

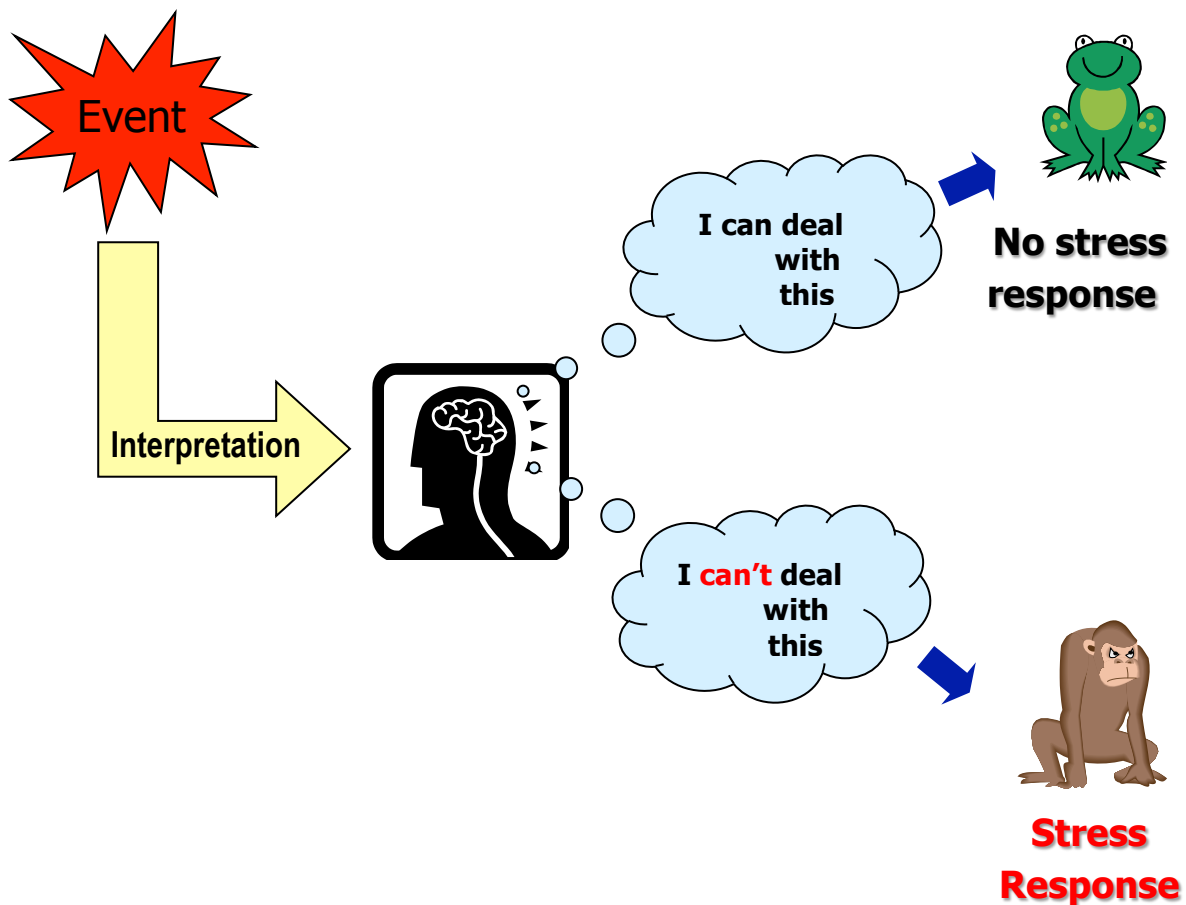
Understanding Stress

There are many issues in life which will cause us stress; there are day-to-day experiences that are stressful, and there are particular stressors that we face at certain times in our lives or in response to unique situations.

People who are experiencing a new spinal cord injury, and their loved ones, are faced with adjusting to new and additional stressors that most people don't need to think about... so be patient with yourself as you go through this.

Stress involves events that happen to us and *our thoughts about them and reactions to them*. Stress is a physical and emotional response that occurs when we interpret something as stressful. We experience stress when we feel that the demands of a situation outweigh our ability or skills to cope with them.

Figure 1



Stress affects the body in many ways:

Figure 2

Intellectual symptoms:

How stress can affect your mind

- problems with memory
- difficulty making decisions
- inability to concentrate, shortened attention span
- confusion
- repetitive or continual thoughts
- misunderstanding of what others tell you
- poor judgment
- thoughts of escaping, running away
- inability to slow down thought process
- loss of objectivity

Emotional symptoms:

What stress can make you feel

- less interest in hobbies or fun
- sudden shifts in mood
- frequent uneasiness, restlessness
- frustration
- anger, resentment
- quick irritability with others
- oversensitivity
- overreaction to unexpected situations
- sense of being overwhelmed
- anxiety
- inadequacy, reduced confidence
- depression
- apathy
- desire to cry

Physical symptoms:

How stress can affect your body

- headaches
- digestive disorders
- muscle tension and pain
- sleep disturbances
- fatigue
- chest pain, irregular heartbeat
- high blood pressure
- weight gain or loss
- hair loss
- asthma or shortness of breath
- skin problems
- immune system suppression
- sweatiness

Behavioral symptoms:

What stress can make you do

- eat more or less
 - sleep too much or too little
 - isolate yourself from others, including people close to you
 - increase use of tobacco, alcohol, drugs, caffeine
 - engage in nervous habits such as nail biting, hair twisting, pacing
 - laugh or cry at inappropriate times
 - become bossy or inflexible with others
 - lose your temper
 - argue with people
 - become violent
 - take inappropriate risks
 - exhibit road rage
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Coping with Stress

- Give yourself permission to feel your emotions – there are no “bad” emotions. Allow yourself to feel anxious and/or stressed about whatever it is that is bothering you (“of course I feel anxious about this problem; anyone would”). At the same time, try to keep incidents in perspective, and not overreact to small setbacks or challenges - these are all to be expected.
 - Listen closely to your “self-talk”. Are you filling yourself with negative thoughts?
 - We naturally focus on negatives – notice this and consciously think and talk about some positives.
 - Notice words like *always, never, no one, everyone* and other “all-or-nothing” words.
 - Notice over-exaggerating - making something small into something big or something big into something impossible.
 - Surround yourself with people who bring positive energy to your life and who are supportive of you.
 - Set realistic goals regarding what and how much you are able to do. Try not to overwhelm yourself with high expectations and “shoulds”. Remember that you are doing the best you can and that you are making the best decisions with the information that you have at the time.
 - Take efforts to solve problems that are within your control. Accept that some things are out of your control and you can only control your perception or reaction to them.
 - **Steps for effective problem solving:**
 - Step 1: Identify the problem
 - Step 2: Gather information
 - Step 3: List possible solutions
 - Step 4: Try one option & evaluate the results
 - Step 5: Know when to ask for help
- (Link to problem solving handout in self-management section)*
- Recognize that your roles may change within your relationships and that these changes can be difficult to negotiate. It is normal to experience a range of emotions. Clear communication with your loved ones will help during these changes and adjustments.
 - Be willing to remove yourself from difficult situations to calm down and return to them when you are ready.
 - Celebrate even the smallest accomplishments. Give yourself frequent praise and rewards for your patience and endurance.
 - Take one day at a time, or sometimes one hour at a time. Try not to predict the future or worry about what *might* happen. There will always be unknowns on our life’s journey.
 - Remember your sense of humour – it relieves stress and can be a positive emotional release.
 - Take time for self-care, for doing activities that you enjoy, for visiting with people who bring you joy, for focusing on pleasant things. See *Strategies for Self Care* for more information.

Strategies for Self-Care

Self-care is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Think of it as making deposits into your “wellness bank”. If you make investments in your well-being, you can withdraw from the bank when needed and you will be better equipped to deal with stress. Some tips:

1) Take Charge

- The spinal cord injury does not always have to take center stage, make an active choice to take charge of your life.
- Equip yourself with as much information as you can about the injury and treatment. Knowledge is empowering.
- Get organized – keep lists and schedules so that you don’t have to worry about remembering everything.
- Simplify and structure your life and environment.
- Get your financial affairs in order.

2) Rest

- Get enough sleep (at least 6 hours per night) and be sure to take little breaks during the day, even if just a few minutes to sit down and do something for yourself.
- Try not to over-function. Share the load as much as each person is able.

3) Communicate

- Clear and respectful communication will decrease the potential for tension and conflict.
- Open up to your friends and family members, most want to be there for you and may not know how to start the conversation.
- Share your feelings in a respectful way with your loved ones, whether this is about the emotions you are feeling, the concern you have for them, or changes you are noticing in your roles and relationships.
- Ask for support around difficult conversations and clear communication from your social worker or another support person.

4) Build a Support Network

- Maintain your relationships with the important people in your life, avoid isolation.
- Try to develop a support network by making connections and relationships with others who are going through similar situations; it is helpful to know that you are not alone.
- Become familiar with the resources in your community that can help (i.e. volunteer drivers, meal delivery programs, support groups, counselors, Spinal Cord Injury BC). Your social worker can provide you with information.

5) Know the Signs of Burnout and Depression

- Develop an awareness of the physical symptoms related to stress. How does your body react to stress? See handout *Understanding Stress* for more information.
- Know when your stress is manageable and when you need to seek help.
- Don’t put off seeking help from professionals when you need it.

6) Practice Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques

- Take care of your whole self. Remember that you are more than your physical body – you are a spouse, parent, sibling, employee, friend, son/daughter, writer, listener, a spiritual being, etc. Maintain these parts of your identity.
- Try techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, relaxation, and guided imagery.
- *** Try this quick, One Minute Meditation: <http://www.onemomentmeditation.com/>

- Make time during the day to be kind to yourself - a moment to do something you enjoy, to read before bed, to take a bath... whatever makes you feel good and remain grounded.
- Being in nature can have a relaxing, grounding effect on us.
- Eat well and get enough sleep, we all function better when our basic needs are looked after.
- Attend a support group or talk to others in similar situations (i.e. Spinal Cord Injury BC). You will discover that you are not alone in this experience, and you will gain invaluable insights and suggestions from others.
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Other resources:

Stress Management Strategies:

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/quick_stress_relief.htm

For links to audio guides for mindfulness:

<http://cirpd.org/resources/Webinars/Pages/MindfulnessforChronicPain-5-PartSeries.aspx>

Dr. Mike Evans Stress Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6402QJp52M&t=3s>