

Managing our stress well
by Lloyd Robertson

Stress is good for you.

Recognizing the value of stress a teacher once asked me if I wanted to spend another year in grade four. Miss Kuntz was a yardstick wielding veteran with a bad disposition, bad sense of humour, and, as I recall, bad breath. There was no way I wanted to spend another year with my desk nestled against her's. I found motivation.

Without stress there is no movement. But we are never without stress for long. Eventually the stress of hunger will motivate me to move off my couch and to the fridge. We also generate our own stress internally as when I have hopes and dreams that motivate me to further my education. Worrying is another way we stress ourselves.

You have all heard that stress is bad for your health. Stress has been linked to high blood pressure, heart attacks, migraine and tension headaches, asthma, ulcers, various skin conditions, sexual disorders, depression and suicide. It even inhibits our immune systems. Too much stress, it appears, can be fatal.

Too much stress also reduces productive behavior. Suppose that a teacher asks "Johnny" if he wants to spend another year in grade four. But Johnny is already distressed living with alcoholic parents, worrying about younger siblings, suffering from lack of sleep and being picked on by older bullies at school. The teacher's threat will likely have the opposite effect to what was intended by reducing his ability to learn.

The first thing I do when counselling someone suffering from stress is to find ways to change the situation. Are there problems that can be solved? Are there stressors that can be avoided? Improving communication skills often reduces the amount of stress from which a person suffers.

Sometimes we cannot change the situation. A parent with a severely disabled child, for example, will face extra stressors due to that disability but will usually want to continue to care for that child. People who cannot or do not want to reduce the major stressors in their lives still have a number of options for managing their stress.

There are people who handle huge amounts of stress without any apparent ill effects. Frankly, people who are competitive, ambitious, achievement-orientated, and aggressive with a high need for recognition do not do well with large amounts of stress. Personality modification teaching them to work without getting angry and to relax without feeling guilty is often effective.

Handling stress well involves avoiding irrational thinking. Believing that we are a bad parent when our child does not succeed is an example of irrational thinking. Believing that we must be the best, that we must be loved by a particular person and, that, when we make a mistake we are a "loser" are other examples of irrational thinking. People who have difficulty saying "no" or who set unrealistic goals are probably victims of their own thinking.

Regular physical exercise, two to three times a week, helps deal with the physical effects of stress and increases our ability to handle more stress. Put away your skidoo and take up cross country skiing this winter. You may be surprised by the results.

Diaphragmatic breathing can help us deal more effectively with stressful situations while we are in them. We can teach ourselves to be calm when everything around us is in chaos.

I also teach a progressive relaxation exercise that has proven very effective in reducing the effects of stress and in improving sleep patterns. A proper diet is another essential in dealing with stress.

In conclusion, it is not so much the amount of stress we face that is the problem. It is a matter of adjusting our lifestyle and our thinking so that we can manage our stress well.