

# **SELF CARE TIPS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT**

The loss of a loved one is the single most stressful thing that can happen to a person. This is a time to be aware of increased vulnerability and the need to take great care of yourself. Because of this increased stress and vulnerability, health problems appear more often during a bereavement period.

By taking care of ourselves and practicing "stress management," we can decrease the physical and emotional wear and tear that stress can cause. There are five components of stress management: good nutrition; sleep; physical exercise; being kind to yourself; and relaxation.

## **GOOD NUTRITION**

Changes in eating habits are normal during a period of grief. It is important to realize that your body is undergoing a lot of stress from the demands of grief work. Even though you may not feel like eating (you may say, "what's the use?"), you need the energy provided by balanced, nutritious meals. It may be hard to cook for yourself, but, for your own healing, it is important to eat regular, balanced meals, and to get the vitamins you need.

Increase your protein intake -- this helps in stressful times. Also increase the intake of calcium (milk and cheese products) and potassium (bananas, baked potatoes, oranges); each helps to combat stress. Consider a B-vitamin or multi-stress vitamins as a daily supplement. Avoid "junk foods" and empty calories.

## **SLEEP**

People frequently have difficulty sleeping during a period of bereavement. It is important to get adequate rest. If you feel extra sleep is necessary, go to bed earlier. Experts say that taking a vacation from the alarm clock on weekends can upset the body's sleep rhythms all week long. Make bedtime the final stage of a regular evening ritual. Walk the dog, watch T.V., read a book -- the activity is less critical than sticking to the same routine night after night. You'll sleep sounder after a late afternoon workout. Avoid any heavy-duty exertion just prior to bed time.

Avoid the "big three" -- caffeine, alcohol and tobacco. All of these upset sleep, even if you find them "relaxing." Alcohol may make you tired, but it reduces the quality of sleep. Caffeine and tobacco may interfere with sleep. Remember that many soft drinks, as well as tea and chocolate, contain caffeine.

Stress is the number one enemy of sleep. Relaxation training can help derail a lot of disturbing thoughts and ease tight muscles that make it hard to sleep soundly. (See later notes on relaxation techniques.)

A low-protein, high carbohydrate snack before bedtime often shortens the time it takes to fall asleep. But remember, if you are on a special diet; be sure to consult your physician or nutritionist about changes in your diet.

For insomnia lasting up to three weeks -- or during illness or bereavement -- sleeping pills may be medically necessary. Your physician will provide you directions for taking sleeping pills. Some people find that if they take a pill for only a night or two their sleep patterns will go back to normal. Next-day effects may include poor memory or concentration, drowsiness, dizziness, lack of coordination, and digestive woes. Be sure to consult your physician before taking such medicines.

## **PHYSICAL EXERCISE**

Moderate, regular exercise helps relieve tension and elevate one's mood. Don't take on anything too strenuous, but rather, have a regular, planned activity, such as swimming, walking, or bike-riding, that will help loosen tense muscles and increase your sense of well-being. Walking with a friend provides an opportunity to share feelings as well, and can be excellent therapy. The local health clubs have many excellent exercise programs for all ages and ability levels.

## **BE KIND TO YOURSELF**

Emotional injury can often require even more healing than physical injury.

It is normal for low periods to become depressions during a period of grieving. These are normal responses, as long as they do not continue for great lengths of time, or become dangerous to you. Here are some suggestions for helping yourself through a depression:

- \* Get some exercise;
- \* Try to maintain good eating and sleeping habits;
- \* Go out to eat with friends;
- \* Engage in a distracting activity, such as reading, watching T.V. or a movie, visiting the park, shopping, etc.;
- \* Engage in comfort-seeking activities, such as talking with a friend, your pastor or your doctor, praying, writing letters, or having a massage;
- \* Engage in constructive or creative activities, such as setting small goals that can be achieved every day, planning something for the future, planting flowers, painting or drawing, sewing or quilting;
- \* Do one good thing for yourself each day; do some needed chores; help out someone else; pay attention to your personal appearance...you will feel better when you look better;
- \* Engage in contemplative activities, such as listening to music, getting some sun, visiting the countryside, or just taking a bath.

## RELAXATION

Only you know what places, situations, and/or people help you to relax the best. There are however, some general guidelines that you may find helpful.

When we're tense, our breathing becomes shallow. When a person is weighted down with strong and painful feelings, he or she often breathes improperly, depriving the brain of necessary oxygen. Taking slow, deep breaths is a good way to ease your tension and resume proper breathing. Place your hand on your diaphragm (just below the rib cage and above the stomach). Take a deep breath through your nose. As you inhale, you should feel your hand pushed outward. Exhale through your mouth. Repeat this exercise until your breathing is deep and regular.

To relieve tension in your day, try this exercise. In comfortable surroundings, try tensing and relaxing each muscle group in turn, starting with your feet and working up to your head. Be aware of knots of tension in your body. Practice slow, deep breathing.

The greatest healer and stress reducer will be the love of those around you. Allow them the privilege of helping you through this. Spend time alone with God or in quiet contemplation.

## MEDITATION

Meditation is the art of focusing your attention so completely on one thing that you lose consciousness of everything else around you. Although meditation often is associated with religious disciplines, modern researchers have found that it can be used apart from any religious or philosophical orientation to promote deep relaxation and mental stillness.

What happens during meditation? University studies have shown that, among other things, heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure drop, and that alpha brain waves -- the brain waves associated with *deep* relaxation -- increase in intensity and frequency. Blood lactate, a chemical associated with anxiety, has been found to fall rapidly within the first ten minutes of meditation. Several studies have shown that people with definite hypertension can reduce their blood pressures (all day) after committing themselves to a regular routine of 20 minutes of meditation, morning and evening.

To meditate successfully you will need peace and quiet. Find a tranquil, comfortable environment where you can be alone and undisturbed for 20 to 30 minutes. Harsh lighting, a room that is too cold or too hot, noise and interruptions are all obstacles that can prevent you achieving the level of physical and mental quietness that is necessary for meditation. Some people find that incense, dim lights, or soft, repetitive background music help them meditate. Others find environmental sounds like birds singing, rain falling, or the sound of the ocean helpful in creating the right mood. But you may prefer complete silence and as little sensory stimulation as possible. Settle into a comfortable position that allows you to relax without falling asleep. Try to set aside about 20 to 30 minutes for meditation, remembering that there will be two stages -- physical relaxation, followed by focusing and emptying the mind. When you begin meditating these initial stages may take time to attain.

You must first relax -- it is impossible to meditate if your body is tense. (source: "The Book of Stress Survival" by Alix Kirsta)

In order to still your internal stream of thoughts, it's necessary to choose a word or phrase to repeat mentally. Good words to choose for repetition end in an *m* or *n* sound, such as *calm*, *home*, or *shalom*.

Although there is some work involved in collecting your wandering thoughts and concentrating your attention on repeating your chosen word, it is essential that you otherwise remain passive. Don't think about how you are feeling. Don't "watch" yourself becoming more relaxed. With practice, your concentration will become so complete that you'll find your whole body is numb and limp when you first open your eyes after your meditation period.

#### DIRECTIONS...

- \* Sit upright in a comfortable chair.
- \* Close your eyes as in sleep. There should be no tension on the eyes or on your forehead.
- \* Begin mentally repeating your chosen word -- over and over, very slowly. Pour your full attention into this repetition. The objective is to repeat your word without a break so that outside thoughts do not enter your mind. When you discover that your mind has left off the repetition and has begun wandering about, simply pull it back in and continue with the repetition. (Note: don't become discouraged when your mind wanders; refocusing your attention on the repetition is part of the meditative process.)
- \* Try to remain as still as possible during meditation. If you feel the need to scratch and itch, try ignoring the need and focusing on the repetition; your itch should go away. If you really feel as if you must change your position slightly or scratch, do so then resume meditating.
- \* You may find it difficult to sit perfectly still and to focus your attention for more than five or ten minutes when you first start out. With daily practice, however, you should be able to work up to 20 minutes of meditation, twice a day. (Before breakfast and before dinner -- when your stomach is empty and you are alert are recommended times for meditation.)

## IDEAS FOR JOURNAL WRITING

You may find it helpful to put your thoughts about your loved one down on paper. Sometimes people will write to the person who died, expressing their thoughts and feelings:

What I wish I had said or hadn't said...  
Ways in which you will continue to live on in me...  
(your love, our children, etc.)

Choose ideas that have significance for you, ideas specific to your situation and relationship.

Some people simply use the journal as a place to express their feelings after a loss; their confusion and pain. A journal can help you work through your grief by giving you an outlet and a way to express yourself. Once that is done, it can help you move on.

Other purposes of keeping a journal:

- \* It can be valuable in sorting through difficulties and problems as well as possibilities of life;
- \* It can help in your decision-making;
- \* It may give you more objectivity;
- \* You may grow in consciousness of yourself;
- \* It may help you to see your own progress over time.