

Relieving Some Winter Stress

It's March and it's been a long winter, even by Michigan standards! Hope is on the horizon! Soon the snow will be gone and the sun shining and new life outside will be blooming, but in the meantime we all are feeling some stress and the winter blues. This is especially true for caregivers who have been maybe cooped up indoors doing what they do best in taking care of someone.

What causes stress?

Sometimes, the pressure of caring for someone who is elderly or who has a chronic illness can lead to stress or a condition called "caregiver burnout."

Stress can be caused by anything that requires you to adjust to a change in your environment. Your body reacts to these changes with physical, mental, and emotional responses. We all have our own ways of coping with change, so the causes of stress can be different for each person. Becoming a caregiver is a common source of stress for many people. Our bodies are designed to feel stress and react to it. Not always a bad thing, stress keeps us alert and ready to escape danger.

It's not always possible to avoid change or the situations that can cause stress; as a result, you can begin to feel overwhelmed and unable to cope. When it persists, stress can affect the body's immune system, leading to illness. The key to coping with stress is to identify the causes of stress in your life, then learn healthy ways to deal with them. It's important to remember that stress comes from how you respond to stress and events in your life. Therefore, you have some control over stress and how it affects you.

When you are not sure of the exact cause of your stress, it may be helpful to know the warning signs. Once you can identify these signs, you can learn how your body responds. Then you can take appropriate steps to reduce the stress.

Signs of Caregiver Stress

Irritability - You snap at people for small things; you lose patience easily.

Withdrawal - You don't stay in touch with friends and activities like you used to.

Fatigue - You are constantly tired and exhausted.

Insomnia - You have a hard time getting to sleep, staying asleep, or sleep restlessly.

Apathy - You feel numb and must force yourself to do routine caregiver tasks.

Appetite Changes - You eat more than you used to, or don't feel like eating anything.

Feelings of Guilt - You think you are not doing enough, or you feel resentment for the amount of work doing

These list of emotions could be only a small fraction of what you are experiencing. However, if the above list really hits the mark on what you are feeling, you may be experiencing stress and/or depression.

Can stress hurt my health?

Stress can cause health problems or make problems worse if you don't learn ways to deal with it. Talk to your family doctor if you think some of your symptoms are caused by stress. It's important to make sure that your symptoms aren't caused by other health problems.

What can I do to manage my stress?

The first step is to learn to recognize when you're feeling stressed. Early warning signs of stress include tension in your shoulders and neck, or clenching your hands into fists.

The next step is to choose a way to deal with your stress. One way is to avoid the event or thing that leads to your stress--but often this is not possible. A second way is to change how you react to stress. This is often the best way.

Tips for reducing stress in your life:

Don't worry about things you can't control, such as the weather.

Try to look at change as a positive challenge, not as a threat.

Talk with a trusted friend, family member or counselor.

Exercise on a regular basis.

Eat well-balanced meals and get enough sleep.

Participate in something you don't find stressful, such as sports, social events or hobbies.

Keep a positive attitude. Believe in yourself.

Accept that there are events you cannot control.

Learn to relax.

Limit yourself to moderate alcohol and caffeine intake.

Set realistic goals and expectations.

Get enough rest and sleep. Your body needs time to recover from stressful events.

Don't rely on alcohol or drugs to reduce stress.

Learn to use stress management techniques and coping mechanisms, such as deep breathing or guided imagery.

Coping Mechanisms

Most people don't have a plan for coping with stress. Fortunately, there are a number of techniques that you can use to help deal with stress, such as:

Two Minute Relaxation Technique

Find yourself a comfortable position, either sitting or lying down.

Uncross your arms and legs (crossing your arms and legs creates physical tension).

Check the main tension points and consciously allow them to relax:

Unclench your teeth and relax your jaws.

Drop your shoulders.

Open your hands and spread your fingers, then relax.

Be aware of your position in the chair or on the bed. Concentrate on your head for a moment, then your arms, the trunk of your body, your legs.

Listen to the sound of your breathing, don't do anything, just listen. It is unimportant whether you breathe quickly or slowly, just listen.

Now take a deeper breath. As you breathe in, make sure you breathe in through the belly; if you are doing this properly your hand will rise as your belly expands. As you exhale, your belly area will deflate and your hand will sink down with it.

Take another breath through your belly, and hold for a mental count of two, then release all the air from the body in a long low deep sigh, and relax.

Let your breathing return to normal again.

Very gently tighten all of your muscles, and as you release the tension, allow your eyes to close comfortably and naturally as you begin to feel physically calm.

Repeat as often as you feel the need.

Guided Imagery Technique

One of the simplest and most powerful ways to learn to relax is through the "peaceful place" imagery:

Imagine yourself in some setting in nature perhaps high in the mountains, or on a beach or near a lake. Find yourself walking along a path in this setting. Notice what the sky looks like, how the air smells, what the ground feels like beneath your feet as you walk. With each step along your path allow yourself to grow more and more relaxed.

As you look ahead, you see a little cottage. It's there just for you. Walk up to this cottage. What does it look like and what is it made of? Go inside and walk around your cabin. Everything about this place is peaceful. If you like lots of sunlight, imagine that your cabin has lots of windows with an incredible view. Sit down in a comfortable chair in your cottage and soak in the relaxation. This is your place . . . a million miles from nowhere - if that's where you want it to be.

This is just one example to use for guided imagery. There are videos, books, etc. available in stores to purchase related to relaxation techniques. Contact your local hospital, COA, Senior Center for the possibility of classes being offered.

Final Closing Thoughts

By recognizing your warning signs and taking steps to reduce the stress in your life, you should be able to cope more easily with the pressures of being a caregiver. Be gentle to yourself!