

## APRIL IS NATIONAL STRESS AWARENESS MONTH

### What is stress?

Stress is often characterized as physical and emotional tension. It is a normal reaction to stressors, such as big changes, critical situations, life events, or even people. In most cases, short-term stress gives us the capacity to persevere through challenges. However, it can also do the opposite and negatively impact our wellbeing when it lasts for an extended period of time. Excessive stress can affect your mental and physical health, as well as decrease your quality of life. Learning to properly manage and overcome stress can help you live a healthier and longer life.

### Biological Reasons

Stress is the body's natural instinct to defend itself against a perceived threat. This response can be life-saving in certain situations by preparing us to "fight" or "flee" to safety. When this alarm system is triggered, the body releases hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline. These chemicals cause increased heart rate, rapid breathing, tenser muscles, and provides a surge of fuel or energy. Once the perceived threat has passed, the body returns to normal. When stressors are constantly present and unaddressed, the body's stress response is overworked and can become both an emotional and physical toll.

### Stress and Health

Continuous stress without relief can be linked to health problems. Examples include headaches, changes in appetite, high blood pressure, chest pain, anxiety, insomnia, or depression. Chronic stress can even make us more susceptible to getting sick or prevent us from recovering as quickly from illnesses. On top of that, it can become harmful when people try to relieve their stress by using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs.

### Tips for Combating Stress

Everyone has their own methods of relaxing and recharging. Engaging in healthy activities and having the right support system can help combat stress. It is important to identify what works for you. Some tips to get you started for better stress management are listed here.

- Identify stressors and develop a plan for addressing them. Once identified, find an effective way to conquer your challenges.
- Build strong relationships with family members or close friends who can offer assistance and support during times of need.

- Keep a positive, yet realistic attitude. Recognize when things are out of your control and let it go.
- Take care of yourself. Eat right, stay mindful, get plenty of sleep, and engage in regular physical activity.
- Participate in activities you do not find stressful, such as sports, social events, or hobbies.
- Set realistic goals at home and work. Avoid overscheduling or engaging in too many things that you cannot give your full efforts to.
- Get organized to help stay focused and prioritized. Approach big tasks one step at a time.
- Know when to seek help. If you are overwhelmed, feel you cannot cope, or have suicidal thoughts, talk to a mental health care provider.

### Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques are a great way to decrease the effects of stress on your mind and body. Examples include yoga, tai chi, meditating, or breathing exercises. Exploring these simple techniques can help slow your heart rate, lower your blood pressure, and reduce muscle tension. Here are some you can try:

Deep breathing exercises – Sit up straight or lie down on your back. Place one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Breathe in slowly to your fullest capacity to the count of eight. Hold your breath to a count of five. Breathe out slowly and steadily through your mouth until most of the air is out to the count of ten. Try this for five minutes.

Muscle relaxation – This consists of a two-step process. First, you apply muscle tension to a specific part of the body, for example your hand. Take a slow, deep breath and squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for five seconds. The second part involves quickly relaxing the tensed muscles and exhaling as you do. Deliberately focus on the difference between the tensed and relaxed states. Repeat this in different muscle groups, such as your legs, toes, stomach, or shoulders.

Meditation – You can meditate anywhere. Sit quietly, close your eyes, and focus on something such as your breathing. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, then exhale through your mouth. You can even do this while reciting a mantra, such as "I am peaceful." Do not concern yourself with any thoughts or distractions that may wander into your mind. Try this for 15 minutes.