

Take Control of the Stress in Your Life

By J. Kristin McIntyre

Stress is a common problem in our present culture. Financial problems, work demands, too much to do and not enough time to do it, relationship strain, and parenting problems are among the most common contributors to high stress levels. As a Licensed Professional Counselor, I regularly witness the effects of stress in people's lives as they seek help to cope with the resulting depression, anxiety, addictions, and relationship problems.

Stress is commonly defined as "a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize." Research has suggested there is a level of stress (specific to each individual) that allows for maximum productivity. It is a level of stress that motivates a person to work towards the achievement of a particular goal or goals. In contrast, a stress level that is too low tends to result in a lack of motivation to achieve goals, and a stress level that is too high can lead to numerous physical and psychological problems including exhaustion, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, increased susceptibility to illness, alcoholism or other substance abuse, obesity, anxiety, depression, and various other forms of physical and emotional breakdown.

Too much stress impacts people differently, so there may be a variety of symptoms that show up. Some common symptoms include feeling tired all the time but still having trouble sleeping, being unable to relax, feeling keyed up all the time, being forgetful, impatient, or chronically angry, never having time for yourself, and a loss of interest in socializing with others. If you are experiencing symptoms like this that are causing disruption in your relationships and daily living, you are probably suffering from the debilitating effects of stress.

There are some things you can do to counteract stress that may even bring some immediate relief. Deep breathing is a technique that slows your heart rate and breathing as well as your thoughts and helps bring oxygen to your brain so you can think more clearly and to your muscles so they can relax. Deep breathing is achieved by counting to five as you slowly inhale, filling your lungs completely, and then counting to five as you slowly exhale. Repeat this five or six times or as many times as needed to calm and relax yourself. You will likely experience some immediate stress relief.

Another way to counteract stress is to get some fresh air. If you work in an office setting, use your break time to leave your desk and step outside where you can take some deep breaths in the fresh air. You may even have time to get some exercise in the form of a short walk or even just a few toe touches before returning to your desk. Even a small amount of movement can have a positive effect. You could even combine the fresh air, deep breathing, and exercise with some positive self-talk such as, "I deserve a break, because I've been working hard all morning" for added psychological boost. Too often the messages we give ourselves are negative and intensifies stress in our lives.

Laughter is another great stress reliever. Not only does laughter lighten your mood, but like deep breathing it also increases your intake of oxygen. Laughter also stimulates your heart and lungs and reduces the level of stress hormones and increases the level of endorphins released by your brain. Find humor in your circumstances by trying not to take yourself too seriously. When you're in a stressful situation, take a step back and try to see some humor in it. Clip out comics or jokes that you find funny and tuck them in your planner or post them in places where you can easily see them.

It may also be helpful to seek out a professional counselor who can help you discover solutions to problems you may be experiencing or think about things in ways you've never considered before. Professional counselors can also typically train you in formal relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation and positive imagery.

There are some preventative measures you can take to ensure stress does not get out of control in the first place. Be sure to eat a balanced diet, drink enough water, get a reasonable amount of routine exercise, and schedule regular time in your day for relaxation. It is also very important to develop a strong social support network by cultivating a few solid friendships. These relationships provide a sense of belonging and opportunities to process your current life circumstances with people in your daily life that know you well and care about you. Another preventative measure is prayer and meditation. Remembering that there is a bigger picture beyond your own circumstances gives perspective and points you back to what's most important and most meaningful in life.

By using preventative measures combined with some simple relaxation and stress relief techniques, you can limit the frequency and intensity of physical illness, experience more satisfying social and family relationships, and live a happier and more fulfilling life.



*J. Kristin McIntyre is a Licensed Professional Counselor and the owner of All Things New Counseling Services, LLC in Nixa. She will be providing a **free** community seminar and teaching stress relief techniques on Monday, June 15th from 6:30pm—7:45pm at Generation Christian Center located at 1864 N. Commerce Drive in Nixa. Call or email to register: 848-5574 or kmcintyre@allthingsnewcounseling.com, or you can register at the door.*