

## **Stress: A Fact of Life**

**by Jim Kendall, LCSW**

Stress is inevitable. Whether it's triggered by an attacking lion in a prehistoric jungle or by the sales quotas of the "corporate jungle" of today, it is a fact of life. Today's stress may even be more intense and unrelenting than that felt by our ancestors.

Stress is not an external force that is done to us. It is our response to a given stressor (a person, situation or circumstance). In primeval times the stress response, the classic "fight or flight" reaction, allowed us to run faster or fight with greater strength in the event of a confrontation, such as meeting the aforementioned lion. Since today's society is free from such physical threats, the stimulation of adrenaline and other biochemical body reactions can negatively effect us through ulcers, heart attacks, hypertension or other stress related ailments. This is why mastering stress is important for us.

Overall there are four categories of stressors that cause us mental stress:

1. Change requires adaptations whether it is positive or negative. Moving, marriage, a new job, the birth of a child, divorce, or other changes are stressful.
2. Threats to our values, beliefs, our well being, or personal and financial security evokes a stress response.
3. The loss of control makes us feel helpless and vulnerable. Illness, loss of a job, or relationship problems stimulate our biochemical reactions.
4. Unrealized expectations cause us to feel tense, anxious, and pressured. This is stress.

Our response to stressors may be positive allowing us to get motivated, focused, energized, challenged, and meet a deadline. This we term "Good Stress". Negative responses make us feel tense, anxious, angry, depressed, frustrated or overwhelmed thus "Bad Stress".

Stress hits us the hardest in three key areas: relationships, job, and finances. It is important to identify stressors in terms of those that we have control over and those that we don't. A lot of frustration occurs when people focus on the latter.

Some key elements to managing stress include:

1. Learning to accept the things that you cannot change.
2. Adopting a stress resistant lifestyle including exercise, proper nutrition, regular sleep, and productive use of your leisure time.
3. Trying to adapt to change rather than oppose it.
4. Developing a Support System.
5. Developing strategies to deal with your stressors by formulating a plan of action to help you achieve a solution or allow you to cope with a situation.

6. Setting priorities for yourself by evaluating your long-term goals for your career, relationships, and funds. Then evaluate how your current lifestyle allows you to meet these objectives.

Productive management allows you to utilize stress as a powerful force to enhance productivity and produce positive change. There is no formula or easy "quick fix". Stress management is a highly personal process that takes effort and planning. As a member of the Vanderbilt faculty and staff, if you need help formulating a plan to best manage your stress; you may need to get help from a counselor or expert in the area of managing stress. The Work/Life Connections-EAP and Faculty and Physician Wellness Programs at (615) 936-1327 can to help you deal with these symptoms or access community resources.