Stress: When to Seek Help

Stress can be defined as the way people react to change. Everyone experiences stress. But all stress is not the same. Experts categorize stress in three ways.

**Acute stress** is the normal, occasional short-term stress everyone faces. Acute stress comes from temporary irritations like flat tires, crying babies and computer problems. It can cause physical reactions like muscle tension, stomach upset or elevated blood pressure. Acute stress can also cause depression, anxiety or irritability.

**Episodic acute stress** is a lifestyle issue. This kind of stress is largely due to disorganization, habits, personality traits and overcommitment. Episodic acute stress may cause anxiety, tension, irritation and hostility. Some people also worry excessively. Physical symptoms can include high blood pressure, chest pain, heart disease or persistent headaches.

**Chronic stress** is the most serious type of stress. It occurs in long-term, seemingly "no way out" scenarios. Poverty, war, dysfunctional family life, miserable marriages or job dissatisfaction can produce chronic stress. Chronic stress damages health and destroys lives because it continues day after day, year after year without relief.

**When to Seek Help**

How much stress can—or should—you handle by yourself? How do you know when its time to seek help? Like many people, you may be unsure about how to answer these questions. American Psychological Association (APA) researchers found that nearly half of all Americans don't know how to determine when to get professional help. Most people try to "hang in there" and handle their stress alone. But ongoing stress can have serious consequences. How do you know if you need help?

The APA says its time to seek help when:

- You're so worried that you have trouble concentrating.
- You're so stressed that it interferes with the functions of normal living--eating, sleeping, work and relationships with others.
- You feel so trapped that it seems there is nowhere left to turn.

Let's apply these guidelines to the three kinds of stress mentioned above.

Acute stress can be irritating, and in large doses it can be exhausting, too. But because it is temporary, acute stress usually doesn't call for professional help.
Acute stress often goes away by addressing the problem behind the stressful feelings. A dented fender can be fixed at the body shop; a parent-teacher conference can clear up a misunderstanding; spilled milk can be wiped up.

Episodic acute stress, by contrast, does call for professional intervention. This type of frequent stress is caused by deeply ingrained lifestyle and personality issues. People who feel such constant stress live chaotic, rushed, emotionally painful and exhausting lives. Even so, these people may not easily recognize their need for help. Change is possible, however. People can learn new, healthier patterns of thinking and responding to stress. They can learn relaxation techniques and other skills that will help them reduce the stress in their lives.

Chronic stress certainly requires professional help. Chronic stress is difficult to treat because it has often become part of the person’s way of life. People in chronically stressful circumstances become so worn down and used to the stress that they hardly notice it. In some cases people give up hope. The consequences of chronic stress can be devastating physically, emotionally and socially. Depending on the circumstances, a person may need several kinds of help. For example, medical treatment, job counseling or behavior treatment may be needed in addition, to help with stress management.

How much stress are you facing? If you have a chronic illness or you care for someone who does, you may recognize elements of your life in two or three of the stress categories.

Where to Seek Help
Do you feel a need for more support? Do you wish you were better equipped to cope with your circumstances? If so, don't hesitate to seek help. Here are some resources that will guide you in your search.

The American Psychological Association offers free information and referral specialists who can help you find a professional in your area. Call toll-free 1-800-964-2000 or visit their Web site: http://helping.apa.org/

The National Mental Health Association also has information and referral specialists. Call toll-free 1-800-969-6642 or visit their Web site at http://www.nmha.org/. You can also contact your local Mental Health Association.

References