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STRESS: DON'T LET IT MANAGE YOUR LIFE

Chronic excess stress doesn't just ruin your day – it could ruin your health.

There is a “healthful,” stimulating kind and level of stress. It’s called eustress.

Susan Harris, University of Nebraska Extension Educator in Rural Health, Wellness, and Safety, says eustress assists in rising to a challenge.

“For instance, if you have a son or daughter who’s getting married, you will feel stress the day of the wedding,” Harris says. “Your body will produce cortisol, which helps you work through the day. The difference between eustress and stress that can negatively impact our physical health is the length of time we continue to produce cortisol.”

Cortisol is a natural stress hormone produced by the human body when we experience emotions such as fear, anxiety, or anger. The body’s response to cortisol is an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, blood glucose, respiration, and muscle tension. Cortisol also shuts down body systems that aren’t necessary during a crisis, such as digestion and reproduction.

At normal levels, cortisol can help control blood sugar levels, regulate metabolism, help reduce inflammation, and assist with memory formulation. This hormone also has a controlling effect on salt and water balance. For women, cortisol supports the developing fetus during pregnancy.

“These are all important reasons why cortisol becomes a problem when levels are sustained at an abnormal level,” Harris says. “It’s difficult to see the correlation between cortisol levels and what’s happening inside our body, but it’s so important for us to recognize the value of managing stress and avoiding consistently high levels of cortisol.”

If cortisol levels remain high for an extended period of time the damage to the body will continually increase. For example, people who consistently have high blood pressure are more apt to become diabetic. Ongoing high levels of cortisol alters the immune system and may be linked to anxiety and depression.

“We tend to think that stress is only in our heads,” Harris says. “However, research has shown how greatly it affects our entire body.”

Harris notes that there are five different levels of stress:

1. Physical: Frequent headaches, difficulty sleeping, frequent illnesses and ongoing fatigue.
2. Emotional: Bitterness, anger, anxiety; loss of sense of humor and/or loss of interest in past enjoyable activities.
3. Behavioral: Acting out, passive/aggressive behavior, irritability, tendency to isolate self.
4. Cognitive: Intense focus on stress leads to inability to concentrate and/or memory loss; inability to focus.
5. Self-worth: Internal condemning voice that insists the person is a failure, unable to “do anything right.”

“Symptoms to watch for include changes in socialization, such as not going to meet friends for daily coffee,” Harris says. “A person under great stress may begin making changes in their daily routine. Those changes may be subtle, but they are signals of stress that’s out of control.”

Lack of activity, decline in the appearance of the farm or home, increased illness in livestock, or increased accidents and/or illness for the farmer.

“These are all common signs of chronic stress,” Harris says.

Often, the person experiencing the stress doesn’t recognize the effect on themselves. They become easily overloaded and don’t process things as they normally would.

“The person may put aside the facts related to their stress and attempt to come up with their own ideas about what’s causing their behavior,” Harris says. “That simply leads to an escalation of the stress and damage to their body.”

To help avoid and/or relieve stress, Harris recommends recognizing what circumstances can be controlled and which ones are beyond a person’s ability to control.

“We can only control what we think, feel, and do,” Harris says. “To manage stress, focus on those things and use some simple ways to help yourself destress.”

Harris points out that most people's self-talk to themselves is far more harsh than the way they would talk to a friend.

"In general, we're pretty mean to ourselves," she says "Try to talk to yourself the same way you would talk to a friend, someone you respect."

Other distress activities include ensuring that proper eating, activity, and sleep practices are followed to assist the body with proper function.

"Connecting regularly with a social network is also important in managing stress," Harris says. "If we don't take time for social activity, we're depriving ourselves of some good therapy that helps keep stress under control."

Ongoing interaction with someone who is affected by chronic stress can lead to low self-esteem and a sense of responsibility for causing the stress. Harris recommends reminding yourself that, rather than causing stress for another, we sometimes become a convenient target for the person who's struggling to manage stressful circumstances.

In this scenario, the most effective response to a personal attack is to remain calm and reaffirm that the situation is not about you. Because stress can cause an individual to breathe rapidly, controlled breathing can help de-escalate a stressful situation.

"Remain calm," Harris says. "Remind yourself that you can only control what you think, feel, and do. It's natural to get our defenses up in this kind of situation. But a better response is to engage in controlled breathing, which is scientifically proven to help the body relax."

The principle of controlled breathing involves exhaling breath longer than inhaling. For example, inhale for a count of four and exhale for a count of six. This practice will help those around us reduce their stress, too.

"I appreciate Steven Covey, who has said, 'Most people do not listen with the intent to understand. They listen with the intent to reply.' Don't fall into the trap of cooking up answers while the other person speaks. Listen with empathy and make every effort to hear the feelings the other person is expressing."

When stress becomes extreme, talk of death and suicide are indications that it's time to seek professional help. That is especially true if the stressed person begins giving away prized possessions and/or seeks to isolate themselves more than normal.

"If someone loses interest in something that was important to them and they begin talking about being a burden or feeling helpless," Harris says, "don't leave that person alone and find the necessary resources to get them some help."

Online resources for managing stress can be found at

<https://extension.unl.edu/statewide/kearney/staying-connected-during-tough-times/>.

Resources include:

- Rural Response Hotline
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
- Veterans Crisis Line
- Nebraska Family Helpline

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