KNOW YOUR STRESS LEVEL / LEARN STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress is a feeling you have when you have to handle more than you are used to. When you are stressed, your body responds as though you are in danger. Your heart speeds up making you breathe faster and giving you a burst of energy. This is called the fight-or-flight stress response. Often times during a stressful time in our lives, we manage to “get through it” and then feel the stress of the event afterward (post-traumatic stress syndrome).

Stress means different things to different people. What stresses one person does not necessarily stress someone else. Some people handle stress better than others. Our bodies are able to handle a small amount of stress, but ongoing, long-term, chronic stress takes its toll on our overall health which can lead to mental health problems (depression, anxiety), cardiovascular disease (hypertension, heart attacks, stroke), obesity and eating disorders (anorexia, bulimia), menstrual problems, sexual dysfunction in both men and women, skin and hair problems (acne, hair loss), and gastrointestinal problems (GERD, irritable colon, gastritis).

Stress can affect all aspects of your life-your emotions, behaviors, thinking ability, and physical health. Because people handle stress differently, symptoms of stress can vary. Symptoms can be the same as those caused by other medical conditions. Your doctor will help differentiate stress versus another medical condition. Stress is a part of life, but the key is learning how you deal with it. The best thing you can do to prevent stress overload (“the straw that broke the camel’s back”) and the health consequences that come with it is to recognize your stress symptoms and take appropriate action to handle them.

**Emotional Symptoms**

- becoming easily agitated, frustrated, and moody
- feeling overwhelmed, loss of control or need to take control
- having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind
- feeling bad about yourself (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless, and depressed
- avoiding others/unsociable

**Physical Symptoms**

- low energy, tiredness, exhaustion
- headaches/migraines
- upset stomach, diarrhea, constipation, and nausea
- aches, pains, and tense muscles
- chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- insomnia
- frequent colds/infections
- loss of sexual desire and/or ability
- nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear, cold/sweaty hands/feet
- dry mouth/difficulty swallowing
- clenched jaw/grinding teeth
- dizziness
- weight gain/loss
**Cognitive Symptoms**

- constant worrying
- racing thoughts
- forgetfulness/disorganization
- inability to focus/lack of concentration
- poor judgment/impulsive decisions
- being pessimistic; negative attitude

**Behavioral Symptoms**

- changes in appetite - not eating/eating too much
- procrastinating/avoiding responsibilities
- increased use of alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes
- exhibiting more nervous behaviors, such as twitching/pacing

**Learn to Relax Your Mind and Your Body!**

- think positive – mind over matter!
- accept you cannot control all that goes on around you
- be assertive instead of aggressive - express your feelings and opinions in a positive way
- learn and practice mind and body relaxation techniques; try meditation (breathing exercises), yoga, music therapy, humor therapy (laugh!), massage therapy, aromatherapy
- exercise regularly for a healthy mind and body
- eat healthy, well-balanced meals
- learn time management
- know YOUR limitations - say “no” to requests that would cause more stress in your life
- make time for hobbies and interest; gardening, journaling, reading, crafts, etc.
- get enough rest/sleep to enable a fresh start for the next day
- avoid alcohol, drugs, or food as a “stress reducer”/lower your caffeine intake
- seek out social support - spend time with those you love
- care, cuddle, and play with your pets
- do volunteer work – not only rewarding for your “heart”, but healthy for your “soul”, too!

If you are feeling overwhelmed by stress, talk to your doctor. Your doctor can evaluate your symptoms and rule out other health conditions. If stress is the culprit, your doctor can recommend a therapist or counselor to help you better handle your stress.

**YOU CAN learn to manage stress and lead a happier, healthier life!**

**Visit the Lehigh County intranet site to schedule your appointment at the Wellness Centre.**