

Managing and Dealing with Stress

Welcome to the managing stress podcast. Hi. I'm Molly Brennan, editor of the educational materials available to you through the program. In this 7-part series you are going to learn a lot of great tips and techniques for dealing with stress. We'll talk with Nancy Ignatin, a telephone consultant who helps stressed out employees and their families every day.

And we're also going to give you tips for understanding how stress affects children and what you can do to cope with stress as a couple. Finally, at the end of the series, you'll be able to download some really great stress-reducing exercises, including tension-taming stretches and a guided relaxation.

Let's start with a conversation with Nancy, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and a Certified Employee Assistance Professional. Nancy is a telephone consultant. She's one of the people you'd talk to if you call the program for help.

Hi, Nancy. Thanks for joining us today.

Thank you for having me.

Nancy, can you just start us off by telling us a little bit about stress and where it comes from?

Sure. Stress is an actual physiological reaction that our bodies and minds have to change that we perceive to be in a threatening situation. And when faced with a threatening situation, the body releases a surge of adrenaline which causes your heart to beat faster, your blood pressure to rise, and your breathing to quicken. And when you're under stress your muscles tighten, you may perspire more than you normally would, that kind of thing. And you may feel your stomach tense up too. And I have to say that a certain amount of stress can be very positive if you're trying to close a big business deal or meet a deadline. But it's not healthy when it's experienced many times a day, day in day out, in response to regular irritations and regular anxieties of daily life. With chronic stress you don't get a chance to ever relax and recharge your batteries.

What kinds of things cause stress?

Just about anything can cause stress, I think, even positive things like falling in love or sending your child off to college. But many people I talk to are stressed out by life in general. And by the time they call me they have often reached that breaking point and they can no longer believe that things will get better. And things tend to change very quickly and everything happens at break-neck speed; it can be impossible for some folks to just keep up with everything, especially when there are unexpected bumps along the way. And all of us tend multi-task when we have too much to do, which may mean nothing is getting done to our satisfaction and that causes even more stress. Relationships with loved ones, coworkers, family, and friends can be adversely affected, as we're not always as emotionally present as we should be, thinking about all the things we still need to do. There seems to be little time to work on the quality of our important

relationships at home, and over time they can suffer or deteriorate. So if we don't realize our level of stress how can we possibly address it?

So what can we start to do to really deal with all that stress?

Well, I think the first step we need to do is to realize how stressed we really are. If we don't realize this, how can we address it? Stress can sneak up on us, because it's both insidious and cumulative, especially when there are multi-stressors that we're not expecting and no time to recover in between. So if we don't take the time to notice and address it, even when we are near the breaking point -- many callers of mine are at that point when they call. They feel burned out, they're anxious, they're depressed, they may be using substances (or otherwise numbing their brains) they can be forgetful, having trouble concentrating, following through may be a problem for many of them because they can't prioritize. They may be short and impatient with their loved ones and have a lot of bodily aches and pains or chronic illnesses that are flaring up because they're so stressed. And there's one more thing. When we have national crises in our country I notice that people are more stressed. They may not mention it but their stress has become magnified by what's happening at a national level.

Can you tell us about what happens when we're under what you refer to as chronic stress? Why is it so bad for us?

Every area of our life can be affected by chronic stress if we ignore it and don't address it. So we all have this point of no return where our physical and emotional constitutions break down if we don't pay attention. We tend to all react a little differently because we're different people, of course. Depending on the kind and type of intensity of the stressors as well as our own temperamental physical makeup. Little annoyances can get magnified, and we may have trouble prioritizing -- figuring out what's the most important thing to concentrate on. Everything hits us with equal wallop. Any physical problems we already had get worse. Maybe eating and sleeping problems increase or drinking, using alcohol and drugs and other unhealthy habits may increase, numbing us even further. If left unchecked we can really spiral out of control. Exhaustion can result making it more difficult to recover. We may be hospitalized, worst case scenario or, have to take off from work. Our overall ability to bounce back can become permanently impaired. And that's why we have to work on this consciously.

Can you give us any tips on what we can do to avoid all of these negative effects?

Yes, I think I can. There are still a lot of things we can do even when we feel out of control. We may not be able to eliminate our stress, but we do have choices about how we respond to our stress. And the first step is taking the time to notice. It's interesting that many callers don't even recognize that they are stressed. They call and say that they are depressed or anxious or that they are using substances. Certainly they are having those feelings and they are legitimate. But they may not always recognize that the underlying problem is not necessarily the depression but that the fact that they're on overload and they don't feel that they have control. The good news is that they have more control than they think.

So we can all begin to recognize our own stress signs which act as a signal for us that we need to take action. So many people don't even realize that they are under stress because they are so overwhelmed and numb. But actually they can find themselves snapping at their partners or overeating or having trouble sleeping, those kinds of things. But those are all signs that immediate action is needed to break this cycle.

Think about some of the stress signs that I just mentioned. Do any of those apply to you? It may be helpful to ask a friend or a partner to let us know when he or she notices that we are stressed and feedback about what they're seeing so that we can become more adept at tuning in to ourselves and noticing our own symptoms.

It can also be helpful to notice where stress "lives" in your body. Do you get a tight stomach? Do you get headaches or shoulder aches? Those can be important clues and starting to recognize those clues can go a long way. Once you recognize them you can start to address them.

And the good news is that stress becomes easier to recognize the more you tune in to it. Stress management is a process and a skill that needs frequent, regular attention. It's a skill that any of us can learn with practice. Just as everyone has their own unique stress signs, different stress relief techniques work for different people. But there are a few core things that work for almost everyone, and these can include exercise and relaxation. Research does tell us that exercise can reduce stress and help you feel a lot better. Everyone should try to get some form of exercise everyday. Some people go to the movies or spend time with friends and loved ones. Others might want to sit quietly with a book or practice yoga or meditation. It doesn't really matter as long as you do something that helps you to feel calm and relaxed and do it regularly. Generally I'd say the earlier you can recognize stress symptoms the quicker you can find results. You can give yourself little stress tune-ups regularly to avoid more serious problems later. Stress management on a regular basis can go a long way to help you feel better and, maybe even more importantly, more in control. So Nancy, what about people who just can't seem to get a handle on their stress who try and try but they can't seem to break that cycle? What can they do? That may be the time to look for outside help. It may be helpful to talk to a mental health profession who can help you devise a stress management program that's tailored to your individual needs. And you work together on that. Well, I think we've gotten a lot of great tips from this. Listeners stay tuned because next time we are going to talk with Nancy about how stress affects children.