**Staying Healthy**

Nancy Lee Nelson, MPH, BAN, RN

**July 8, 2020**

**Supporting Your Immune System in the Era of the Pandemic**

**Managing & Minimizing Stress**

This week in our effort to create a healthy immune system to fight COVID-19, we will focus on the component of managing and minimizing stress using specific strategies. Stress, however, is something we experience with or without COVID-19, so these strategies should work for us far beyond this Pandemic.

Stress results in a feeling of uncomfortable pressure and anxiety. Stress can come from different areas of our lives such as relationships, our workplace, financial issues, grief, health problems, etc. Recognizing and being aware of our stress, helps us to begin to look at how we can manage and minimize our stress.

There are many research studies that connect “chronic stress” to a negative impact on our immune system. Conversely, “acute short-lasting stress” can potentially be adaptive and helpful to natural immunity. Acute stress can make us more alert and able to perform better. That said, acute stress that occurs too frequently can become chronic stress. Too much stress, too often and for too long has deleterious effects on our physical and emotional being.

Prior to utilizing the strategies, we begin by:

* Recognizing when there is stress causing anxiety for us.
* Identifying the underlying cause(s) of stress.
* Sorting the stressors into three categories: 1) Stress that can be resolved by something we are able to do; 2) Stress that will get better on its own; and 3) Stress that is not in our control to fix.
* Choosing strategies for Category 1 to minimize and manage stress while we are working on resolving the stress causing anxiety for us.
* Letting go of Category 2 since this stress will resolve on its own.
* Determining which strategies will work to manage and minimize the stress of Category 3 while “letting go” of “fixing” Category 3 since we do not have control over Category 3 and therefore it not within our ability to resolve Category 3.

**Please note that all of the strategies below have a link to more online information.**

**Strategies for Minimizing Stress**

**Strategy 1. Keep a Positive Outlook.**

* We can choose to live with positivity. When we make this choice, we begin to learn how to reframe our negative thoughts and take actions that change our thinking in ways that can surprise us. We can be more in control of who we want to be if we take the time to learn how to keep a positive outlook.

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mindful-anger/201701/6-steps-transform-your-outlook

**Strategy 2. Recognize You Can Only Control Yourself**

* We can waste a lot of precious time, trying to control other adults or blaming them for problems they won’t change in a manner we think will make our lives better. We can control our reactions to other adults, but the truth is we can only control ourselves. To effect change in another person, that other person has to truly want the change. Our ability to assist is very limited.
* Once we recognize we cannot change other people, we begin to focus on ourselves. Instead of reacting to the other person, we move on to something more positive. We become more self-aware and more in charge of ourselves. We learn who we are and to focus on our own personal growth.

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/inviting-monkey-tea/201603/you-cant-change-someone-else-you-can-do

**Strategy 3. Take Time for Self-Care.**

* Finding time for self-care is often difficult for most of us. However, when we actually pay attention and do self-care, it actually saves us considerable time. With self-care we have more energy and deal with stress in a healthy manner. Self-care includes all of the things we have been discussing over the past weeks, i.e. eating healthy, getting adequate sleep, exercising, etc.

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/click-here-happiness/201812/self-care-12-ways-take-better-care-yourself

**Strategy 4. Listen to Music.**

* Music can have a positive effect on stress. Experts state that slow quiet classical music can have a significant relaxing effect on us physiologically by slowing our pulse, heart rate and lowering our blood pressure

 https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-power-of-music-to-reduce-stress/

**Strategy 5. Learn and Practice Techniques to Manage Stress .**

Breathing, Meditations, Mindfulness, Yoga and Tai Chi are techniques that can help you manage and minimize the impact of stress.

* Mindful Breathing Meditation: Stop, Breathe & Think; minutes.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cp7pnHCY94U

* Guided Meditations to Calm Anxiety.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpiw2hH-dlc

* 10 Minute Guided Meditation to Reduce Stress.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_1MnKCofWO8

* Yoga Poses to Reduce Stress and Improve Sleep.

https://www.hfe.co.uk/blog/yoga-poses-to-reduce-stress-and-help-you-sleep-better/

* The Basics of Tai Chi for Stress Reduction.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAKXr-MpCbo

* The 4 Steps of Laughter Yoga Exercise.

 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1v1WvakrYY

**Strategy 6. Be Assertive. Rather than Aggressive, Passive or Passive Aggressive.**

* When we are assertive, we express our opinions while being respectful of the rights and beliefs of the person with whom we are having a discussion. The tone of our voice is calm and straightforward and respectful. Assertiveness shows we are willing to stand up for ourselves while being aware of other people’s rights and feelings. When we are assertive, we listen as well as talk. We do not monopolize the conversation but we do participate in the conversation. Being assertive is critical for a mutually respectful relationship.
* Aggressive behaviors can involve attacking, threatening or ignoring other people instead of working on a two-way respectful communication. Aggressive communications disregard the opinions and needs of others. Individuals who are aggressive can come across as a bully or involve physically threatening behaviors. Aggression is contrary to a healthy, trusting and respectful relationship.
* When we are passive, we send a message that our thoughts and feelings are not as important as other people’s thoughts and feelings. We allow others to disregard our opinions and needs. We tend to overly avoid conflict when we are passive. When we are a person who always says “yes” we damage our relationships, since our needs are not communicated and therefore not met. Passivity results in resentment and feelings of being victimized in a relationship.
* When we are passive-aggressive instead of communicating respectfully with another person, we may gossip and talk to others about the other person in a negative manner. We may communicate sarcastically. Our anger may come out through negative actions. When we are passive-aggressive we are uncomfortable about being direct in a respectful assertive manner. This behavior damages our relationships and is not based on mutual respect.
* We can learn to be assertive through reading about and practicing assertive behaviors. We can also take an assertiveness class. If our efforts are not working because other feelings like anger or fear get in the way, consider working through those issues with a mental health professional or social worker. https://www.verywellmind.com/learn-assertive-communication-in-five-simple-steps-3144969

**Strategy 7. Manage Your Time & Set Limits/Boundaries to Excessive Stress.**

* Setting boundaries is not always easy, but is extremely valuable to us and to those with whom we have relationships. This requires that we become familiar with our own personal boundaries. Knowing our boundaries means we communicate those boundaries allowing others to know and respect our boundaries.
* Knowing our boundaries, makes it easier when we are under stress to recognize an opportunity to say “no” rather than taking on more work or other activities that cause excessive stress.
* Saying “no” is not easy especially to activities that we would like to do if we were not already so busy. Limit setting often involves clarity in what we are able to do or not do, i.e. negotiating. To be effective it also involves using assertive communication skills.
* Keeping in mind, the goal of setting limits to requests that would create excessive stress in your life, will prevent excessive stress.

https://www.verywellmind.com/setting-boundaries-for-stress-management-3144985

https://www.verywellmind.com/how-to-find-more-time-in-a-busy-schedule-3144749

**Strategy 8. Say “No” to too much Alcohol, Cigarettes and Junk Food.**

* Alcohol can be used to manage or cope with stressful events when in reality it can cause our issues to be compounded by the negative impact of alcohol as both a depressant and a known factor for not dealing with issues. It is important that we know the recommended limits of alcohol since drinking more than the recommended limits can cause physical and emotional issues.[[1]](#footnote-1) “The brain is a major target for actions of alcohol, and heavy alcohol consumption has long been associated with brain damage. Studies indicate that alcohol is neurotoxic with direct effects on nerve cells.” https://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/10report/chap02e.pdf
* “It is common to think that smoking is a way to calm your nerves and deal with feelings of anxiety. But the truth is, nicotine can cause anxiety symptoms or make them worse.” https://smokefree.gov/challenges-when-quitting/cravings-triggers/anxiety-smoking
* “[N]utrition experts say “giving in” to junk food cravings like ice cream would most likely worsen your stress even though we believe they help us fight stress. And this can happen in the immediate few hours after and also in the longer term.” https://www.healthhub.sg/live-healthy/1007/stressed-stay-away-from-junk-food

**Strategy 9. Care for Others.**

* A 2015 study published in the Clinical Psychological Science journal demonstrated that helping others can relieve stress. The study showed that helping others helped us manage our stress and feel better.

https://www.verywellmind.com/stress-helping-others-can-increase-happiness-3144890

**Strategy 10. Rest Your Faith on the Power of God – Trust God.**

# 1 Corinthians 2:5. so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

* Sometimes difficult sad things happen to us that do not feel fair or just and that we cannot control. When you do not have control, consider your options and you may find that “letting go and letting God” will work best for you.
* The research of Harold Koenig, M.D., associate professor of medicine and psychiatry at Duke University, who reviewed more than a thousand research studies regarding the effects of prayer on health in his book *Handbook of Religion and Health.*  His findings include: 1) People who do not attend church have an average hospital stay of 3 x longer than people who regularly attend church; 2) Cardiac patients were 14 x more likely to die following surgery if they did not practice a religion; 3) Elderly people who never or almost never attended church had a stroke twice as often as people who attended church regularly.
* Mindfulness Meditation “Being Still in the Presence of God.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZb5fN\_YEbQ

**Strategy 11. Go Out in Nature.**

* Spending time in nature relieves stress and improves sad feelings.
* Sunlight is known to encourage your brain to release chemicals that decrease stress.
* Numerous studies show that sitting and looking at trees reduce stress -related hormones cortisol and adrenaline.
* Research studies show that people, who have a hospital room that gives a view of nature, heal faster.

https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/how-does-nature-impact-our-wellbeing

**Strategy 12. Spend Time with Your Trusted loved Ones and Trusted Friends.**

* Thousands of studies have found that spending time with loved ones and friends reduces stress and increases happiness. In fact, it is known that happiness decreases when you decrease the number hours that you socialize

 https://www.ornish.com/zine/why-spending-time-with-friends-will-lower-your-stress/

**Strategy 13. Eat Healthy.**

* There is growing evidence in the scientific research that eating healthy positively impacts our mood and stress level. Decreasing stress levels and increasing the feeling of well-being can happen by ensuring that our diet has adequate amounts of brain nutrients, essential vitamins and minerals. It is also very important to drink enough water. The recommendation previously was 8 cups of water a day. This has been increased to 15.5 cups of fluids for men and 11.5 cups of fluids for women.

https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/in-depth/water/art-20044256

* Examples of brain nutrients include fatty fish (salmon, trout, sardines), blueberries, pumpkin seeds, Magnesium, copperomega-3s, B12, B6, Folate, curcumin, broccoli, dark chocolate, Vitamin C, carotene, green tea, Flavonoids, Vitamin D, Vitamin E, Choline, Calcium, zinc, selenium, black pepper, beans, Brazil nuts, whole grains, sunflower seeds, almonds, oysters, whole grains, eggs, plant foods, avocado peanuts, spinach, mushrooms, vegetable oil.

https://www.everydayhealth.com/diet-nutrition-pictures/how-to-reduce-stress-with-diet.aspx

**Strategy 14. Exercise.**

* Physical exercise is very effective in relieving stress. Exercise increases the brain’s ”feel-good neurotransmitters” known as endorphins resulting in increased energy and a sense of hope. Exercise can also improve sleep which is a benefit since stress often disrupts sleep. Choose an exercise routine that you enjoy and stick to it.

 https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2013/exercise

**Strategy 15. Get Enough Rest.**

* Lack of sleep is a steadily growing problem in America. Almost one-third of Americans adults report getting insufficient sleep. Likewise the American Psychiatric Association states that Americans also report significant regular stress levels beyond what they believe is normal.
* Bedtime Meditation:

https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/bedtime-meditation/

**Strategy 16. Journal.**

* Regular journaling is considered a very effective tool to reduce stress when we write about our feelings related to the event(s) that are causing us stress. As we put our thoughts and feelings on paper, we often discover solutions to our issues. Similarly, journaling is known to help us to explore related emotions and actually release those emotions. Likewise, journaling helps us with our perspective by including those things for which we are grateful. Interestingly, a 1999 study showed that disclosure of our emotions through writing resulted in changes in blood related to stress.

https://www.verywellmind.com/the-benefits-of-journaling-for-stress-management-3144611

**Strategy 17. Building Resilience.**

* We all experience challenges and difficulties in our lives with some them resulting in emotions that don’t resolve in a day to two. And yet, over time we learn to adapt and use what has worked for us in the past and when necessary, we reach out to learn new ways to adapt to our stress with profound new personal growth. This adaptation is resilience. Some of the literature describes it as “bouncing back” from painful experience(s). Resilience can include all of what we have discussed in this paper and more. All the tools we use to get ourselves back to the caring solid people we are, is what we call “resilience.”

https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/resilience.html

**Strategy 19. Practice Gratitude.**

Despite the stress in our lives, we all have much for which to be grateful. Having a grateful heart helps to put the challenges in a different perspective. Gratitude provides a balance as one very wise person stated. “Thanking others, thanking ourselves, Mother Nature, or the Almighty – gratitude in any form can enlighten the mind and make us feel happier. It has a healing effect on us. (Russell and Fosha, 2008).”

https://positivepsychology.com/neuroscience-of-gratitude/

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201504/7-scientifically-proven-benefits-gratitude

**Strategy 20. Talk to a Social Worker, Mental Health Professional or Your Pastor.**

If our stress becomes unmanageable or prevents us from functioning well, mental health professionals or our pastor can help us work through the stress issues. Mental professionals include psychologists, counselors, social workers and psychiatrists.

https://www.mhanational.org/get-professional-help-if-you-need-it

**REFERENCES**

1. Segerstrom, S.CX., & Miller G.E. (2004) “Psychological Stress and the Human Immune System: A Meta-Analytic Study of 30 Years of Inquiry,” *Psychological Bulletin,130(4),601-630.* https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1361287/
2. “Healthy Ways to Handle Live’s Stressors,”,” *American Psychological Association* (2020). https://www.apa.org/topics/stress-tips
3. Shields, Grant S., Spahr, Chandler M., Spahr, George M., “Psychosocial Interventions and Immune System Function: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Randomized Clinical Trials,” *JAMA Psychiatry*, June 3, 2020. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32492090/
4. Segal, Ph.D., Jeanne, Smith, M.A., Melinda, Segal, M.A., Robert and Robinson, Lawrence, “Stress Symptoms, Signs and Causes,” *Help Guide*, (May 2020).

https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm

1. “Being Assertive: Reduce Stress, Communicate Better,” Mayo Clinic Healthy Lifestyle (2020).
https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/assertive/art-20044644
2. Adams Keigh, “Laughter Therapy as Stress Relief,” *Skills You Need* (2020).

https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/therapeutic-laughter.html

1. Bressington, Daniel, Yu, Clare, Wong, Wandy, NG Tsz C., Chien, Wai Tong, “The Effects of Group-Based Laughter Yoga Interventions on Mental Health in Adults: A Systematic Review, *Journal of Nurse Midwifery Res.,* V. 19 (1); (Jan.-Feb. 2014). https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/300309
2. *“3 Tips to Manage Stress,” American Heart Association*, (June 2014). https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/3-tips-to-manage-stress
3. “Dealing with Stress – Ten Tips,” Skills You Need, (2020). https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/stress-tips.html
4. Robinson, Lawrence, Smith, Melinda Smith, and Segal, Robert, “Stress Management,” *HelpGuide* (Last updated October 2019); https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/stress-management.htm
5. “10 tips to Manage Stress, *WEBMD*, (2020).

https://www.mydr.com.au/sports-fitness/strength-training-exercises

1. Gomez-Pinilla, Fernando, “Brain Foods: the Effects of Nutrients on Brain Function,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, (July 2008).

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2805706/

#  “It's official -- spending time outside is good for you,” *Science Daily* (2018)

#  https://www.uea.ac.uk/about/-/it-s-official-spending-time-outside-is-good-for-you

1. “Developing Resilience,” *Skills You Need*, (2020)

https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/resilience.html

1. “Building Your Resilience,” *American Psychological Association,* (2012).

https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience

1. “The Dietary Guidelines also recommend that if alcohol is consumed, it should be in moderation—up to 1 drink per day for women and up to 2 drinks per day for men—and only by adults of legal drinking age. However, the Guidelines do not recommend that people who do not drink alcohol start drinking for any reason.” https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/moderate-drinking.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)