

living well

Just Say No to Stress

You know how stress makes you feel mentally-irritable, on edge, under pressure, maybe even sad. But are you aware of the many physical manifestations of stress? A myriad physical symptoms can be blamed on nothing more than stress. Some are merely annoying; others are life threatening. Find out what your stress may be doing to you-and your body.

My husband, Dave, had all he could take. Our twin daughters were getting ready to graduate from high school. Family was coming in for the celebration. The movers were coming to pack us up. He was trying to tie up loose ends at work. Then the cat died. To top it off, Dave broke out in hives.

My friend, Donna, was having some problems at work. She wasn't happy and felt like she was under a lot of pressure. She developed an itchy rash on her wrists, legs and neck.

Both these people in my life scratched their way to the doctor to get the same diagnosis - stress. Dave's hives disappeared within days of moving; Donna's rash, the day after she left her job.

Stress can manifest itself in several different ways, according to Sharon McGee, a licensed professional counselor and licensed marriage and family therapist in Montgomery. "People who are overstressed get sick a lot," McGee said. A cold, flu, any bug going around seems to latch on to a stressed out person because their bodies are so worn out, she said.

Other physical symptoms of stress include headaches, high blood pressure, joint and backaches and even heart problems. Stress can cause emotional problems as well including damaging relationships and a false sense of guilt. "Stress comes from our feeling we are not achieving what we need to. We are feeling overloaded. It is our perspective to what's going on," McGee said.

McGee said stress has two components. "As our demands increase, we become used to the increased level. As we try to tackle more, we feel more stress, but then we accommodate. That might not be healthy. We don't necessarily register it as stress, but it can affect the body," she said.

On the other side is the person who becomes so overwhelmed that they don't accomplish anything. Many of the ill effects of stress come about from a failure to listen to our bodies, McGee explained. "There are a lot of little signals the body gives us that we continue to ignore. We think we are not stressed, but we are just not paying attention," she said.

Another manifestation of stress that affects many people today is forgetfulness. McGee said sometimes people fear they have the beginning signs of Alzheimer's disease, when in actuality, they are stressed. "We are trying to multi-task and trying to force our brain to do too much so we forget," she said.

In her practice, McGee helps her clients reduce the amount of stress in their lives by writing down what they do every day and then picking out what absolutely has to be done. That number is usually small, she said. "People need to learn to say no more often. We think we are not supposed to say no because that is selfish. But there is a difference between selfish and self-care," McGee said.

McGee also recommends taking time for you, even if it is only five minutes

of deep breathing. "Physically it helps relax you. It doesn't have to take hours," she said.

She also encourages people to look at their priorities.

"Relationships are the most important thing, so sometimes we have to say no so we can spend more time on our relationships."

Parents need to model good stress-management for their children too, including not over scheduling them. McGee said when children are stressed their symptoms often mimic those of Attention Deficit, Hyperactivity Disorder. Children are so busy with structured activities that they have no time to play and let excess energy out so they get antsy, McGee said.

To help prevent getting overstressed, McGee recommends checking your calendar before agreeing to do something and deciding whether it is something you really want to do. "It's not a matter of fitting it in, rather, should you fit it in," she said.

And remember that you are not alone. Everyone gets stressed.

The best cure can be a two-letter word - no. ~L