

Stress Relief-Physical Activities

Everyone has heard of stress. Most people will readily admit that they have some in their lives. It is helpful to understand stress and learn how to cope with it.

Definition and Symptoms

Stress is the non-specific physiological response to external stimuli. Some examples of stress include headaches, muscle tension, sweating, queasy stomach, fatigue, inability to concentrate, moodiness, and changes in appetite. Stress experiences are different for all people. The relief of stress is an important life task. There are physical strategies to provide relief as well as mental strategies. The following examples are physical strategies for stress relief.

Progressive Relaxation

Progressive relaxation is an activity that includes tensing and relaxing muscle groups in sequence. To start, sit (or lie down) quietly and comfortably. Starting with the feet, tense the foot muscles, holding the muscles tense for a count of five, then release. Next, tense the calf muscles, hold, and release. Travel up the legs, torso, down the arms, then to the head and face muscles.

All muscle groups are included. Sometimes we are unaware that certain muscles are tense—this exercise ensures that any tenseness is found and released.

Deep Breathing

When stressed, we breathe quickly and shallowly. Deep breathing is a physical activity designed to bring lots of fresh air into the body, force the old air out, and bring about relaxation. Sitting comfortably, with the chest high and head up, take in a deep, slow breath through the nose, filling the belly area. Count to three slowly as you inhale. Count to three slowly as you exhale. Repeat, taking as many slow, deep breaths as you need to, until you start feeling more relaxed. As you continue using this method, count higher on the inhalations and exhalations.

Stretching

Easy stretches will assist with working the tension out of muscles. Many of us use our muscles more than we think. Some common stretches are:

- Wrist circles-slowly circle your hands to the right and left to alleviate the tension from typing or writing.
- Shoulder shrugs-lift your shoulders to your ears, hold, and pull shoulders back down.
- Head rolls-Lean your head toward one shoulder. Slowly, roll your head forward and toward the other shoulder, stopping at the other shoulder. Hold and roll the head back.
- Back stretches-in a sitting position, with arms on top of the legs, slowly bend forward and down rounding the back as you move. Stop when your hands get to your ankles.

Exercising

Exercise is a great stress prevention strategy as well as coping tool. Any exercise that gets the heart rate up and gets the body moving will be beneficial. The exercise doesn't have to be extremely vigorous; overworking one's body may add stress. Try any of these activities:

- Swimming - What a great all over workout! Swimming laps is a great stress reliever, plus it puts little strain on joints.
- Walking - Buy good walking shoes and get to it! Walking can be done anywhere at any time. What about taking a few walks throughout the day?



- Cycling - Whether stationary or going down the road, cycling gets the blood circulating and the fresh thoughts flowing!

Other activities include skiing, running, skating, playing volleyball or basketball, weight lifting, Frisbee, or tennis. The important thing is to do what you like to do!

