



The Quest to Manage Stress

by MARIE WALL

The quest to manage stress is a lifelong task. It ebbs and flows with the events and experiences in our lives. Learning to develop a healthy perception of stress and to confront it in a healthy manner are skills you can learn and thus become stronger as a person and in your ability to handle daily tasks. Don Powell of the American Institute for Preventative Medicine says stress management is multi-dimensional. It centers around four tasks: good communication skills; time management; healthy perspective; and relaxation. Incorporating these tasks on a daily basis will be beneficial in lowering our stress and essential when high emotional experiences and demands trigger intense stress.

Stress is our response to experiences and thoughts and causes us to react and release adrenalin. This occurs for both positive and negative experiences. It triggers our innate drive to action – our “fight or flight response”. Stress heightens our awareness of external and integral cues and drives us to respond appropriately to the events and thoughts at hand. Stress, as a positive thing, is a natural response that calls us to act. But we cannot live in a constant state of stress. Constant stress is destructive, because we cannot differentiate between the new event and the constant stress. A stress response is for emergency situations. When everything is an emergency, it is impossible for our innate wisdom to help us deal with the situation at hand – the daily tasks in our work and home life that make demands but are not emergencies. When we use our skills and take them in stride, we create the space we need to live a more peaceful life.

It is important for us to remember that stressful experiences occur throughout every stage of our lives. No one is exempt from experiencing stress. What differs for people is how we relate to stressful events when they occur and how we manage our daily life and the tasks at hand.

We need to develop skills that will assist us in dealing with the constant demands we face. Some

of us may have confidence in certain areas but may need to develop skills in other areas. The more skills we have, the more confidence we have in dealing with the everyday tasks at work and home, leaving time and energy for the real emergencies that arise and require our full attention.

These skills build confidence and comfort, enabling us to manage events as they arise, to complete tasks that require our attention and to discharge accumulated stress. The benefits are many for our families, our students and ourselves – we can enjoy the interactions with others, take time to enjoy life, sleep better and feel better. Is it worth learning these skills? It's only worth it if you want to be more confident and more comfortable in your life.

Our relationships with others and how we care for ourselves influence stress reduction. Positive outcomes in our personal interactions, whether at work or home, leave us feeling positive and confident.

Communication Skills

Many people think that the skill of communicating well is a natural, innate gift. In reality, communication is a skill that is a learned behaviour and it is never too late to learn. Two main components of communication are effective listening and assertiveness. Effective listening is more than hearing. It requires our full attention and receptiveness to content and feeling, which in turn leads us to interpretation, evaluation and response.

Listening is not effective when we block the message. We do this when we feel protective and defensive. The root of self-protection is fear and defensiveness being anchored in our own position. Both leave us closed to others' perspectives and to potential positive outcomes. Dynamics which block effective listening include rehearsing our response, jumping to conclusions, daydreaming, attacking the speaker or blaming another. When we engage in tasks other than listening, we are not open to receiving the full message. In this way we subvert effective communication.

Listening is essential in understanding what someone else is trying to say. Healthy assertiveness is a way to express yourself that is respectful, that does not harm another person or minimize what we want to say. Assertiveness is a direct, honest and appropriate expression of the situation, our feelings, and communicates what we need.

Few of us know innately how to express ourselves assertively. Most of us learned to either ignore our own experience, which is passive, or to get our way at another's expense, which is aggressive. Assertive interactions result in a win-win outcome. It may be uncomfortable to us initially because it is unfamiliar, but in the long term it builds confidence and lowers stress.

Time Management

Time is a valuable asset. When we are continually pressed for time it becomes a source of stress. Effective use of time produces positive results, increased good feelings, and room for other activities such as personal and family time. Time can be, or is, a source of stress for teachers.

Time management stressors include missing deadlines, constantly feeling rushed, indecision, procrastination, and not having enough time to do the things you would like. To consider the effectiveness of your own time management, ask yourself this question: "Is time working for you or against you?" Good time management enhances one's confidence and others' confidence in you.

Some things that we can do to positively impact effective use of time are:

- Make a set time to get a task completed, for example daily class preparation. Do it at the same time each day and make it manageable.
- Avoid interruptions. When we decide to work instead of socializing we complete our tasks more efficiently. Closing our door and letting others know we are not available are ways to take care of time.
- Learning to say "no" to others and ourselves helps in managing time. Decide where our priorities lie and say "no" to unwanted distractions.

It is important to separate what is activity, busy work that does not get results, and productivity, which leaves us with the feeling of accomplishment. Making a "To Do" list and completing given tasks shows us clearly when we are productive, giving us the feedback and satisfaction that we need.

In lowering stress, effectively managing time can enhance positive feelings and free us to do things that are important. Take time to check in and ask, "What is the best use of my time right now?" This is one way to assess what is needed immediately. Once it is finished you will feel more positive.

Healthy Perspective

Most of us are not used to thinking positively about ourselves, a courtesy we offer readily to our students. We can more easily share appreciation to another person, but seldom give that same compassion and gentleness to ourselves. Developing a healthy perspective is another essential element to lowering stress in our lives.

Learning to be gentle with ourselves involves letting go of self-criticism and becoming more honest with ourselves. When we do something well, we should acknowledge it, even share it with a friend. When something does not go well, we need to accept it and know we are okay. This can then become an opportunity for learning rather than self-disparagement.

Developing a more neutral thought pattern is a challenge, but it is one that puts things in clearer perspective. Thus, clarity allows us to move through tasks without the added pressure of self-criticism.

Relaxation

In handling stress, relaxation is our time for rejuvenation. Taking time out is an investment in ourselves and in what is important to us. Relaxation can prevent stress from occurring or release stress that has been built up. There are lots of ways to use relaxation time and many of us do it naturally. Just sitting back for 10 minutes or going for a short walk can be a natural way to relax. For others, taking time out may be a new experience. For more specific techniques for relaxation, refer to my article in the November 2004 issue of *The Bulletin* entitled "Mental Fitness in the Game of Life".

Stress is a constant presence in our lives. It comes in waves. It can be a positive motivator to move us into action. It can also be destructive if it overwhelms us. Learning effective communication and time management skills build our confidence and lower personal stress levels. Healthy perspectives and attitudes help us be clear in dealing with situations, and taking time to relax allows us to rejuvenate.

Marie Wall is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Marie Wall (ext. 265) or Claudette Coombs (ext. 265).