What, me worry? Self help can reduce stress

Resilience and coping can be learned, then practiced for less than an hour a day to accrue benefits.

By Teresa Kramer, Ph.D.

Kramer

Whether you're taking the fourth stab at next year's annual budget or trying to meet expectations for a perfect holiday season, nerves are bound to be jangled. Stress is a normal part of life, and isn't necessarily bad. Without it we wouldn't work, accomplish projects, or do all the things that we must to survive.

Stress tends to become a problem when people shoulder multiple burdens that last for a long time. Such stress threatens a person's psychological, physical and spiritual well-being.

How stress works

When severely stressed, the body prepares for the reaction known as fight or flight. Heart rate and breathing increase, while other bodily functions shut down. Stress can cause the fight or flight scenario to recur, keeping the body in that very ready state. Over time, such physiological changes may result in high blood pressure, heart disease, diminished immune response, digestive problems and sleep disorders.

Unhealthy levels of stress can affect anyone, but typical candidates are people in leadership positions with high responsibility, such as yourselves, whose jobs involve responding to and juggling the requests of others on a daily basis.

The good news for those burdened by stress is that resilience and coping can be learned, even though we may feel there is not enough time in the day to do so.

Simple steps

Start by taking these simple steps toward coping, which require an hour or less each day:

• **Exercise.** Even 15 minutes of physical activity allows the muscles to relax, improves immune system function and releases endorphins, the body's natural chemical that reduces pain.

• **Organize.** One study showed that executives spend an average of six weeks a year searching for misplaced information in files or on their desks. Take 15 minutes at the end of each day to organize your work space, even if you are only tackling one pile at a time. Doing so will help you become more efficient.

• **Set realistic daily goals.** Oftentimes what stresses us most is setting unrealistic goals, which makes us resentful because by day's end we've usually failed to meet everybody else's expectations, and we haven't done anything that's pleasing to ourselves. Use a 10-minute quiet period as your day begins—on the way to work, if possible—to think about your expectations for the day. Ask yourself, how will I feel if something gets in the way of my being able to do that, and how can I on the ride home feel good about what I have accomplished?

• **Take five.** Spend 5-10 minutes each day by yourself in a quiet place in your home, on your porch, or outdoors. Rest and practice letting go of goals.

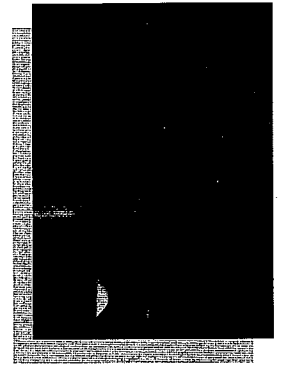• **Have fun.** Spend 15 minutes each day doing something that gives you joy, whether it's playing with your children or your dog, planting flowers, or watching a funny video.

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Coaching can help

Also critical to controlling stress is finding ways to cope without caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and high sugar foods. All are popular choices for the stressed, but each causes mood swings and dependence on external options for relief. In the long run they can result in fluctuations in a person's physiology and biochemistry and can contribute to chronic illnesses, such as cancer, heart disease and depression.

If your self-help efforts aren't working, coaching is available from professionals who can help you get organized, set goals and establish priorities. Executives in companies across the country have sought the expertise of coaches. Although we often hear the message, "You should be able to handle this," we can all benefit from additional support during times of high stress.

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