

STRESS CONTROL

by Dr. Simmons

About stress--there is some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that all of us have to contend with stressful circumstances and conditions every day of our lives. Some of us, it seems, have to contend with more than our fair share. There is even more bad news connected with this subject. There are personal and societal factors that make it difficult to cope with stress and leave us vulnerable to vicissitudes of life that take a heavy toll on our mental, physical, physiological and emotional well being. Before we look at these elements, let us say something about the good news.

The good news is that there is something we can do about stress in our lives. We can avoid some stressful situations and conditions and we can mitigate the effects of others by decisions we make and actions we take. This may be contrary to what some people think, but it is true, nonetheless. Let us now look at some of the conditions in our world that threaten our welfare. Generally speaking, our world gets more complex all of the time and complexities of life make it more and more difficult for us to live without a high degree of stress. Since its beginning, our country has undergone changes on a regular basis and it, as any living organism or entity, will continue to change as long as it exists. So, this will continue.

Our country began as an agrarian-rural society, went through an industrial-urban phase and now we find ourselves in a high tech megalopolis stage. The implications of this process are staggering. We find ourselves having to cope with stressful situations on all fronts. On one hand, it may appear to be a great thing to be in the middle of a high tech world. On the other hand, most of our

population are not prepared to participate in it fully. If you are, and most who read this article will be, you are left to deal with those who are not. And that is no small chore. Much of our society finds itself in about the same situation as were the buggy makers during the first half of this century. The skills they have developed may be no longer marketable. Of necessity, they will have to make changes. For a mature person who has achieved a certain station in life and is expecting to continue an enjoyable life style, it can be a bewildering experience to find there is no job market for skills learned and perfected. Those who feel they can compete favorably in a high tech society will have to cope with the resentment of those who cannot and will have to assume responsibility for training and education of those who are in danger of being swallowed up by progress.

Not only do we have those who cannot participate in this new society, but those who find themselves in a precarious situation. Quantum leaps are being made in all scientific-technical areas and even those with a high degree of intelligence and a strong background in science-technology find themselves hardpressed to stay abreast of the ever increasing mountain of knowledge that continues to grow each day. It is keen and the burden it places on the individual to keep pace is dangerously heavy.

Technological advances are affecting everything we do in life. Communications, transportation, food growth, preparation and distribution, educational programs, all are undergoing sweeping changes. About the time we make peace with the idea of flying (many still have not), we have to cope with high speed surface

transportation. About the time we get comfortable with one computerized system, we have to learn to master another. And so it goes. Nothing remains the same. Our capacities for adjustment are taxed to the limit.

In addition to technological advances, we have to cope with the pressures of urbanized living in the extreme. We are finding ourselves with less and less space to call our own and more and more people with whom to share that space. Physical and emotional comfort are important and we need some space for that, just to get away from it all, as it were; but that isn't the end of it. The advent of the megalopolis on a large scale (by that, I mean more of them) has brought with it more and more demands on our abilities to relate to others and interact with a wide variety of personalities with diverse backgrounds who come from many different subcultures and who follow many different value systems. It is still difficult for a New Englander to deal with a Southwesterner and a Yankee to understand the ways of the Southerner. Yet, these people are being thrown together more and more in work situations which demand more and more of them in the way of understanding and cooperation. Not only are they being required to share the work place, but marriages are consummated between individuals who have not the slightest idea of how the other half lives, and has lived, and what their expectations of marriage are. It is certainly well accepted that those who marry have the greatest chance of success if they marry others with whom they share many facets of life. If they come from the same educational level, same socio-economic status, same religion, etc., their chances for marriage survival are better. With the new world, it is especially difficult to succeed in family planning and home building.

There are other societal factors that militate against successful stress control on the part of the individual. In a capitalistic society, Madison Avenue plays a very important role. Its role simply stated, is to make everyone of us unhappy with whatever it is we have to wear, to eat, to ride or to play with.

Buy something new is the clarion call that goes out to the entire populace. You simply cannot be caught dead in plain ol' Levis. You have to go with Calvin Klein, or Jordache, at least. You certainly don't want to invite friends to your home and have to get up and walk over to the TV and change stations. How primitive! So, we find ourselves really having to keep up

with the Joneses and the Smiths and the Silversteins and the Delgados and the Wongs and Ferraris and the Slomchinskis and just about everybody else on the block and for blocks around. The grievous burden we bear as a result leaves us with unmanageable amounts of stress.

Not only does Madison Avenue dictate to us what we have to wear and what we should drive and the kind of recreation we should engage in, but it reminds continually of our shortcomings from day to day. Apparently, we all smell rather bad and have skins that are too dry or too oily (some of us have both, according to some recently revealed information) or hair that has split ends, or is too thick or too thin. And, of course, all of us are overweight so nothing can be done but join a weight watching organization that reminds us that we are totally unacceptable unless we follow their plan to the nth degree. It's a wonder that we have any sanity at all.

Madison Avenue doesn't stop there either. They bombard us with all kinds of sound advice. For example, one of the leading breweries has begun to advertise that you should "put a little weekend in your week". In other words, drink alcoholic beverages every day and do not let a day go by without getting in the proper amount of dissipation. After all, you wouldn't want your body to know how good it can feel if it is not basted with alcohol regularly. Another advertisement has to do with the TGIM club. Thank God, it's Monday! Now, when we wake up foundering from the excesses of the weekend, we do not have to suffer from sick feelings. Just start drinking again. Never mind trying to find out if somebody got the number of the truck that hit you.

Of course, Madison Avenue is joined by others who have a buck to make. As you drive down the street, any street, you will find advertisements on signs and directly on buildings proclaiming Happy Hour! And that's every day of the week. If ever there was a misnomer, it has to be that assertion. I have witnessed a considerable amount of embryonic misery watching people "enjoy" Happy Hour! It really doesn't matter though, because you can straighten everything out with another helping of Madison Avenue.

There is an ad running currently on TV and elsewhere that says essentially for you to go ahead and dissipate to your heart's content. Our tablet is designed for people like you--for those who burn the candle at both ends. The implication is that it is perfectly all right. You really don't have to worry about what you are doing to your person and to your interpersonal relationships and to your ability to work and be productive. Dissipate to your heart's content and then take one of our li'l ol' pills and everything will be lovely. And, of course, they make many sales as a result. It seems that the majority of people actually believe what they are told in this regard.

Feeling tired and worn out, lagging a little? Grab our brand of cigarettes. They refresh you. You will feel better, stronger, more sociable. You will satisfy that need to belong. Be one of the in group. It is rather easy to be victimized by this type of suggestion. Obviously, it works. Advertising pays; at least, it pays the advertiser.

We cannot limit ourselves in this discussion, however, to society as a whole. We must concern ourselves with individuals as well. There are some characteristics of persons that make it difficult for them to live lives that produce a minimal amount of stress. One thing that seems to stand out in the young is the God complex. I am immortal. Nothing will ever happen to me. I can abuse my body and my mind and I can defy the law of gravity and other physical laws and remain in complete control. Of course, there is a terrible price that society as a whole pays for this kind of thinking, but it seems impossible to counteract. It is bad enough to see this in the young, but when older people do not outgrow it, it is frightening.

Then, too, there are certain things that we feel we really ought to do; for example, "enjoy" the aforementioned Happy Hour. How droll it seems to consider going home when the workday is done. If you have any creativity at all about you, you will go where everybody else is going, to the bar. That's a sign of independence, of being our own person. How unique it would be to go home and play with the babies, or better yet, play with the babies' mama or papa. What a quaint idea!

There is another ritual that we must engage in. After a long, dreary winter when the sun has

hid itself behind the clouds and over the hills for months, suddenly, we find ourselves surrounded by summer. The beaches are bedecked with natural beauties and we must hie ourselves away to the seashore for a little sun and surf. Of course, many of us come back with second degree burns, unable to work, perhaps lose our job, can't get close to anybody for two weeks just waiting for it all to heal so we can do it again. And many are the young ladies who worship the sun and damage their skins beyond repair because that is what everybody is doing. It doesn't make any real difference, of course, because Madison Avenue is advertising an emollient that will take care of everything. We will always have soft, alluring skin, no matter how much we abuse it.

It is amazing how many people choose to fight stress conditions with stress-producing agents such as alcohol and tobacco. Under the guise of relieving stress, these agents create and aggravate already stressful conditions. Not only do we use these damaging agents, but we deny ourselves much benefit from rest and relaxation when we use them during rest periods at work. Rest periods were introduced so people would be able to continue their work after a time of relaxation and recuperation. It is precisely at this time that most of us make a great effort to see that our bodies are denied this brief hiatus from stress by smoking or drinking stimulants which deplete the body's energy resources.

Human beings are also cursed with the belief that whatever happens that threatens well being can be handled by following the advice of a friend. interest in life, totally rested from the cares and worries of the every day world. In most cases, what will happen is that you will come back from such an outing with all of the worldly cares and stresses aggravated by tender feet, sore muscles and exhausted bodies. That is, unless you have been building up to such an adventure gradually. Stresses of life are not to be taken lightly, but require thought and planning to handle successfully. At the same time we are so eagerly following suggestions from our friends, and even casual acquaintances, for the improvement of our lot in life, we humans exhibit another peculiarity. We are quite willing and even anxious to pay professionals for advice not followed. Many unfilled prescriptions and cancelled checks will attest to this fact.

For example, we go to a doctor with a digestive complaint and we are not satisfied unless he gives us a prescription for some magical elixir that can relieve all of our strains and stresses. Of course, in many cases, we do not bother to have the prescription filled because by the time we get to the pharmacy, nature has done its work and we are already feeling a little better, or so we tell ourselves. Besides, when I told the doctor about eating highly seasoned pizza and drinking a little beer, he had the temerity to suggest that perhaps I should not eat highly seasoned pizza and drink beer. Perish the thought of modifying our behavior in order to decrease bodily stress. Everybody drinks beer and eats highly seasoned pizza. What would the pizza makers and breweries do for a living? Obviously, the doctor is not to be taken seriously. There is a little story about Babe Ruth that illustrates the frailty of human nature rather well. It is said of the Babe that he was a junk food addict before it was called junk food. On one occasion, he had an upset stomach during a ball game. Somebody asked him what he had eaten. His response was "four hot dogs, six cokes, three candy bars, some chips and an apple". After thinking a minute, he said he guessed he shouldn't have eaten that apple. I rather doubt that the apple was the culprit. Perhaps the story itself is apocryphal, but it certainly characterizes most of us in that we find it difficult to associate our behavior with the way we feel.

There is one other approach that we humans use to solve our stress problems that needs to be observed. Many of us really expend a lot of energy in trying to relieve ourselves of stress, energy that could be used wisely in any number of ways. This is exemplified by the experience related to me recently by a young lady whose husband is in the DP world. She actively pursues a career outside the home, also, and they decided their lives were so filled with stresses they thought were generated by urban living that they needed a place in the country to relax. Excellent idea!

So, they bought themselves a lot with a little cabin on it in a quiet country town north of Houston. Houston was where they labored day after day. Living in Houston is a real labor in itself. Anyway, they could hardly wait for the first weekend away from the city. Wild anticipation reigned. Great plans were made. Everything was going to be so perfect. Finally, Friday evening came and they jumped in the pre-packed auto and headed north on Interstate 45. Some three and a half hours later, they arrived at their little country retreat, battle weary from their struggle to negotiate

the 60 miles. The return trip two days later required the same time and the same effort. Fortunately, they could see the fallacy of their thinking and sold their little dream place and learned to stay in their own back yard and really relax. So much for those factors that impede our search for relief from stress.

It is time to look at the good news again. We can exercise some control over our own lives and make for more relaxed and rewarding life styles that will result in less stress and displeasure with life in general. Now, this is sometimes doubted by individuals who feel they are victims of an uncaring world bent on doing them in totally. So, first we have to rid ourselves of a certain way of thinking and change our attitudes to a degree.

There is a tendency for many of us to blame our ills on something, or somebody, other than ourselves. We see ourselves as pawns in life's game of chess. We are being manipulated, used, abused and influenced in devious, diverse and myriad ways. We are victims of society, of our environment, anything except our own weaknesses and refusal to order our lives in such a way as to reap the most rewards, mentally, emotionally and physically. We obstinately cling to the idea that our adversity in life has nothing to do with our behavior. We simply do not have any control. That is the chief reason for the popularity of astrology in our time. I have had parents sit in my office and lament the fact that their child has seemingly abandoned standards and denied values held near and dear to the older generation. Instead of attempting to understand what their offspring is actually doing and trying to say, it is easier to attribute it to the influence of the stars. We know our child is impulsive, irresponsible and inconsiderate but that is just the way Virgos are. (My apologies to all of you Virgos with sunny dispositions.) Since he is a Virgo, there is obviously nothing that can be done. Or, in the same vein, our child has a terrible temper. I guess it is true what they say about redheads. They are just hot-tempered. If they weren't, their hair wouldn't be red. It doesn't take children long to learn. They get the message quickly. It isn't my fault if I am socially unacceptable so I don't have to do anything about it. These children grow up to be obnoxious adults. There are grown people who will go into temper tantrums and embarrass and humiliate their friends, to say nothing of alienating them. Then, they make some remark to the effect that this is just the way I am. You will just have to get used to me. Not a thought is given to modifying behavior. This

disinclination to accept responsibility for ourselves seems to be bred into us at an early age and is resistant to extirpation.

So, what can be done? As I suggested, change your attitude, if that is necessary, and accept the fact that you can exert a great measure of control over your behavior and your life.

Once we get over the idea that we can find the answers to all of life's problems in pill or liquid form, and we understand that we produce most of our stress by our own thoughts and actions, we will be ready to go to work on improving our lot in life. Then, we will be prepared to do the following things:

1. Learn about yourself. This may involve seeking the help of a professional. There may be someone out there who can help you understand yourself better than you do at present. You will need to know about your intellectual ability and how able you will be to function on a level that requires profound and creative thought. For example, if you aspire to be the world's leading brain surgeon and you had trouble with introductory Biology, pick another goal. It is a good thing to set goals, but they should be commensurate with your abilities.

You will need to know something about your personality and what traits play a dominant role in your interaction with others. If you have an opportunity to get a good position that requires constant contact with the public and you are basically shy and timid and averse to interaction with others, then, choose another position; or, if the position is appealing, work toward overcoming your weaknesses in this area. If you are a highly motivated individual who works at a fast pace, you probably would not enjoy finding yourself in a situation where you have to spend a lot of time cooperating with people who slow you down. If you are claustrophobic, do not take a position that confines you to an eight-foot square cubicle.

Your specific and general interests will have to be considered. If you have an enduring commitment to the Arts, do not place yourself in a position where you are surrounded by sports freaks.

As you find out about yourself, you will be forced to make decisions about what you see. You will have to decide whether you like what you see or whether you would like to change what you see. In any event, the information will be useful to you.

2. Learn about others. This applies especially to the persons with whom you have close associations. These are the people who can be supportive of you from day to day or who can cause you much grief if you cannot communicate well with them. You may not have any interest in participating in Christmas activities. You may not even want to send Christmas Greetings. It might not hurt, however, to consider the feelings of a mate. Your mate's spirits may be revived periodically by observing special days such as Christmas. It may give them an emotional lift and make them feel all is right with the world. As you learn about others, you can make concessions to them in order to have a more agreeable work place or home life. This does not mean that you have to abandon your own principles or make concessions contrary to your conscience. It simply means that you need to learn to consider the feelings of others when decisions are made that affect both of you.

You will find that the world will be a less stressful place if you learn to do this.

3. Learn about sources of stress. Sometimes, it is hard to accept the fact that stress can come from our own inability to handle disappointments such as the loss of a job or rejection by a mate. We tend to act as though all will be all right as soon as we have another job or another mate. We do not allow for the existence of emotional turmoil as a result of what happens to us. Sometimes, we cannot even recognize the source of our discomfort when it should be obvious.

In my files is the history of a 23-year old female student, apparently in good health, who ended up in a hospital for tests after a lengthy battle with fatigue. She went to bed tired, got up in the morning tired and was tired all day at work. It turned out that she had no business working in the atmosphere in which she found herself. She had nothing in common with her

co-workers. She was interested in the Arts and got most of her personal satisfaction from painting, visiting museums and attending dramatic presentations. Her co-workers were all scientifically inclined and had no interest in the things around which she wanted to build her life. It wasn't until she came to this realization that she was able to handle the problem in a rational way. Many of us do not want to admit that we have emotional needs and refuse to admit that any of our ailments could be psychogenetic. Do not allow yourself to think that you are above feeling the effects of stress due to psychological factors.

4. Realize what damage stress can do. Stress, not controlled, can have very damaging effects upon you physically, physiologically, emotionally and mentally. The list of ailments caused in part by psychologically stressful conditions is quite lengthy. Fatigue, constipation, tachycardia, chest pains, elevated blood pressure, insomnia, dizziness, diarrhea, headache, abdominal cramping and the list goes on and on.

In another of my patient files is the story of the young lady, age 30, who suffered from the stress of a divorce. She thought she was handling her situation with considerable aplomb, right up until the time the doctor diagnosed abdominal distress as ulcers. Of course, this was one of those cases in which the patient was "managing" her stress with cigarettes and alcohol. She remained anesthetized a great deal of the time but stress did its damage, anyway.

5. Learn to manage your time. Everything you do takes energy. It takes energy to be a good employee, even if you are also the employer. It takes energy to be a good mate. It takes energy to be a good parent, a good child. We only have so much energy to devote to all of the aspects of our lives. If we spend too much in one area, another area will suffer. If you don't pay attention to time allotments, you will end up exhausted trying to keep up with all of your commitments. We have to establish priorities and learn how to live with them.

6. Make a schedule. This is closely allied to time management. In the case of time management, we are looking at the time we have to spend. In the case of the schedule, we are looking at the number of things we have to do. It may well be that we will have to reduce

the number of activities in which we engage. We may not be able to join a number of bowling leagues. It may be that we cannot handle the money for our favorite organization. We may have to turn down opportunities to learn more about our profession. We have to decide what endeavors really fulfill our needs as an individual and use our energies in pursuing them.

7. Plan recreation. This could be included under scheduling, but I think it is worthy of its own classification. Most of us engage in recreational activities when there isn't anything else to do. Our recreational activities are usually spur-of-the-moment decisions. We keep our calendar full of other things to do, for whatever reason. Sometimes it is purely psychological. We really don't feel that we deserve the time to play. There is so much to do and so little time to do it. At other times, it is simply a lack of planning. We just don't deem recreation worthy of attention. In order to control stress in our lives rather than having it control us, we need to take time for recreation on a regular basis.

8. Learn Relaxation Techniques. There are many techniques for relaxation. Deep-breathing exercises, deep muscle relaxation, stretching exercises, biofeedback, yoga, and meditation are a few. It is not within the scope of this paper to provide instruction in these methods. I am simply calling your attention to the fact that they are available to you. You already know this, but a little reminder may help. It will also be helpful if you will manage to incorporate your selected method on a regular basis and participate with a group in some instances. Any of the above-mentioned methods will decrease tension in your system, help you to sleep and rest better and make better use of your energies.

9. Learn to eat nutritious food. I say learn to eat nutritious food because that is what it takes, learning. It is easy to fall into habits and eating is for most people simply a matter of habit. Unfortunately, it is easy to develop a habit of eating those things that satisfy our palate rather than those that satisfy needs of the body. It is probably advisable not to try to eliminate all junk food from your diet at once if you are a junk food junkie. It would probably be an excellent idea to identify a few nutritious foods that you can live with and develop a taste for them. Then, go on to others while eliminating some of the least useful foods that you now eat.

10. Get a reasonable amount of exercise. I say a reasonable amount because people have a tendency to try to make up for 10 years of sedentary living in a two or three week period of intensive exercise. Usually, this does more harm than good. Walking is still recognized as one of the more healthful exercises and does not call for a great expenditure of money. Swimming is also excellent and it does not cost much either. Of course, if you are on an exercise program that takes up a great deal of your time and energy and it is suitable for you, that is good.

11. Give some thought to your interpersonal relationships. Ask yourself some questions. Are they satisfactory? Do I benefit from them? While you are about it, look at it from the standpoint of the other person. Sometimes people tell me they are not subject to stress problems. On occasion, I find myself suggesting that the people who are dependent on them for emotional support may have a great deal of stress due to their lack of concern. Usually, they agree with me. If you are not getting anything from a relationship, whether it's with your golf partner or your spouse, or whoever, is there anything that you can contribute to make it better? Be honest with yourself in making this assessment.

12. Work on reducing conflict in your life. I am speaking of conflict with others and also conflict of interests that you might have. For example, you may be interested in being well-informed and read so much that you do not have time to devote to other things that may be equally important to you from a business and social standpoint. You may need to spend more time engaging in social activities with other professionals. If you find yourself in constant conflict with others, whether at work or at home, this is draining you energywise and something needs to be done to protect you from damage to your health. If you need to make overtures to others to alleviate the situation, be

sure to do so. To wait for the other party is just inviting more damage to yourself.

13. Financial planning. It is said that people get into more trouble over sex and financial matters (not necessarily in that order) than in any other area. Certainly, it is worthy of some consideration on your part. Most of us would like to have our cake and eat it, too, but few of us are able to do that. If we want to enjoy some of the finer things of life, we are going to have to forego some of the lesser things. Planning will have to be done with parties who have a stake in the results. Certainly, a mate should have input when financial decisions are being made.

14. Allow for plenty of rest to body and mind. As I have mentioned before, everything we do takes energy. The body and mind need time to replenish supplies of energy. There is no substitute for rest. Scientists still are not agreed on what takes place during sleep that is rejuvenating, but it matters little. The fact of the matter is it does rejuvenate, as does just resting from labors periodically, with or without sleep. Some of us take a lot of pride in burning the candle at both ends and working 16-hour days. Many of us take our pride right with us to an untimely demise, denying friends and family our companionship and association over a reasonable period of years. Also, you might find a little rest does wonders for your disposition. You might become more welcome to a friend or mate. The Good Book says that after God made the heavens and the earth, he rested. Enough said.

In concluding, let me reiterate that stress control is primarily a matter of self control and you owe it to yourself to control your life to the end that stress will not take control of it for you and take you through some miserable years before it deposits you in an early grave. The adoption of practices herein suggested will enable you to effectively combat stress and its ill effects.