



InfoSheet

Panic Disorder Support Group • Fort Lauderdale

Number: 2

Tuesday, December 11th, 2001

Stress

Stress is the “wear and tear” our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment; it has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings. As a positive influence, stress can help compel us to action; it can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, or a new relationship, we experience stress as we readjust our lives. In so adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder us depending on how we react to it.

Stress is not an anxiety disorder, nor is it a normative concept; a person typically is stressed when positive or negative (e.g., threatening) experiences temporarily strain or overwhelm adaptive capabilities. Stress is highly individualized and depends on variables such as the novelty, rate, intensity, duration, or personal interpretation of the input, and genetic or experiential factors. From the stress perspective, it is quite possible for there to be even too much of a good thing: one person’s fun may be another person’s stressor.

Both acute and chronic stress can intensify morbidity from anxiety disorders. Panic attacks, for example, are more frequent when the predisposed person is exposed to stressors. Stress-reduction strategies can be helpful to many anxious patients. Unfortunately, many anxious persons cannot concentrate enough to use such strategies effectively for acute relief. Most stress reduction techniques have their greatest utility as elements of a prevention plan that attempts to raise one’s threshold to anxiety-provoking experiences. The 5Rs—core concepts that are basic elements in a stress or anxiety reduction program.

Recognition of the causes and sources of the threat or distress; education and consciousness raising.
Relationships identified for support, help and re-

assurance. **Removal** from the threat or stressor; managing the stimulus. **Relaxation** through techniques such as meditation, massage, breathing exercises, or imagery. **Re-engagement** through managed re-exposure and desensitization.

Meditation techniques are currently popular and may be beneficial to some stress-prone or potentially anxious persons. Many variations exist. Most meditation techniques share common elements: (1) a focusing chant or mantra that distracts one from preoccupying thoughts and feelings; (2) deep, rhythmic (usually abdominal) breathing that emphasizes a prolonged expiratory phase; and (3) muscle relaxation. For more information on stress reduction or meditation, the interested reader is encouraged to consult relevant references.

Medical Disorders Associated with Anxiety

Certain medical illnesses and neurologic disorders can change the balance of neurotransmitters in the brain and cause the occurrence of anxiety symptoms or panic attacks. Hyperthyroidism, hypoglycemia, mitral valve prolapse, and parathyroid disease are related to panic attacks. Adrenal tumor, alcoholism. Angina pectoris, CNS degenerative disease, Cushing’s disease, coronary insufficiency, delirium, postconcussional syndrome, premenstrual syndrome and pulmonary embolism are usually associated with symptoms similar to those of generalized anxiety disorder.

Drugs that Can Cause Anxiety

A common cause of anxiety symptoms can be traced to drug use or abuse. Some of the drugs that can cause anxiety are: amphetamines, asthma medication, caffeine, cocaine, steroids, nasal decongestants, and appetite suppressants.

Useful Anxiety and Panic Internet Links:

- Panic Disorder: A Comprehensive Overview
www.algy.com/anxiety/NEWS/700.html
- Understanding Panic Disorder (NIMH)
www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety/panicmenu.cfm/
- Free Medication: How to Get Them
hope4ever.hypermart.net/FREEMEDS.html