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The Impact of Stress on Adults and Children

Stress-related physical and emotional illness is a major problem for Americans of all ages because of the hectic pace of life in the twenty-first century. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, 2 out of every 3 doctor's visits are stress-related.

Tips to help adults cope with stress effectively:

- Write or talk about what's bothering you – “Keeping a journal to write about stressful experiences lowers the level of stress, and people feel better,” says James Gordon, Director of Center for Mind-Body Medicine.
- Create personal limits and boundaries – Schedule time to catch-up or focus on a task. Take lunch, leave work on time, enjoy an evening out (or in), close your door or turn off the phone. Self care makes you a better employee, spouse, parent, or friend.
- Focus on humor – Stressed individuals have higher levels of the hormone cortisol, which can suppress the immune system. Studies show that laughter lowers cortisol levels in the body. It's a natural stress buster.
- Regular exercise – The Surgeon General recommends a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate exercise at least 5 days a week (i.e., take a walk, rake leaves, ride a bicycle, stretch or move however you want to music).

How stress impacts children – Although stress sometimes affects children differently than it does adults, it can still be harmful to their overall health. Some kids display the effects of stress physically (i.e., catching more colds, nausea, stomach or headaches, trouble sleeping or nightmares etc.), while others display more emotional or behavioral signs (i.e., regression to bed-wetting or younger behavior, trouble concentrating or difficulty with school or homework, fighting with siblings, peers or adults, abusing drugs or alcohol, etc.).

Tips to help children manage stress:

- Spend more time relaxing with them – Many kids become tense because of their parent's overloaded schedules. Kids will model their parent's behavior. They need to see parents relax, take time to have meals together as a family, play games, etc.
- Help them gain skill at releasing their stress physically – Playing, running, stretching, and singing instantly releases stress and improves breathing patterns.
- Encourage them to talk about their feelings – Helping children express their emotions verbally can reduce the need to “act out” behaviorally.
- Monitor their caffeine intake from chocolate, soda, etc – Caffeine is a stimulant which generates a stress response in the body.

Additional Sources: Sheppard Pratt Health Plan; “KidStress” by Georgia Witkin, Ph.D., Federal Occupational Health's WellTimes Newsletter.