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Acute and Chronic Stress

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Don't "Sweat the Small Stuff"

This month's topic is designed to help you identify, categorize, and respond to the different types of stress we all face on a regular basis. Rather than grouping all stressors into the same category and feeling overwhelmed, this month's newsletter will help you channel more energy to bigger concerns while simultaneously devoting less time to things that are not as jeopardizing to your wellness and personal health.

Making a Mountain Out of a Molehill

For many of you reading this newsletter, you can recall Richard Carlson's book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff* book published a few years ago, where he essentially discouraged people from "stressing out" over the relatively small things in life. While the exact definition of "Small Stuff" is certainly relative to each person, we can probably all agree that some things in life are more important to pay attention to than others (i.e. a career change is usually more important than what you are going to plan for dinner tonight!). The funny thing, however, is that we tend to lump all the things we stress over into one big pile, and the result is that we feel overwhelmed, tired, depressed, and sometimes even angry when we are forced to deal with everything.

Cognitive psychologists often try to help people gain control over the stressors in their lives, and one technique that has been proven helpful is encouraging clients to develop a hierarchy of the issues in their lives that they find stressful. Rather than grouping everything together and feeling overwhelmed, this technique allows people to prioritize stressors into categories. The bigger, more significant stressors can then be addressed first and with more energy, while the smaller life hassles can be qualified as just that – and addressed in a much less time and energy-consuming way.

When people are able to gain better clarity on the things that stress them, they will then feel in more **control** of their lives. The advantage of gaining control is that it gives people the sense of confidence needed to tap into personal resources to beat stress!

Acute and Chronic Stress

When evaluating the stress in your life, it may be advantageous to categorize into two separate categories: Acute and chronic stress. **Acute stress** is the type of stress that is usually "in the moment" and transient in nature. Some examples of acute stress include the traffic you battled on the way to work today, the minor disagreement you had with your boss this morning, or how you are going to get out of work on time to make it to your child's game tonight. As you can see, none of these examples are debilitating stressors, and in most instances they can be improved upon rather easily with some sound thinking and planning.

Chronic stress, on the other hand, is the more long-lasting, enduring stress that is more taxing and requires greater resiliency. Examples of chronic stress might include the loss of a job during the current recession, conditions of poverty and crime, or a long-term illness. In these examples the stressors are more severe in nature, require greater amounts of energy, planning, and resiliency, and usually last a lot longer than acute stressors do.

How Categorizing Stress Helps with Recovery

First, by examining and categorizing your stress you will be taking positive and proactive steps toward stress recovery. Instead of simply sitting back and responding to everything that comes at you in a reactive way, the simple procedure of categorizing your stress can lead to better emotional health and overall wellness.

Second, when you see that, for most people, the type of stress we deal with daily is acute in nature, it gives us more confidence that we can deal with the little things and still have enough energy to tackle the bigger things as they come. Rather than feeling completely flustered because the woman at the checkout line was rude this morning, we can learn to let that go. It's analogous to either choosing to walk around with a pebble in your shoe or simply taking your shoe off and removing the pebble.

More Information

Each month Dr. Chris Stankovich writes a newsletter for the Educational Council of Franklin County along the topics of balance, wellness, and life success. To learn more about his products, counseling services, or professional consultation, please visit www.drstankovich.com or email chris@drstankovich.com

Finally, by feeling better about dealing with acute stress you will develop a better attitude, confidence level, and emotional state that is needed for the bigger things (chronic stress). With these things going for you, it is much easier to think through problems and arrive at better, more responsible means for coping and problem solving.

Tips & Strategies

- Take out a notebook and write out all the things that are “stressing you out.” Interestingly, this exercise alone will allow you to have a cathartic experience and purge many negative emotions.
- Next, go back through your list and place an “A” for daily, acute stress and a “C” for more enduring, chronic stress. Finally, develop comprehensive plans for the bigger things that are stressful and write out your thoughts. On the other hand, for the acute stressors, think about ways that you can keep your head high and take things in stride rather than letting these things ruin your day. As Richard Carlson says, “Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff”.

Additional Links

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_signs.htm

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