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Understanding Forms of Distress: Stress, Chronic Stress and Trauma

Challenging and distressing events in life can have a major impact on our emotional and physical wellness and can come in many forms. To understand how to be resilient, we first need to understand the different types of distress we can experience:

- **Stress** is the physical and mental response to an external event. Dealing with traffic problems, being ill, or having to deliver a big presentation at work are examples of challenges that may cause negative stress. But you also may experience positive stress, for example, when planning a wedding or accepting a job promotion.



Our bodies are designed to respond to stress by a “fight or flight” mechanism in which stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, are released. This adaptation protected our ancestors from physical threats to survival by increasing heart rate and blood pressure and preparing our muscles to help us fight or run. We may experience short bursts of this stress response and then our bodies ideally return to a normal, calmer state.

- **Chronic Stress** is encountered when we face more enduring challenges. Perhaps a family member has a chronic, debilitating illness. A worker may experience financial hardship after the loss of a job. A child is being abused or bullied. When stressors persist for long periods of time, the cumulative physiological and emotional effects of the stress response can lead to serious illnesses, including heart disease or depression.
- **Trauma** is an experience of real or threatened death or serious injury to a person or someone close to them. These experiences result in significant symptoms that interfere with normal functioning, such as avoidance, nightmares, flashbacks, changes in mood, thinking and behavior. Most people recover well from traumatic threats, but if symptoms persist for more than several weeks, a person may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Specialized professional trauma treatment is highly effective for such individuals.

Building Resilience

To build your personal resilience to stress and chronic stress, consider these tips:

- **Learn** and practice relaxation exercises such as abdominal breathing or meditation. Find simple ways to incorporate this into your everyday routines. Try taking three deep breaths every time you are stopped at a red light, for example.
- **Identify** what is causing your stress, as well as what is within your power to do to change your situation. Stress often is more about our interpretation and response to events than it is about the events themselves.
- **Make** exercise and healthy eating priorities in your life. Limit caffeine, alcohol and tobacco.
- **Connect** with others. Strong relationships provide healthy perspective and enrich our lives.
- **Detach** from negativity, whether it comes from social media, people near you, or television. Choose instead to focus on building up yourself and others and taking action in areas where you can make a positive impact.

Reducing Stress-Related Pain & Muscle Tension

Let's face it. Stress can hurt. A sudden onset or prolonged periods of stress can cause muscle tension and pain, or other associated pains such as headaches brought on by muscle tension in the nearby areas of the shoulders, neck and head. But why does stress cause muscle pain and tension and what can you do about it?



When stress levels are high, our brain sends a signal to the nerves to go into 'protection mode,' and our nerves activate our muscles to tighten and increase their tone. This can cause pain because when muscles are tense, the circulation is decreased, causing a buildup of lactic acid in the muscles. It's similar to feeling soreness the day after strenuous exercise such as weightlifting.

In addition to emotional stress, the physical stress brought on in many work environments by maintaining a prolonged position without movement, by poor posture or by singular repetitive movements can cause similar problems. So, what can you do to reduce stress-related pain and tension?

The first thing to remember is that this doesn't necessarily mean that you have overly tight muscles that require aggressive stretching. But it is a sign that you would benefit from changing your activities to decrease the threat to the nervous system, and there are some easy ways to help your body deal with the impact of stress.

Simple Solutions

- Move more! Every hour for a minimum of three minutes.
- Ergonomic modifications
- Meditation - 10-30 minutes before bed can improve sleep quality
- Isolated light strengthening
- Exercise can reduce pain and tension
- Gentle stretching to reduce tone

General Stretching Guidelines



- Move more! Every hour for a minimum of three minutes.
- Warm-up: Preferably, three to five minutes of gentle rhythmic movement, such as walking or marching in place. This increases circulation and core muscle temperature.
- Stretch only to the point of gentle tension. Ease into the stretch as you feel your muscle relax. You should never feel pain when you stretch.
- Hold the stretch in a comfortable position; the feeling of tension should subside as you hold the stretch. Do not bounce. Hold each stretch for 15-20 seconds.
- Feel the stretch. If the tension becomes greater as you stretch, you are overstretching. Ease into a more comfortable position.
- Breathe slowly and naturally. Do not hold your breath.

It's important for you to consult with your physician before beginning any exercise program, especially if you've had any recent physical problems, musculoskeletal or other pertinent history (or if you're not sure) or have experienced any pain.