

Combat high blood pressure, stress by just relaxing your mind, body

We face stress everywhere – at work, at home, in the car, and in our interactions with others.

We think of chronic, daily stressors as the cost of living in a modern age. We tend to ignore their effects on our bodies and minds, shrugging off stress-related aches and pains or changes in mood. But chronic stress has health implications beyond tension headaches and emotional ups and downs.

Stress activates the sympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for the well-known “fight-or-flight” response. This response serves us well when we’re in immediate danger. It increases our heart rate and blood pressure, opens airways in our lungs and releases hormones in our bodies that help mobilize energy stores. In short, it rapidly gears up our bodies to either face a threat or run from it.

But when activated on a daily basis, over years, research has shown that this system also can damage our bodies. Chronic stress may contribute to hypertension, accelerate the depositing of fatty plaques in the arteries (a process known as atherosclerosis), decrease immune function and increase inflammation.

Stress also can worsen the perception of pain, deepen depression and impair the quality of life for those who live with chronic diseases such as heart failure or cancer.

We often deal with stress in negative ways, by eating unhealthy foods, drinking excessively and smoking. The combination of stress and an unhealthy lifestyle is a formula for many of modern life’s afflictions, such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and obesity.

Unfortunately, we can’t all quit our jobs and move to the beach to live a stress-free existence. But we can learn to deal with stress more effectively.

One stress-reduction technique that is gaining acceptance among patients and medical practitioners alike is meditation. Many have discovered this mind-body practice as an effective antidote to the negative impact of stress.

Though rooted in Eastern religious tradi-

tions, meditation has no relation to any particular religion. It is, quite simply, a method for learning to let go of the thoughts that seem to crowd our minds from moment to moment during the day. In the process, we learn to appreciate life in the present moment and stop stressing about events in the future or worrying about the past.

Practiced by sitting or lying in a comfortable position, meditation involves focusing one’s attention. The focus can be on breathing, a word or phrase (known as a mantra), a prayer, an image or an object. Thoughts are allowed to come and go naturally, and when a distracting thought occurs the meditator gently returns to the focus.

With daily practice, the meditator experiences greater peace of mind and physical relaxation, a phenomenon known as the relaxation response, a term dubbed by Dr. Herbert Benson, a Harvard-based researcher in mind-body medicine.

The relaxation response has the opposite effect of the fight-or-flight response – it slows the heart rate, lowers the blood pressure and slows breathing, triggering a calming effect on the mind and body. Over time, these changes may be long lasting.

Hospitals and health centers all across the United States are now offering meditation programs. They are designed to help patients cope with the stress of living with conditions such as chronic pain, cancer and heart disease, as well as things like anxiety and depression. There also are programs for people interested in general stress reduction and wellness. Some programs combine gentle exercises, such as yoga and tai chi, with meditation.

In Delaware, Christiana Care’s Preventive Medicine & Rehabilitation Institute offers a number of such programs. For more information, call 661-3000 or visit www.christianacare.org.

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