

Ask Connie... Less Stress, Pleeze!

Connie Myslik-McFadden, MSS, LCSW

Dear Connie,

Lately I've been tossing and turning for hours every night before I finally get to sleep. I have to drink three cups of coffee in the morning just to wake up enough to drive to my job, an hour away. It's costing me an arm and a leg to drive my truck to work these days, and what's worse is I could even lose my job, because my company is laying people off. I'm getting headaches and stomach aches, and my doctor says my blood pressure is too high. When my adjustable mortgage goes to a fixed rate I'll be up a creek. On top of that, when I sit down at night with Fox news and a couple of beers, I get all worked up over the things I see. I need to relax. How can I?

—Sincerely, Jeff

Dear Jeff,

Learning how to deal with stress in this fast-paced and fast-changing world is a challenge every human being has to face. We are biologically equipped to handle stress by fight or flight, a response that worked in the stone age but doesn't so well now. Our adrenal glands pump out adrenaline in response to perceived threats. If we do need to fight or flee, we are given the energy to do so. But many of the situations we face in life cannot be met by fighting or fleeing. If we can't do either—for example, we are stuck in traffic that isn't moving because of an accident up ahead, or the boss gives us a project to complete with an unrealistic deadline—adrenaline byproducts build up in our bodies and cause physical symptoms such as headaches, irritability, high blood pressure, etc. Coffee in excess makes the symptoms worse, as does worry. Alcohol can be a temporary relaxant, but it primarily depresses—hence the need for more coffee in the morning. Some people try anti-anxiety medication, or sleeping pills, which may have side effects that are not particularly desirable, including addiction.

I know of two main ways you can reduce stress, both of which are worthwhile. The first is to deal with the external factors which are stressful for you;



the second is to find ways to help your body handle stress. Because there will always be stressful situations in life, learning how to better cope with stress will serve you well for the long haul.

Some practical problem solving for example—carpooling or driving a smaller, more energy efficient vehicle, will help save on gas expense; reducing credit-card debt and rethinking your budget—should help avoid more debt; drinking less coffee and beer will break the cycle of overstimulation, sedation, and sleeplessness; listening to soothing music instead of watching the news will help you relax more naturally.

One of the best ways to reduce stress is exercise. Half an hour or more of brisk walking, jogging, swimming, biking, or any other form of sustained moderately strenuous exercise will help lower your blood pressure, elevate your mood, and increase your fitness (always good for one's self-esteem!).

Spending time outdoors where there are trees and flowers, a lake or river, birds and wild animals, mountains, the ocean, will help reduce your inner stress and give you the experience of being part of the whole. Petting and playing with a dog, cat, or other domestic animal is also known to increase people's sense of well-being.

One of the most effective tools you can use to relax is meditation. Meditation has been used throughout the ages by people from many cultures as a way to become centered, connect more deeply with themselves, and experience the divine. Some people think sitting on the floor for hours with their legs twisted into a pretzel and their back aching is the only, right, way to meditate. This is not so. Nor is it necessary to listen to a particular kind of music, join a cult, or have a guru to supervise you. Although there are different meditation techniques, the simplest I know is this:

Find a comfortable place to sit—in a chair or on a floor cushion is fine. You can lie down if you like, but many people fall asleep when they lie down. Sit straight, and either cross your legs or, if you're in a chair, put your feet flat on the floor. Rest your hands on your thighs, palms up or down. Set a timer for ten or twenty minutes. Close your eyes and take three long, deep breaths, letting your body relax more with each exhalation. Then focus all your attention at the tip of your nose and begin to follow the in and out of your breath. For increased focus, track the pause at the end of each inhale and exhale: inhale, pause, exhale, pause. Until you have practiced meditation regularly, you will probably find it hard to stay focused—thoughts will distract you from following your breath. As soon as you notice you are thinking, gently bring your attention back to your breath. Keep doing this until the timer beeps.

Remember that the regular practice of meditation has a cumulative, positive, effect. If you commit yourself to meditating daily, you can expect to feel more centered, peaceful, calm, and much better able to deal with the external stressors that inevitably will come your way. Be patient with yourself, give it a couple of months, and I predict that you will feel a whole lot better, no matter what the external circumstances are.

—Good luck, Jeff!

Do you have a relationship question?

E-mail Connie, conniem@mcn.net, or
Call 406-582-7450 & Ask!

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Connie Myslik-McFadden, MSS, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in Bozeman with 25 years of experience working with individuals, couples and groups. She leads workshops, retreats and teaches Dream work and Pathwork. Connie devoted 9 years to Jungian analysis, training, and supervision, after graduating from the Bryn Mawr School of Social Work. She went on to graduate from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, and Society of Souls, a kabbalistic

school of healing. She is the author of "Gathering the Soul, a True Story of Spiritual Healing." Pathwork (Pathwork.org) and Imago Relationship Therapy (www.GettingTheLoveYouWant.org) are two easily accessible sources for the theories upon which much of this column is based.

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