



## STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

The good news is that stress is a normal and often productive occurrence in life. The bad news is that stress can be an obstruction to leading a healthy life. If we manage stress well, it can lead to increased productivity, more energy and creativity as well as happiness. However, when we have too much stress in our lives and it gets to the point where we can no longer manage it, it can manifest itself in ways which we might not characterize as stress related. Some of these would include ennui or lack of interest in life, constant fatigue, and irritability. Eventually these can morph into depression.

Kurt Lewin, a noted mid-century psychologist, compared stress to a rubber band. A rubber band lying on the table is relatively useless. When it is used to bind together several objects it is very helpful. However, if there are too many objects in the bundle, the rubber band is stretched beyond its capability and eventually will snap. The same goes with stress. A little bit of stress is useful to get things done but too much stress will break an individual.

A little bit of stress can propel us into action. An exam coming up, a wedding, a new assignment, packing from an assignment that is concluded, getting ready for a trip are all stress producing activities that can motivate us to get into action. However, there is something called “chronic stress” that can inhibit any production at all and can eventually cause great damage.

What is chronic stress? Chronic stress is the everyday stressors that continue, and over time one believes he/she has no control. Examples might be financial problems that increase, a toxic work environment, too much input from social media, the news, etc. Chronic stress never lets up and eventually causes vulnerability to psychological and physical health issues.

So, what to do? We need to learn how to manage stress, to mediate it, and to self-regulate. These are skills that are not innate but can be learned. They require practice and sometimes professional help. To manage stress, we can use cognitive reframing, understanding cognitive distortions, (catastrophizing, “what if” thinking, etc.), use of relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, mindfulness, prayer, etc.

Stress can be mediated by examining how we are interpreting the event. Is there a silver lining to what is happening? Can we choose hope, a theological virtue? Can we learn self-mastery through self-awareness and thereby regulate our thinking?

And finally, exercise. Belonging to a gym or health club, walking alone or with a friend, sitting on the beach, taking in a sunrise or sunset, can all be beneficial. Concomitant with exercise is a healthy diet. What we eat or drink and how much we indulge can affect stress. Turning to alcohol or overeating only adds to the stress rather than mitigating it.

Self-care is one of the best ways to overcome unhealthy reactions to stress. Eat well, exercise, get enough sleep (7-8 hours per night), and read up on ways to relieve stress. The internet is full of resources on how to manage our stress. And never be afraid to seek professional help when the going gets too tough for you to overcome on your own. We at Saint John Vianney Center are always here to help when needed.

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