

STRESS

An American Epidemic

By Darlene Friedman

It's the beginning of a typical day. After being startled into consciousness by your alarm clock, you get dressed, swallow your toast whole and head for the door. You don't want to be late for your 8 a.m. appointment with rush-hour traffic.

You get to the office, wait in what seems like an endless line at the coffee machine, file past your desk-drumming, foot-tapping co-worker, and plop down into your chair. "Gee," you say to yourself, "my head aches. My back is killing me. It's not even 9 o'clock and I'm exhausted. I'm not cut out for this life."

Welcome to the world of stress, the modern-day epidemic.

Twentieth century Americans have been hurtling toward the outer reaches of manageable stress levels at alarming rates:

- Heart disease is the nation's number one killer and one in four Americans has high blood pressure. Both are caused or aggravated by stress.
- The three bestselling prescription drugs in the U.S. are an ulcer medication (Tagamet), a hypertension drug (Inderal), and a tranquilizer (Valium). Painkillers are the leading over-the-counter drugs.
- The American Academy of Family Physicians esti-

mates that two-thirds of all office visits are due to stress-related ailments.

What is stress and why is it plaguing modern-day society?

Wear and tear

Dr. Hans Selye, the Austrian-born "father" of stress research, defined stress as "the rate of wear and tear in the body." Experts now use the term to refer to any external stimulus causing wear and tear, or to the resulting internal damage. This damage can take many forms, from simple headaches to more serious conditions including heart disease, stroke and cancer. In fact, it has been said that stress may be the greatest single contributor to illness in the industrial world.

As the incidence of stress-related illness soars, and lives are lost, a closer examination of stress and what can be done to control it has been the subject of extensive research.

Dr. Robert S. Eliot, author of *Is It Worth Dying For?*, has made stress research his life's work. He became his own first stress patient when he suffered a heart attack at age 43.

"Modern stress," he says, "is caused by circuit overload—what Alvin Toffler called 'future shock.'"

"Technology has altered our lives. Mass media, air travel and computers have expanded our worlds, creating an environment where we encounter 1000 times more events per year than our great grandparents did.

"But," he adds, "while we are bombarded with constantly changing challenges, the time available for decision making remains the same or less."

Harvard cardiologist and stress expert Dr. Herbert Benson concurs: "We live in a world of uncertainties—everything from job insecurities to the nuclear threat." The question is, how do we cope with these stress situations?

Fight or flight

In prehistoric times, when our ancestors needed to be prepared to fight a saber-toothed tiger, they experienced stress. Adrenaline coursed through veins, as the body readied for one of two actions: fight or flight. The response was appropriate. In the twentieth century, however, that same response is physiologically neurotic—that is, people are reacting to today's problems with yesterday's primitive responses.

The danger to health and well-being comes when release of stress chemicals like adrenaline is triggered, resulting in a rise in blood pressure and heart rate and preparation for the now inappropriate fight or flight reaction.

Paul J. Rosch, president of the American Institute of Stress, says, "Today, we have little opportunity to make use of that added adrenaline." In fact, Rosch explains, the chemical release can actually overpower the body's resistance system. "Often, the adrenaline overdose can seriously disrupt the body's natural checks and balances and lead to a buildup of cholesterol in the arteries. It has a disastrous effect on the immune system as well."

Consequences can range from cardiac disease to an increase in accident proneness to suicide. And, this chronic adrenaline overdose can aggravate other conditions such as asthma, diabetes and multiple sclerosis.

According to a study conducted by the University of California's School of Medicine, in 1981 premature death cost business and industry \$25 billion and 132 lost work days. Today, estimates put that figure at \$50-75 billion a year, or more than \$750 for every U.S. worker.

Managing stress has become a priority for those companies concerned about their employees and about the steep medical bills for American workers' declining health. The battle cry was sounded years ago when the chairman of General Motors discovered that his company spent more on health benefits than it did on steel.

To date, more than 500 corporations have launched programs to enhance the well being of their employees. One

in five Fortune 500 companies now sponsors a stress management program. Why? One reason is the bottom line. Helping employees manage stress translates into dollars—less illness, less time missed from work, greater productivity.

Programs differ from company to company, but all incorporate the basic anti-stress tenets: Learn to relax. Engage in healthy eating habits. Exercise.

From yoga to TM

The last decade has also seen corporate programs embracing what were once considered outlandish relaxation/lifestyle techniques, things like yoga and transcendental meditation (TM).

Harvard's Dr. Benson is largely responsible for bringing TM to the masses. In 1968, he was persuaded to study the effects of TM. Although skeptical at first, Benson's findings surprised him. "We discovered that TM can elicit dramatic changes including decreased heart rate and lower blood

continued on page 8

Shaping-Up: feeling good, easing stress

Two years ago, Commonwealth introduced the Shaping-Up program to employees and their spouses. Its purpose: to help foster exercise, activity, weight loss and overall stress reduction habits—to remind Commonwealth people of the importance of their own individual well-being.

More than 1,500 people signed up for the corporate-sponsored program, and continue to report their Shaping-Up activities in personal logs, earning exercise- and sports-related prizes.

Shaping-Up Update, a newsletter that reinforces the program, offers information on nutrition, stress reduction and physical fitness. "A fit, stress-free group of employees is, naturally, a more self-satisfied and productive group," said Chief Executive Officer Herbert Wender. "We believe in the importance and value of Shaping-Up—of individuals feeling better about themselves and their lives. It benefits us all."

Living with stress

Thinking positively, setting reachable goals

continued from page 7

pressure.

"In fact," he asserts, "TM sets off a built-in mechanism that is opposite of the fight or flight response—that is, a mechanism allowing the mind and body to relax and cope with modern stress."

According to Benson, when practiced 10 to 20 minutes once or twice a day, TM can produce a lasting reduction in stress-related symptoms.

Now, many companies use the latest stress management techniques. For example:

- New York Telephone has been offering meditation seminars to help stress-ridden employees since 1979. Employees who meditate are less depressed, anxious, hostile. They report they can think more clearly, feel more alert, function better socially and enjoy life more.

- The Live for Life Center at McNeil Consumer Products Company in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, stocks its cafeteria with healthy foods, low in sugar and salt. McNeil also offers counseling for drug abuse, one of today's common and unfortunate responses to stress.

- PepsiCo Inc. has a comprehensive fitness program at its world headquarters in Purchase, New York, that includes aerobic dancing, yoga classes and fitness equipment.

Good stress, too

Dr. Mel Goldsmith, national director of ACORN, a stress management consulting firm used by more than 50 companies, says, "Our clients have found that a stress management program is the least expensive employee benefit—costing one-half of one percent of the total expenditure for benefits. For every dollar invested, the employer gets a return of \$8 to \$15 on reduced medical costs, lower medical insurance costs and less frequent

absences."

O God, give us serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other—Reinhold Niebuhr

Falling in love, watching a thrilling football game, taking a trip through Europe—pleasurable activities and experiences—can unleash stress hormones just as crises can. Explains Dr. Eliot: "Stress isn't always bad. In fact, a certain amount is positive and pleasurable, leading to productivity. Life would be dreary without it."

The key to living with stress, maintains Eliot and other experts, is learning to distinguish between good stress and bad stress and ridding oneself of the latter.

"It may sound like a cliché," says Eliot, "but thinking positively is perhaps the most important element for leading a happy, nonstressful, productive life.

"Sure, life isn't perfect, so adjust your expectations. Set reachable goals and raise your possibility of success.

"Decide which things you can and can't change, and learn to yield gracefully to those things you can't change."

More on stress

Here are some recent books on stress: **Treating Type A Behavior and Your Heart** by Drs. Meyer Friedman and Ray H. Rosenman (Alfred Knopf); **The Stress Check** by Cary L. Cooper (Prentice Hall); **Is It Worth Dying For?** by Dr. Robert S. Elliot and Dennis L. Breo (Bantam Books); **Beyond the Relaxation Response** by Dr. Herbert Benson with William Proctor (Times Books).