WHOLE-PERSON WELLBEING (General Healthy Lifestyle): 06 — STRESS

(NOTE: Check with your health care provider for any nutritional concerns related to physical conditions, for example, diabetes, hyperglycemia, heart disease, etc.)

(NOTE: Check with your health care provider before beginning an exercise program.)

KEY POINTS:

- Long-term exposure to the body’s natural stress reaction mechanisms does physical harm.
- Chronic stress contributes to poor nutrition and weight gain — which exacerbates chronic stress.
- Poor nutrition negatively affects sleep — which contributes to poor nutrition and weight gain.
- Address excess stress and emotional issues like depression and anxiety.
- Stress and depression encourage poor eating habits.
- Stress and depression interfere with goal setting and accomplishment.

TRACK:

- Weight (weekly) (Goal: lose ½ -2 lbs., if necessary)
- Water intake (daily — 8-ounce glasses) (Goal: 6-8 glasses)
- Breakfast (non-sugary) (daily — yes / no) (Goal: yes)
- Sugar intake (daily — grams) (Goal: 50-60 grams)
- Vegetable/fruit servings (daily) (Goal: 2-4 servings)
- Second servings at meals (daily) (Goal: 0 seconds)
- Minutes of exercise (daily) (Goal: 20-30 minutes, 3-5 days per week)
- Hours of sleep (nightly) (Goal: 7-8 hours, 5-7 nights per week)

GOALS:

- Try one of these simple breathing exercises for 5-10 minutes, twice per week:
  - [Link](http://healthland.time.com/2012/10/08/6-breathing-exercises-to-relax-in-10-minutes-or-less/)
  - [Link](http://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=46922)
  Or simply take 10 slow, deep breaths through your nose, while focusing solely on your breathing. *(Try this at times of tension or high stress.)*
What Is Stress?

Stress is a psychological and/or physical reaction to positive or negative situations, whether real or imagined. There are two types: 1) short-term, acute stress; and 2) long-term, chronic stress. In either case, the body’s natural reaction to tension, pressure and change is to release internal chemicals (neurotransmitters, hormones, etc.) to deal with stress. The body needs occasional acute stress to motivate action and response (e.g., the caveman fleeing the tiger that surprised him on the trail). The body is NOT supposed to be perpetually responding to chronic stress (e.g., continuously worrying about job security or personal finances for weeks/months on end).

Long-term exposure to the body’s natural stress reaction mechanisms does harm.

When we talk about stress here, we’re talking about mental/emotional stress. Physical stress comes from physical injury or disease, which is certainly important. Your body could also be physically stressed from poor nutrition or lack of exercise. And to complicate things just a little more, physical stress from any of these things can affect mental/emotional stress, which we will talk about. This is one more example of how the mind and body are connected.

Mental/emotional stress is essentially the same as worry.

This program is about mental/emotional stress. The things that stress you out cause you to worry, such as not enough time, not enough money, family problems, etc. We could all add to this partial list of reasons for stress/worry:

- I have too much work and not enough time.
- I don’t get along with my boss.
- If I lose my job, I’ll be in dire financial straits.
- I’m in dire financial straits even with a job.
- I just lost my job.
- My mother needs to be cared for, and I’m it.
- My father just died.
- My child was just born.
- My teenage daughter is pregnant.
- My son is going to court for a drug arrest.
- My child is getting married.
- My spouse and I are not getting along — What if we divorce?
- I just got divorced.
- I can’t keep up with my courses, and my parents are spending big bucks for my college.
- I just dropped out of college.

Can you top these? No doubt many of you can. And a lot of you might be feeling excess stress for lesser reasons than listed here. As we say about many other things, it’s all relative. If you worry too much, consistently — chronically — it doesn’t matter whose troubles are the worst. It’s not a contest. What matters is how you deal with the stress you have.
Nutrition ↔ Stress

Chronic stress contributes to poor nutrition — which exacerbates chronic stress.
Poor nutrition negatively affects sleep — which exacerbates chronic stress.

Chronic Stress Causes Nutrition Problems — Which Reinforce Stress

- The body releases cortisol (the “stress hormone”), which effects the following:
  - Decreases the effectiveness of the hormone leptin, the body’s “full switch,” which tells your appetite you’ve had enough
  - Encourages the storage of visceral (belly) fat, which increases the risk of cardiovascular and metabolic disease
  - Creates a craving for junk food, sweets and other refined (“bad”) carbohydrates, which:
    - causes mood and blood sugar spikes (highs and lows)
    - interferes with getting enough necessary nutrients from healthy foods
- Refined (unhealthy) carbohydrate cravings and malfunctioning “full switch” causes weight gain.
- Poor nutrition weakens the body’s natural attempts to accommodate stress.

Answers

- Educate yourself about basic good nutrition.
- Eat 3 meals daily (don’t skip any), at about the same times each day — this diminishes the roller coaster effects of not being hungry, then feeling famished.
- Go easy on alcohol and caffeine.
- Lean toward foods high in the following:
  - Omega-3 fatty acids (salmon, albacore tuna, walnuts and flaxseed)
  - Folic acid (leafy greens)
  - Vitamin B12 (lean animal protein)
- Lean away from junk food, sweets and other refined carbohydrates.

Address Excess Stress and Emotional Issues Like Depression and Anxiety

Being continuously stressed out or depressed about life circumstances will greatly interfere with your attempts to adopt healthy lifestyle habits. Whole-Person Wellbeing is a game plan for health improvement involving learning and effort. Unfortunately, many stressed or depressed people medicate these uncomfortable or painful feelings by overeating, junk-food eating and other unhealthy habits, no matter how much willpower they try to summon. Obviously, these two forces will conflict.

Persistent stress and depression are harmful to people in other ways besides interfering with healthy eating. Many sufferers don’t take their medication properly. They often overuse chemicals of abuse such as alcohol and other drugs. And they often don’t feel up to putting out effort for exercise, reflection, relaxation, getting proper sleep or maintaining healthy relationships.
• If you are affected by excess stress, anxiety or depression, take one or more of the following actions:

  o Consult your doctor for help and guidance.

  o Call your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), if you have access to one, for guidance or short-term counseling.

  o Consider consulting a counseling clinic or therapist.

  o Seek out stress-reduction programs or activities.

  o Seek out education for addressing stress and other emotional issues.

Next Step: Keep Up the Good Work

This healthy lifestyle program has given you insight into what is involved in maintaining your weight and maintaining a healthy body — and it’s so much more than simply eating right. You have a start on the basics: nutrition, exercise, sleep and stress management. Keep up your goals in each of these areas, and dig deeper if you feel you might have a sleeping disorder or harmful stress levels. See your health care provider for help with either of these. You’ve already seen her (or him) to prepare for your exercise program (you have, right?). It’s always highly recommended that you work with your health care provider in all of these areas; she can continue to guide you in the right direction and monitor any problem areas.

Now you will probably want to focus on the deeper aspects of good nutrition and changing your eating habits for the better, for the long term. During this time, keep up your improved sleep habits (7-9 hours per night, as much as possible), stress management activities and exercise routine (at whatever level you’re at). You might only be doing 10 minutes per day, 3 days per week. This is fine, but you must keep it up, and you must continue to gradually expand on it.

Good sleep, stress management and exercise also support your whole-person wellbeing goals in several ways including keeping a positive mental outlook, which supports better food choices and sticking to your goals. You feel better and look better and stay more confident. Keep it up.