

# STRESS MANAGEMENT

**Stress** is what our bodies experience in response to physical and mental demands. The demands are the **stressors**. Stressors can come from our **environment**, from **our thoughts** and from our **physical health**. Stress from the environment includes such things as weather, traffic, noise, pollution or overhearing a loud argument. Stress from our thoughts has to do with general negative thinking, worrying, self talk that inflicts suffering or our interpretation of events. Some examples of stress from our physical health would be colds, injury, excess weight, chronic illness and pain.

The stress response that our bodies experience is a series of biochemical events that are part of a basic and essential survival mechanism. It is known as the **fight or flight response**, because it provided primitive man with the necessary adrenal push which enhanced his physical capacity to escape or fight to survive in the wilds. These are normal changes and can also be quite helpful in modern society. Your body becomes more alert and you have the adrenaline and subsequent physiological changes that prepares your body for optimal performance. This response can enable you to rapidly pull a child from harms way or quickly turn the wheel of the car to avoid an accident. This response is activated in the challenge of sports activity and can improve your performance.

The diagram on the following page of **The Autonomic Nervous System, The Endocrine System and The Immune System** outlines the effects of stress on your body. The hypothalamus stimulates the Sympathetic Nervous System, and the Endocrine System to secrete neurotransmitters to make changes in the body. Your heart rate, blood volume and blood pressure all go up, you start to pressure. Your hands and feet get cold as blood is directed away from your extremities and digestive system into the larger muscle that can help you fight or run. Your diaphragm and anus lock. Your pupils dilate to sharpen vision and your hearing becomes more acute. At the same time chemical messengers are inhibiting digestion, reproduction, growth and tissue repair, and the immune and inflammatory responses.

In modern society our everyday stressors are more subtle than the threat of overt physical harm, but our more subtle stressors continue to elicit those same physiological changes. In most situations after the stress subsides, the body relaxes and returns to normal. When you are over stressed your body does not return to normal. When your body stays in this state of hyper arousal, current physical problems can be aggravated and this creates risk for developing a stress related disease. Any vulnerable system can be aggravated by chronic stress. This could include for example, musculoskeletal problems, reproductive problems, digestive problems, respiratory problems, heart, blood pressure and headache.

Living with **chronic pain** is living with a chronic stress. **Stress management skills** are essential tools for coping, improving function and helping our bodies achieve optimal balance.

## Tools for stress management:

- **Identifying symptoms of stress.**
- **Elicit the relaxation response on a regular basis.**
- **Identifying situations which contribute to stress.**
- **Problem solve for situation management.**