

HANDLING STRESS AFTER A CRISIS

The shock of losing Dennis, PM's partner of two years, was devastating. For the first few days after the fire that killed his best friend, PM was numb, walking around like a zombie. Then shock turned to anger, a feeling PM says he still carries...

For weeks after the multiple casualty incident involving a high-speed three-car collision, Shelly closed her eyes at night and saw the carnage strewn about the high-way, particularly the blood-tom face of a little girl...

Stress is a stranger to no one, particularly those on the front line of crisis. Stress can immobilize our emotions and drain our energy. Ironically, stress also is crucial in times of crisis for life-saving decision making.

Stress management is really about finding balance in your life: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Whether you're a dispatcher or a first responder, the bottom line on stress management is letting go and gracefully moving on.

The Many Faces of Stress

Stress wears many faces in the course of a typical day, but it can be reduced to two basic emotions: anger and fear.

In simple terms, anger and fear, also known as the fight or flight response, are survival emotions. Stressful episodes, either real, such as the death of a partner, or imagined, such as a false-alarm call, are best described as perceived threats to our existence. Our first ancestors dealt with threats of a physical nature. Today, it is safe to say that perceived threats affect not just the body, but the mind and spirit, as well. Stress currently is understood as a mind-body-spirit phenomenon. For this reason, the most effective stress management program works with the causes of stress (mind and spirit) and the symptoms (body).

But stress is more complex than mere fight or flight. What about the emotions that hit us well after a stressful episode? Stress also surfaces in the forms of apathy, lethargy, prolonged grief, impatience, sarcasm and repeated doubt. Well after a crisis, memories can haunt you.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Donna was a first responder to the Big Thompson flood in Colorado several years ago. Every now and then she wakes up in cold sweat and reports seeing faces and bodies washed away in mud. Those with the strongest will and the strongest character are not immune to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Repeatedly witnessing gruesome car wrecks and dismembered or severely burned bodies makes you vulnerable.

Nightmares, flashbacks and intrusive memories can bring a troubling scene to mind again and again, affecting sleep and eating behaviors and possibly leading to depressions. PTSD is an emotional imbalance caused by recurring memories or experiences of severe trauma according to the Harvard Medical Health Letter, people with PTSD tend to be edgy, irritable, nervously watchful and easily startled. Some fixate on the trauma, while others tend to repress or deny details of the event.

It may seem that the purpose of debriefing after a critical incident is to review emergency procedures and fine-tune protocol. While lessons certainly may be learned from debriefings, the most significant purpose is catharsis, the emotional release of feelings and memories among coworkers. According to Jeffrey T. Mitchell and the Holeman Group, debriefing should occur both during and after an incident. With the understanding of confidentiality, responders reveal facts and feelings according to the following phases:

- 1. Thought**
- 2. Reaction**
- 3. Symptom**
- 4. Teaching**
- 5. Reentry**

Counseling is recommended for those who need more

Symptoms of Stress

Michael, an EMT, gets migraine headaches at least once a week. His brother in law Jeff, a firefighter has temporomandibular joint dysfunction, or TMJ. Jeff wears a mouth guard at night to prevent his teeth from grinding and his jaws are pretty stiff each morning. After every intense rescue call, Shirley comes down with a sore throat and a sinus infection, coincidence? Perhaps not. Stress and illness are closely associated. Symptoms of stress can fall into one of the two categories; acute (intense but short lived) and chronic (not so intense, but long lasting). Acute symptoms of stress include a rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, rapid ventilation's---- responses designed to get the body going when confronted with danger. Chronic stress is best described as wear and tear from repeated exposure to stressful events. The symptoms of stress are more numerous than previously thought. They range from headaches and hypertension to the common cold and cancer.

The Best Coping Skills

Effective coping skills include mental strategies aimed at changing a threatening perception to a neutral or positive one. Conversely, ineffective coping skills avoid, and thus perpetuate, the problem. The ultimate goal of an effective coping strategy is a peaceful resolution to the stressor, big or small. For this reason, drinking, drugs and/or violence are not effective they don't resolve anything. You can select from among many effective coping skills; no one way works for everyone. Moreover, no one way will work for you every time. Get fluent in the use of several coping skills. Here are a handful of effective ways to cope with the feelings of traumatic stress:

Affirmations.

The ego loves to jam the frequencies of the mind with negative, self-depreciating chatter. Affirmations replace that negative feedback with positive strokes that nurture a sense of high self-esteem. The affirmations can range from "I am calm and relaxed," to "I radiate success." Flick a phrase and say it to yourself. Think it in your head and feel it in your gut, as well. If Olympic athletes use these, so can you!

Journaling.

One of the most poignant comments from a first responder at the Oklahoma City bombing came from a firefighter who said that keeping a journal was the best way he found to cope with the stress of that mass casualty incident. Journal writing - getting your thoughts and feelings down on paper - is a tried and true method. Feelings of anger, despair, frustration and anxiety can be toxic to mind, body and spirit. Releasing them (catharsis) maintains a sense of equilibrium. Journaling is an individual undertaking with no "right way." What's more, you don't have to write pages and pages. Start with a blank notebook and a pen and jot down whatever comes to mind. Try this a couple times per week or as often as you feel is necessary.

Humor

If you ever watched M*A*S*H, read The Far Side cartoons, or huddled around the water cooler and told jokes, you know how important humor therapy is to relieving stress. Black humor or gallows humor is best suited to coping with trauma and death. To the uninitiated, it sounds rather sick. To those who work on the front line of trauma, however, black humor is the only way to cope with repeated exposures to horror.

The Best Relaxation Skills

Imagine Us: You are lying in bed after a long day, your mind is racing, your heart is pumping and your muscles are tense. Your eyes are closed and programmed for sleep, but sleep seems like hours away. Sleep isn't a relaxation skill, it's the result of good relaxation skills. Hundreds of techniques can help you relax. Each one involves the participation of and/or deactivation of one or more of the five senses to bring the body to a state of homeostasis.

Diaphragmatic breathing.

Diaphragmatic breathing is the one technique that calms the nerves of the most stressed individual. Since everyone knows how to breathe, this technique doesn't require a lot of training but only some concentration. Specifically, you concentrate on expanding the abdominal region when you inhale, which allows for a greater relaxation effect than breathing with the upper chest, which actually triggers the stress response. Diaphragmatic breathing can be done with the eyes open or shut, it can be done virtually anywhere and it can be done in combination with other relaxation techniques. -

Safe physical exercise.

Exercise engages the fight or flight response, which may not seem relaxing. Physical exercise does two things. First, it flushes out the flood of stress hormones (cortisol, addosterone) produced in the course of daily events. Second, the body reaches a greater state of homeostasis after exercise than before. Which type of exercise is best? While pumping iron may be effective in the short run, experts agree that continuous rhythmical activity that works the heart, lungs and blood vessels best produces the parasympathetic rebound (relaxation) response. These activities include brisk walking, jogging, cycling, racquetball and swimming. Experts recommend three times a week.

Healthy nutrition.

Food is a pacifier, something every baby knows. Food definitely calms the nerves, but some foods trigger the stress response, which is like throwing gasoline on the fire. It's best to avoid caffeine, refined sugar, salt and bleached-flour products, as these elicit or aggravate the stress response. Junk food (foods high in sugar, salt and fat) compromise the immune system. The best choices are whole foods (vegetables, fruits, grains and nuts) and foods without pesticides, hormones, antibiotics or trans fatty acids (hydrogenated oils).

Massage/whirlpool.

Muscle tension is the No. 1 symptom of stress. Any way to reduce muscle tension, then, is highly recommended. By all accounts, muscle massage (Swedish, Shiatsu or sports massage) is an effective means to release tension and promote relaxation. If you have never had a massage, you don't know what you're missing! A whirlpool can produce similar effects by bringing blood from the body's core to the periphery to relax stiff, sore muscles.

Mental imagery/meditation.

To clear the mind of the events of the day, conjure up an image of relaxing scene, such as a Caribbean beach or mountain cabin vista. Use these images to replace mental images that promote stress and help bring a sense of balance back to both mind and body.

Creative Anger Management

Anger the fight or flight response, fast is becoming a source of stress nationwide fight response - fast is becoming a source while anger is considered a survival emotion and necessary in small amounts, unresolved anger that which lingers is not healthy The following are some ways to diffuse anger effectively

- Know your anger style
 1. Are you someone who represses anger or someone who explodes?
 2. Do you seek revenge?
 3. Mismanaged anger becomes a control issue where you give your personal power away.
 4. Knowing anger style is the first step toward resolving it,

- Develop a strong support system.
 1. Studies show that people who have strong ties to friends and family weather the storms of stress better than those who spend the majority of time alone.
 2. Friends act like a buffer, offering support, advice or when needed.

- Stay in shape
 1. Stress may begin in the mind, but within seconds, it travels to the body.
 2. When stress persist the body becomes the battlefield for the war-games of the mind.
 3. Physical exercise is the best way to flush out stress hormones.
 4. Staying in shape also means eating wholesome foods to sustain your immune system.
 5. Finally, the funny bone needs a workout as much as the physical body. Exercise your sense of humor regularly.

- Make past anger past
 1. Forgiveness is essential in any productive anger-management program.
 2. Forgiveness is letting go.
 3. Forgiveness means resolving the issues, behaviors and attitudes of those we feel have violated us
 4. Forgiveness includes forgiving yourself, too.

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This article is by Brian Luke Seaward Ph.D.