Compass Rehabilitation

A DIVISION OF COMPASS HEALTH

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Understanding stress...

STRESS.....WHAT REALLY IS IT?

Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the demands of life[1]. It is important to understand that this is normal and that a little stress can be a good thing. Some research suggests that moderate amounts of stress can actually make you mentally and physically tougher and better able to manage the small bumps in the road as we go about our life. A study at UCLA found that people with a history of some lifetime adversity reported better mental health than people with high amounts of stress and also low amounts of stress[2].

This suggests that a history of moderate stressors can make us less reactive and more responsive to current life events. Why is this? Some possibilities are: some stress helps us better able to tolerate and adapt to life's difficulties, may help us learn new skills (like sociability or patience) we can apply later in life, we may gain confidence in managing stress ("If I can do this, I can do the next difficult thing."), we may be less likely to fear change, we may adopt a more positive attitude towards stress in general, knowing it may help us grow[2]. Stress is normal in moderate amounts and beneficial to our overall well-being.

Managing stress:

As mentioned above, some stress can be beneficial. However, prolonged stress can lead to serious health concerns such as: heart disease, hypertension, high blood pressure. It also can lead to decreased immune function and is linked to strokes, IBS, ulcers, diabetes, muscle and joint pain, allergies, alopecia and other conditions.[3]

What can we do to manage stress when it pushes us beyond our coping mechanisms?

1) **Exercise:** As we know, there are physical benefits to exercise such as improving physical condition and fighting disease. Studies now show that physical exercise helps with cognitive function which can be helpful when stress has depleted your energy levels and ability to properly focus.

    Scientists have found that regular participation in aerobic exercise has been shown to decrease overall levels of tension, elevate and stabilize mood, improve sleep, and improve self-esteem. Even five minutes of aerobic exercise can stimulate anti-anxiety effects[4].

2) **Balanced diet:** During stressful times we often turn to "comfort food" to satisfy our hunger (pizza, ice cream, brownies, cookies, burgers...etc.). These high caloric foods are usually the worst choices because they make us feel lethargic and less able to deal with stress. Even more importantly, these foods drive up our cholesterol levels which clogs arteries and increase our risk of a heart attack.

    Fiber: Carbs help us relax. Especially at night after a long day. Foods rich in fiber release serotonin which relaxes our body and aids in a good night's sleep. (examples- blacks beans, lentils, chickpeas, avocados, almonds, broccoli, and sprouts) **Veggies:** It's tempting to reach for a cheeseburger when stressed, but try instead to reach

for green leafy vegetables like spinach, containing folate, which produces dopamine--a pleasure-inducing brain chemical, helping you keep calm[5]. **Salmon:** When your cortisol levels are high (like when we are stressed) the omega 3's in salmon can help reverse the negative effects of stress hormones and is also good for your heart health.

4) **Get some sleep:** More than 1/3 of Americans are not getting the recommended amount of sleep on a regular basis (about 7+ hours/night)[5].

Sleep is essential for mental health, physical health and quality of life. It allows our brains to function properly and repair itself for the next day. Getting sufficient sleep is crucial for memory, problem solving and creativity. Physically, proper sleep patterns aid in fighting heart disease, kidney disease, diabetes's, obesity and stroke[6].

So, what are some ways we can assure the proper amounts of rest? **Stick to a routine:** Make a habit of getting to bed at the same time every night wind down: Take a relaxing bath, read a book, meditation or deep breathing routine, bed-time tea. Turn off TV and stop looking at your phone: The light from TV and our phones can interfere with our sleep patterns. Try and make a habit of turning off the TV and stop looking at your phone an hour beefier bedtime[3].

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References:

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