TIP SHEET: MANAGING STRESS

Stress is an unavoidable part of life. From time to time, everyone experiences increased levels of stress. However, if left unaddressed, stress can continue to build and affect your health and ability to cope with life. This process can occur with chronic stress that builds gradually over time, or with acute stress, that suddenly overwhelms our ability to cope. That's why social support and self-care are important. They can help you see your problems in perspective…and the stressful feelings ease up.

Sometimes stress can be good. For instance, it can help you develop skills needed to manage potentially threatening situations in life. However, stress can be harmful when it is severe enough to make you feel overwhelmed and out of control.

Strong emotions like fear, sadness, or other symptoms of depression are normal, as long as they are temporary and don't interfere with daily activities. If these emotions last too long or cause other problems, it's a different story.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Physical or emotional tension are often signs of stress. They can be reactions to a situation that causes you to feel threatened or anxious. Stress can be positive (such as planning your wedding) or negative (such as dealing with the effects of a natural disaster).

COMMON REACTIONS TO A STRESSFUL EVENT INCLUDE:

- Disbelief and shock
- Tension and irritability
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Difficulty making decisions
- Being numb to one's feelings
- Loss of interest in normal activities
- Loss of appetite
- Nightmares and recurring thoughts about the event
- Anger

- Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Sadness and other symptoms of depression
- Feeling powerless
- Crying
- Sleep problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Headaches, back pains, and stomach problems

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TIPS FOR SELF-CARE

The best ways to manage stress in hard times are through self-care. Below are the recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for managing stress in healthy ways:

- Avoid drugs and alcohol. They may seem to be a temporary fix to feel better, but in the long run they can create more problems and add to your stress – instead of take it away.
- Find support. Seek help from a partner, family member, friend, counselor, doctor, or clergyperson. Having a sympathetic, listening ear and sharing about your problems and stress really can lighten the burden.
- Connect socially. After a stressful event, it is easy isolate yourself. Make sure that you are spending time with loved ones. Consider planning fun activities with your partner, children, or friends.
- Take care of yourself.
    - Eat a healthy, well-balanced diet
    - Exercise regularly
    - Get plenty of sleep
    - Give yourself a break if you feel stressed out—for example, treat yourself to a therapeutic massage
    - Maintain a normal routine
- Stay active. You can take your mind off your problems by giving such helping a neighbor, volunteering in the community, even taking the dog on a long walk. These can be positive ways to channel your feelings.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention