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STRESS MANAGEMENT

A common suggestion given by all different types of healthcare professionals is to “avoid stress”. I often hear friends or colleagues or patients say they are “stressed-out”, which is now a favorite American catch phrase for when we are overwhelmed, overworked and fatigued. I have also seen the physical manifestations of what long-term, high-stress situations can do to the body. Stress is well-documented as a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Since there are stressors all around us, some unavoidable, I speak to my patients about managing stress more than eliminating it. Some modicum of stress can actually be beneficial since it spurs us on to accomplish tasks, or give meaningful situations the care they deserve

One reason why stressful situations are so difficult on the heart is that we have a tendency to treat ourselves poorly in times of pressure, uncertainty, or “must-do,” “have-to” situations. It’s common that people under long – term stress lose a sense of moderation about their own well being. They tend to eat in unbalanced, unhealthy ways, they fail to exercise in an optimal way, and at times, they let go of the very hobbies that bring them the most satisfaction because they suddenly feel like luxuries, not necessities. People under stress have poor sleep habits, which can make everything seem overwhelming. Sometimes people turn to drugs or alcohol, which only accelerates the damaging effects of blood pressure and can cause other unwanted complications on their own.

So, the body compensates by excreting hormones to try to help us through these times. Cortisol is a hormone often talked about in the news, because it is associated with fat in the midsection (creating the infamous “apple” – shaped body). As a cardiologist, I pay special attention to my patients who carry extra weight in their abdomens, because that is yet another strong indicator of heart disease.

Here are some great ways to manage the effects of stress on your body, especially in times of personal upheaval (like a divorce, death, or chronic illness in the family), or environmental stress:

Take your health seriously

Though we are faced with situations in life that seem daunting (from a test at school, to a parent or child with illness), the best way to face them is with the best health you can have, and respect for the situation at hand. Even if its doing stretches in the kitchen, or taking a short walk, take time for yourself and pay attention to your body’s need for movement. If you’re taking medication, be sure to take it regularly. Seek someone to talk to when you need it. Find a friend to cry or laugh with. Change the scenery of your thoughts. Remember that your health is the foundation of your life, and you deserve time for exercise.

Take a series of deep breaths

This is an easy one to do, at work or at home. Sit, close your eyes, let your body relax as much as possible, and breathe deeply and slowly five times. Conscious breathing can bring your attention back to your body in a small way, and refreshingly calm you down. Studies show that just a few moments of this type of activity can make an enormous difference in mood and can reduce stress levels. .

Speak to your doctor about what's going on

If you have a history of heart disease, stroke or have a pre-existing condition, share your situational stress with your physician. He or she needs to know in order to get a greater understanding of changes in your life, and can possibly help manage the effects. Your physician may suggest talking to a counselor if stress is leading to problems with work or family, and there are many solutions counseling can bring to alleviate stress and avoid panic attacks and other manifestations of depression or anxiety.

Stress management is only one factor to living a heart-healthy lifestyle, but it is crucial to living a life of purpose, meaning, and value. Pray, meditate, practice yoga, sing, swim – whatever brings joy, and alleviates pain. These are just a few activities my patients have found that have greatly enhanced their lives. Treat yourself right, and find what works for you.

Listen to Dr. Galichia's Radio Show – "Take Your Health to Heart" every Saturday from 11 AM to Noon on 1480 KQAM in Wichita. If you have any medically related questions, please call us during the LIVE broadcast at 1-800-TALK-997 or 1-800-825-5997. You can also e-mail your questions anytime to

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