WORKING THROUGH COVID-19

Article 4
The Importance of Stress Management
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As our world addresses COVID-19, stress management is essential for leading a more balanced, healthier life. Stress is a normal alarm system signaling the body to respond to a challenging event. Usually after the threat is gone, the body returns to a relaxed state. During the pandemic, the stress period seems to be continuous, and the body's alarm system rarely shuts off. This can be destructive and harmful leading to serious physical or psychological problems.

The Importance of Stress Management

Stress management offers a range of strategies to reset the alarm system. It can help the body and mind adapt to dealing with stress. To monitor stress, first identify the triggers. Here are some questions to consider in processing the roots of stress:

- What aspects of the outlying threat can we control?
- Does exposure to the news or social media increase the stress?
- Is there a person tied to where the stress is coming from?
- What meaning or feeling does it have?
- What hurts? Are there medical causes for the pain?
- What is needed to deal with the situation?

Once stress triggers are identified, think about strategies for dealing with them. Identifying what can be controlled is a good starting point. Stress management strategies can be categorized into three groups:

Action-oriented Strategies - Taking Action to Change a Stressful Situation
- Be assertive - Clear and effective communication is the key to being assertive. Identify what we want, ask for what we need, and explain what is bothersome. Use a fair and firm manner while still having empathy for others. Be proactive in altering the stressful situation.
- Reduce noise - Switch off all the technology, screen time, and constant stimuli to slow down. Make time for quietness each day. Notice how all those urgent things we need to do become less important. Recharging is an effective way to relax and repair the toll stress takes on our minds and bodies.
- Manage time - Our days will consume us if we let them become too busy. When we prioritize and organize tasks, we create a less stressful and more enjoyable life.
- Create boundaries - Boundaries are the internal set of rules we establish for ourselves. They outline what behaviors we will and won't accept, how much time and space we need from others, and what priorities we have. When we have boundaries, we respect ourselves and take care of our well-being by clearly expressing them to others. Healthy boundaries are essential to reduced stress.

Emotion–orientated Strategies - Changing the Way We Perceive a Stressful Situation

- Cognitive Distortions and Restructuring – The mind may alter what we see, and what we tell ourselves about a situation. Take a moment to process a situation, understand any negative emotions, and challenge incorrect beliefs which unknowingly contribute to making things worse. Changing our beliefs can make a difference on whether we feel stressed, influence the actions we take, and determine the outcome. This new perspective allows us to see solutions and potential benefits.
- Positive Thinking – Being optimistic changes how we perceive a situation maximizing our power and keeping us in touch with our options. This can reduce stress and help empower us in situations that might otherwise feel overwhelming.

Acceptance-orientated Strategies - Dealing with Stressful Situations We Can't Control

- Diet and Exercise – Be mindful of having a balanced and healthy diet. Plan meals for the same times every day. Set aside time daily for some type of regular, physical exercise. Identify the workout, intensity, and duration which fits best.
- Meditation and physical relaxation – Help restore a sense of control by focusing on a positive word or phrase while slowly, deeply breathing. Shifting attention and becoming more centered will relax the body and create a calm reality. Use techniques such as breathing exercises, guided visualizations, progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, or tai chi.
- Build resilience - Our ability to bounce back from stressful or negative experiences. Accepting the situation has occurred, learning from what transpired, and then moving on.
- Talk it out - Many of our worries sound a lot less troublesome when we say them out loud. Speak with family, friends, or a mental health professional about what is stressful. If sharing things is uncomfortable, try writing them down to release them.
- Sleep - A good night's sleep is necessary for recharging and dealing with stressful situations. While the exact amount of sleep needed varies among individuals, an uninterrupted sleep of approximately 8 hours is generally recommended.

It doesn't matter which stress management strategies are chosen. Select one, two, or more that work best and practice them on an ongoing basis. Don't wait until stress damages health, relationships, or quality of life.

Life right now is full of new and difficult stressors. While stress won't ever disappear completely from our lives, paying attention to what causes stress and practicing ways to relax can counter some of the bad effects and increase our ability to face challenges. Managing stress can help us lead a more balanced, healthier life. Remember, we don't have to figure everything out by ourselves. Seek help and support from co-workers, spiritual leaders, or employee assistance program professionals when needed.

The Office of Employee and Organization Development is an internal Employee Assistance Program. We are experienced at listening, asking the right questions, gathering information, providing support, and helping individuals decide on the best course of action to take in resolving the difficulties and stressors they face.