

Chapter 16

Coping and Stress Management

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ALTHOUGH STRESS IS often thought to be a product of an overcharged modern society, it has been a constant companion since time immemorial. Primitive humans did not have to deal with rush-hour traffic, but they did have to worry about where their next meal would come from and whether a predator was lurking behind a nearby bush. Stress is so basic that the human body has developed an elaborate physiological mechanism to deal with it. The “fight or flight” reaction is the body’s primitive but adaptive response to stress. As society has developed, the causes of stress have multiplied exponentially, but human physiology has remained basically the same. As a result, the instinctive response to stress may be inappropriate for the complex pressures of modern life. In effect, cave people are now masquerading in modern dress, still primed for fight or flight.

STRESS: DEMON OF THE MODERN AGE

Many people believe that stress plays an important role either in precipitating the onset of multiple sclerosis (MS) or in triggering exacerbations. Anecdotes abound of people who had their first attack right after a major emotional trauma. Many studies have investigated this possible link, with mixed results. It is therefore unclear whether stress plays a major role in MS disease activity.

Immune dysregulation seems to be the major culprit in MS. There is plenty of evidence, mainly from disorders other than MS, that stress influences the immune system. However, it is not known how this complex relationship plays out in MS or what its sig-

nificance may be. Studies in disorders other than MS have indicated that stress, especially severe stress, can promote inflammation. This raises the possibility that stress may be linked to MS by triggering some aspect of the inflammatory process associated with exacerbations. However, much more research will be needed to clarify whether stress plays a significant role in MS and what exactly that role might be.

Unfortunately, belief in the negative effects of stress has caused many productive people with MS to cut short their careers unnecessarily to avoid occupational stress. In addition, many family members harbor unnecessary guilt concerning their role in causing the stress that made a loved one’s MS worse. Hopefully, the true significance of stress in MS will be understood some day.

CAN STRESS BE AVOIDED?

People with MS are often told to reduce or avoid stress in their lives. Avoiding stress is easier said than done, however, because avoiding stress often means avoiding life. Life is full of stress, and the fuller your life, the more likely you are to be exposed to stress. Instead of avoiding stress, you need to learn how to deal with it.

Dealing constructively and creatively with stress will be more satisfying than a futile attempt to escape from stress. For example, if you quit your job to avoid occupational stress, you may encounter the stresses of isolation, loss of self-esteem, and a lower standard of living. Remember, the human body is biologically programmed for fight or flight. Although flight may have worked well in the past, when people were confronted by saber-toothed

tigers, it doesn't work well now, when sources of stress can relentlessly pursue you where tigers could never go.

WHAT IS COPING?

In modern times, a third option has been added to the legacy of fight or flight: coping. The concept of coping is not really new; it is simply a refinement of the fight part of our heritage. Instead of flight from occupational stress, you might decide to stick it out and fight—that is, to try your best to cope with stress in all its myriad manifestations. The best way to understand the nature of coping is to compare it to stress. Stress involves anything that demands a response from you, particularly if the demand is for change. Coping can be thought of as the ability to respond comfortably to stress.

But what does *comfortably* mean in the context of coping? That's a question on which social scientists have disagreed for decades. To some, you are coping comfortably if you are not anxious and depressed. However, in some situations, feeling anxious and depressed may indicate that you are in healthy touch with reality and are processing feelings that you will inevitably have to confront. To others, you are coping well if you forge ahead through life, viewing each stress as a challenge to be mastered through clever problem-solving strategies. Still others believe that it is optimal if a person has a wide variety of coping strategies to draw upon, with the choice of method contingent upon the unique demands of the situation.

Each of these ideas of what constitutes good coping strategies can teach a valuable lesson. If you go through life perpetually depressed and anxious, it's time to take stock of your coping strategies to see if something is lacking. Coping with a chronic disabling disease like MS inevitably demands a lot of concrete problem solv-

ing—for example, how to surmount a curb. Life has a dizzying variety of stressors, and what works in one situation may not work in another.

COPING AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

Coping is a broad term that encompasses several strategies, including stress management, counseling, psychotherapy, and use of psychotropic medication. Successful coping involves using whatever resources are at your disposal.

The need for professional help may be indicated by a number of situations. For example, if your efforts to manage stress are foundering and you are feeling overwhelmed in spite of your best efforts, you probably need to consult a therapist. Likewise, if you are so depressed or anxious that it seriously interferes with your everyday activities, self-help may not be enough. If you find yourself having recurrent thoughts of death or of hurting yourself or having fantasies that you would be better off dead, you need professional help.

Many determined souls put off seeking professional help, feeling that to do so is to admit failure. Nothing could be further from the truth. Participating in counseling is a form of self-help, and your self-help program should incorporate the notion that, at some point, you may need professional help to get you on track so that you can effectively use other self-help strategies. Championship athletes get to be good through hard work and determination, but few can do so without coaches, trainers, and teammates.

MANAGING STRESS

In learning how to manage stress successfully, the first step is to take stock of yourself and your life. Although many people know that they feel stressed, they have a

surprisingly sketchy idea of why. Keeping a stress record book can help you get in touch with the sources of your stress.

Use your stress record book as a diary to record situations that you find stressful in daily life. Along with entries concerning the who, what, when, and where of each stressful event, record how you reacted to each event in four domains:

- What were your thoughts during and after the situation?
- What were you feeling?
- What did you do?
- What sorts of physical reactions did you have?

For example, if the stressful event was filling out your taxes, it might go like this:

- Thoughts: “This is impossible; I’m never going to get this done.”
- Feelings: anxiety, frustration, and hopelessness.
- Actions: organized the necessary papers, read the instructions, and made up a checklist to get it done.
- Physical reactions: headache, indigestion, sweaty palms, and/or rapid heartbeat.

Monitoring stress is not an academic exercise. It helps you to identify and understand where stress is coming from. More importantly, it provides real insights into how you are coping with stress. The stress record book will help you to notice when you are underutilizing certain strategies or overemphasizing others. This may be the first step toward developing a more varied and increasingly successful stress management program.

INTERPRETATIONS OF STRESS

Taking stock of stress and your reactions to it can help you understand your interpretation of stress, because how you interpret or

appraise stress affects how well you cope with it. For example, if you perceive stress as an uncontrollable, overwhelming enemy, you are unlikely to do as well as someone who views it as a challenge to be dealt with creatively. Therefore, a powerful stress management technique is to understand and, if necessary, work to alter your appraisal of stress. Altering your appraisal of stress can make the difference between feeling demoralized and defeated and feeling triumphant.

STRESS MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

In some instances, the emotional response to stress, including the tension and agitation that it produces, precludes any sort of rational appraisal. At such times, it may be helpful to use a technique to foster calmness and tranquillity. Once disruptive emotions are under control, it’s a lot easier to confront stress rationally.

Meditation. For many, meditation is a useful tool for achieving the requisite state of peace and tranquillity. Although meditation may strike some as a mysterious, almost mystical experience, it is a simple and effective way to achieve a slightly altered state of consciousness that helps to manage stress while promoting a feeling of well-being.

There are many approaches to meditation. The classic technique involves two or three 15- or 20-minute sessions per day. The directions are simple:

- Pick a quiet place, free of noise and interruptions.
- Loosen clothing, close your eyes, and breathe deeply.
- Clear your mind of all extraneous thoughts and focus on and repeat a one-syllable word that has a calming effect.

In some forms of meditation, this one-syllable word is called a mantra. It can be

gently chanted (aloud or in your mind) in a slow, rhythmic pace while you breathe deeply. At the end of your session, have a good, slow stretch and return to your normal activities feeling refreshed and renewed.

Relaxation techniques. Another classic stress management technique is known as progressive deep muscle relaxation. This technique involves alternately tensing and relaxing a number of major muscle groups such as hands and arms, forehead, stomach, and thighs. The procedure takes about 15 minutes and can be done several times during the day.

Some people with MS find that tensing certain muscles can start a spasm. For this reason, progressive deep muscle relaxation should be used with caution. If you run into the spasticity problem, you may want to consult a professional to help you adapt the technique to your needs.

Yoga. In recent years, yoga has become a popular activity for many people with MS. Yoga combines stretching, especially the back, with breathing exercises. But, like progressive deep muscle relaxation, certain yoga exercises and positions may be problematic for people with MS.

In many locales, yoga classes specifically tailored for individuals with MS are offered. A good yoga teacher who is familiar with MS can help you work out a program to suit your special needs. In addition, books, videotapes, and television programs on yoga are readily available.

T'ai chi. Like yoga, t'ai chi is an ancient art that can be successfully practiced by young and old alike, regardless of physical disability. The slow, rhythmic movements of t'ai chi are, in many ways, ideally suited to the person who has some weakness caused by neurologic disease. Also like

yoga, t'ai chi has more than physical benefits. It tends to facilitate global feelings of well-being that help to neutralize the effects of stress. T'ai chi has gained great popularity in recent years, and many MS t'ai chi groups are available across the country.

Aerobic exercise. Stress-reducing exercise does not have to be of the ancient Eastern variety. Many people find that aerobic exercise like swimming, walking, or bicycling have the same benefits as yoga or t'ai chi (see Chapter 13, "Exercise Options and Wellness Programs").

However, when taking part in any exercise program, don't overdo it. Exercising to the point that you feel disabling fatigue and find yourself unable to function the next day will induce stress, rather than reduce it.

Visualization. Visualization employs vivid mental images in which you take an active role. You imagine a pleasant and appealing scene in which you are doing things and experiencing the scene through a variety of your senses—sight, smell, hearing, and touch. Many people find it relaxing to imagine themselves on a sunny beach listening to waves gently breaking on the shore. They imagine the smell of salt air, the gentle warmth of the sun, and the soft, refreshing coolness of wet sand. Visualization can be used in conjunction with other techniques, such as deep breathing or relaxation.

Visualization has gotten a bad name in some quarters from unwarranted claims for its ability to alter the physical condition of the body. For example, if you find it relaxing to imagine myelin regenerating itself on nerve fibers damaged by MS, by all means, do so. There is, however, no scientific evidence that visualizing biological events can make them happen any more than your imagining a scene at the beach could give you a sunburn.

Having fun. While you're busy imagining going to the beach or the mountains or wherever, why not plan on making your fantasy a reality? One of the most reliable ways to reduce feelings of stress is to have fun.

People with MS often abandon enjoyable activities because they have limited ability to engage in them. The person who used to love museums may stop going because he or she can't handle all the walking. Why not use a wheelchair or scooter and start enjoying life again? Perhaps it's because of the stress of appearing in public in a wheelchair. That goes back to the appraisal of stress—that is, how we interpret stressful situations. When people with MS dust off and reactivate abandoned activities, it can feel like a rebirth.

COMMUNICATING WITH OTHERS

Stress comes in many varieties, but one of the greatest sources of stress in our lives is other people. Ironically, in many instances, the people we love the most can be the greatest sources of stress.

The ultimate stress reducer for sources of social stress is good communication. What constitutes good communication? Like good coping, there is no universal definition of good communication.

If other people are sources of stress in your life, you need to talk with them about it. You're probably a source of stress for them as well. Maybe an understanding or a change in behavior can take place, leading to greater comfort for all involved. But if communication proves fruitless or seems to make things worse, try to get professional help.

Sometimes talking about stress can help you sort it out and, at the same time, relieve the tension. You can accomplish this by talking to a therapist, but sometimes a friend or family member can be helpful. For many, support groups are indispensable for talking through the stressors found in everyday life.

The important thing to keep in mind is that bringing the causes of stress out in the open and discussing them can be a powerful tool for relief.

REDUCING UNNECESSARY STRESS

Although trying to avoid stress completely is futile, there are things that everyone can do to reduce unnecessary stress. For example, sometimes stress results from the ways in which you do or do not do things. The key is to learn how to cope with situations that are beyond your control, while trying to modify situations you can control.

Here are a few tips:

- *Give yourself enough time to complete tasks.* A major source of stress for many is feeling rushed because not enough time has been allocated for the tasks at hand.
- *Don't just accept help, ask for it.* Many people feel overwhelmed because they think they have to do everything themselves. Work on that foolish pride that stands in the way of your enlisting the aid of others.
- *Cultivate flexibility, especially concerning time and schedules.* If you find that you don't have time for something you wanted to get done today, relax and reschedule it for tomorrow.
- *Stop being a perfectionist.* Relaxing your standards even a little will relieve you of a major source of stress.
- *Learn to conserve your energy.* People with MS often feel stressed because fatigue interferes with their ability to accomplish things they would like to do. Instead, get to know your energy limits and plan around them. Avoid doing so much in one day that it takes you a day or two to recover.
- *Get organized.* A major source of stress for many is chaos. Disorganization man-

ifests itself in piles of papers, things you can't find, phone numbers scattered all over the house, and schedules you can't keep track of. Get a book on personal organization and follow the suggestions. For example, you can set up a family calendar, create a home filing system, establish bill-paying routines, and use telephone message pads. Staying organized is one of the most effective stress-reducing things you can do for yourself.

- *Think twice every time you find yourself saying something like, "I should..."* Those "shoulds" are really guilt and stress inducers. If you encounter something that you think you should do, ask yourself why you should do it. Do you really have to do it? Can someone else do it? Is it something that can be left undone until tomorrow, next week, next year, or perhaps, forever? If it is something that you really do need or want to do, avoid procrastinating. Putting things off tends to lead to a stress-inducing backlog of tasks, just the thought of which can be overwhelming.

- *Learn to respect the coping strategies of others*, as you pursue what is most comfortable for yourself. There is no one right way to cope. What's best for you may not be best for someone else.

If you repeatedly find yourself in a stress-provoking situation, sit down and try to sort out how and why it's so stressful. Think about how you are handling the situation and whether a different approach to the task or situation might make it less stressful. Talk about the situation with someone whose opinion you trust, and experiment with new approaches.

Stress is an integral part of life. Everyone must deal with stress, but a chronic, disabling disease like MS tends to give you an extra dose. There are a host of ways to deal with stress, many of them simple and inexpensive, and you can become expert in how to use them. Then, if you apply them consistently, you will find yourself feeling that you have mastered stress, rather than being at its mercy.