Stress – Can’t Live With It; Can’t Live Without It.

We all have stress. The amount and the type varies from person to person and from time to time. Often, stress sneaks up on us when we don’t expect it, and other times, even though we can see it coming, it is like our hands are tied and we are immobilized from doing anything to shield ourselves.

There is good stress, and there is bad stress. For example, for most people, we could say that marriage is a good stress. Vacation is good stress. Both are stress though, because they both involve planning, a change in routine, perhaps changes in sleeping and eating habits – all of which take a certain toll on our physical and mental capacities.

The total of all of our stress, both good and bad, needs to be kept within our capability to manage without creating negative consequences for our lives, whether that is physical, mental or emotional consequences. When stress gets out of our control, it may begin to trigger our body’s fight or flight responses. This can result in serious physical or emotional consequences, such depression, reduced immunity to colds and flu, or even chronic or long-term illness or heart attack.

What are the consequences of stress – (how do I know if I have too much)?

There are abundant signs and “symptoms” that you may be under too much stress, such as the following. Some of these symptoms are often associated with “burnout”.

**Physical Signs**
- Change in sleep patterns
- Fatigue
- Stomach problems
- Minor illnesses
- High blood pressure
- Muscle tension or pain
- Headaches

**Intellectual Signs**
- Lack of concentration
- Scattered short-term memory
- Difficulty focusing on one thing at a time
- Lack of interest in learning new things
- Difficulty understanding new material
- Indecisiveness
- Procrastination

**Emotional Signs**
- Moodiness/irritability
- Increased conflict in some of life
- Anxiety
- Decreased sense of fulfillment

**Social Signs**
- Feeling alone or isolated
- Snapping at close family members
- Chronic nagging or “nitpicking”
- No time for friends and family
- Difficulty feeling empathy or caring for others

**Spiritual Signs**
- Feeling life has no meaning or purpose
- Cynicism about accomplishments and goals
- Lack of sense of fulfillment
- Apathy
So if I can’t live without stress, what can I do?

Some stress you might be able to prevent – such as travel or career changes. If you are experiencing a lot of stress in some areas of your life, you may want to put off a change in jobs, for example. But even these stresses can be outside our control at times.

Many stresses we have very little or no control over — The amount of work we have in our careers; the demands of working and raising a family; the loss of loved ones through death or divorce.

If we can’t prevent stress, that means we need to find ways to deal with it when it arises. It helps if we can practice some coping strategies to deal with stress ahead of time. Some general strategies available to lessen the effects of stress include the following:

**Take care of body, mind and spirit…**

- Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals
- Regular moderate exercise
- Stretch regularly (once each hour, if you sit at a desk)
- Practice good sleep routines, focusing on adequate sleep, and regular sleep and waking times
- Practice yoga, tai chi or meditation
- Pay attention to your breathing, making sure it is relaxed and comes from deep within your abdomen, rather than shallow and quick from your upper chest.

**Take Control of Your Time and Work**

Feeling overworked, overtired, underappreciated, thinking about work all the time but not wanting to go there. This is a sign you have been working under too much stress with little time to recover. It is important to find a way to balance things out to give yourself time to recuperate. This is sometimes easier said than done, but here are some ideas to get started.

1. Rather than trying to take regular big breaks from work and then not taking them because you can’t afford the time, take several mini-breaks that don’t feel like they’ll take as much time out of an already overly busy day. Here are some ideas for 2- to 5-minute breaks:
   - Make a list of what you want for Christmas
   - Walk around the block or the office
   - Browse through a catalogue or travel brochure
   - Work on a crossword puzzle
   - Call and make an appointment for a massage
   - Close your eyes and imagine yourself on your favourite beach or golf course
   - Read the comics
   - Keep an “executive” toy at your desk, such as a yo-yo or paddle ball, and take a minute to focus on playing, rather than on the deadline that is stressing you

You get the idea – something, anything that gives your mind a doorway to some fresh air.

2. Make an appointment for lunch the way you would make an appointment for a client or a meeting, and stick with it. Try not to eat at your desk.

3. Spend evenings and weekends doing things with friends and family, removed from office and work environments.

_FSO offers confidential professional assistance on a wide variety of issues._

_For information and assistance call: 613.725.3601_