if you practice time management techniques in your daily life.
- _____ 11. Subtract *10 points* for each pack of cigarettes you smoke during the course of an average day.
- _____ 12. Subtract *5 points* for each evening during the course of an average week that you take any form of medication or chemical substance (including alcohol) to help you sleep.
- _____ 13. Subtract *10 points* for each day in the course of an average week that you consume any form of medication or chemical substance (including alcohol) to reduce your anxiety or just calm you down.
- _____ 14. Subtract *5 points* for each evening during the course of an average week that you bring work home that was meant to be done at your place of employment.



Now calculate your total score and place it in the box above. A “perfect” score would be 115 points. If you scored in the 50 – 60 range, you probably have an adequate collection of coping strategies for most common sources of stress. However, you should keep in mind that the higher your score, the greater your ability to cope with stress in an effective and healthful manner.

This stress assessment test was created by Dr. George S. Everly, Jr., University of Maryland.