

The following article was written by Steve Barrett, an American Legion lifetime member (Chapter 201), a member of the VFW (Post 9143), and a Clinical Social Worker at the Atlanta VA Medical Center. He works primarily with Vietnam veterans, and Steve is a Vietnam veteran himself. He was stationed in the Central Highlands in 1967. Steve is also a retired military social worker.

Stress and Our Health

By Steve Barrett, LCSW, BCD

Did you ever notice that during transitional life events, you sometimes feel irritable and experience flu-like symptoms? For example, when you were in the service and facing a PCS move, did you feel short tempered and not able to shake a cold or sore throat a couple of months before or maybe after the move? If this sounds familiar, then maybe you were experiencing a reaction to stress. Anytime there are negative **OR** positive changes in our lives, we must make an adaptation. The adaptation and our response to the adaptation can cause 'stress'.

What exactly is stress? In common language, the word "stress" is used to describe a wide variety of situations – from your cell phone ringing while you are talking on another phone - to the feelings associated with intense work overload or the death of a loved one. Perhaps the most useful and widely accepted definition of stress is attributed to the psychologist, Dr. Richard Lazarus. He described stress as "a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that 'demands' exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize. In less formal terms, we feel stressed when we feel that 'things are out of control.' Natalie Goldberg said "stress is an ignorant state. It believes that everything is an emergency." In fact, excessive physical or mental stress can have a detrimental effect on the optimal functioning of the immune system. According to many physicians, stress has surpassed the common cold as the most common health problem in North America,

Stress is unavoidable, and some stress can even be beneficial. Good stress can excite us. It pushes us to achieve, to cope with problems, and to get things done. Speaking before a group, getting ready to go on holiday, competing in sports, or entertaining a guest can be stressful; yet also rewarding. Our response to stress is influenced by our perceptions. For example, retirement may be extremely stressful to one individual, while another may adapt to the change without any negative reactions. The stress response is also a physical response - a hormonally stimulated reaction of arousal and alarm that prepares our heart, nervous system, muscles, and other organs to face the challenge at hand. This is called the "flight or fight" response that we all experience when we are confronted with stress. Veterans who have been in combat know this flight or fight response very well, and it probably gave them the physical and emotional resources to stay alive. This flight or fight response is our body's response to challenge or danger. When we have a flight or fight experience, our bodies generate over 30 bio-chemical hormonal and physiological changes; and it can take up to 30 minutes for our bodies to recover. It is estimated that we have approximately 100 modest flight or flight responses every day. Thus, we rarely have a chance to recover from the previous stress experience.

When the stress response is activated, certain signs and symptoms become evident. They can be classified in three categories:

1. **BEHAVIORIAL:** Common behavioral reactions to stress are increased errors, diminished concentration, forgetfulness, lowered energy level, lack of enthusiasm, and

pulling away from others. Behavioral responses may also be evidenced by heavy smoking, increased use of alcohol, and lowered job performance.

2. **PHYSICAL:** Some of the physical indicators of stress include: elevated blood pressure, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, and frequent headaches. Stress also shows itself in sweaty palms, upset stomach, jaw clenching, flushed face, or sleep difficulties.
3. **EMOTIONAL:** Most common among the emotional indicators of stress are worry, irritability, depression, and low morale. While experiencing stress, we may experience a dislike of ourselves, a sense of futility, and a sense of unimportance. We may begin to blame others for our circumstances, and become increasingly suspicious and distrustful.

Experiencing any one or two of the signs of stress does not necessarily mean something is wrong. However, when we experience several of these stress indicators, we should ask these questions: “What is going on in my life that may be stressing it? Am I in control of things?” Understanding what is going on in our lives is important because the impact of stress on our health can be overwhelming. The University of Kansas Counseling Center estimate that 85% of all visits to the doctor are for stress-related and stress-induced illnesses. In fact, there are many common ailments that are clearly related to stress such as depression, high blood pressure, diabetes, hair loss, heart disease, obesity, sexual dysfunction, and cancer. We can die from unresolved stress related problems. The death certificate will read that the person died of a heart attack or stroke; but, if we were to do a psychological autopsy and go back in that person’s life for the past 2-3 years, we would discover much unresolved stress and anger. I think we need to treat our bodies and soul with as much TLC as we would treat that beloved, classic 1957 Chevy.

There is no way to completely avoid stress. Complete freedom from stress is death. So if we cannot eliminate stress, let’s look at some ways to manage stress:

1. Modify your value system – it’s okay not to be perfect.
2. Slow down your life – we don’t need to rush every place we go.
3. Become involved in an exercise program. Check with your doctor before embarking on a physical exercise program.
4. Attend a stress awareness/management class.
5. Change your eating habits and diet. Again, check with your doctor before you make any major dietary changes
6. Learn the *Relaxation Response*, and practice it daily.
7. Give or receive a massage.
8. Pet a puppy or a kitten. It is very difficult to be stressed when a puppy is licking your face.

It is important to know what ‘stresses’ you and how you react to stressful events. Take time to evaluate your life and activities. The more we know how our body responds to stress, the better off we are. Finally, look out for yourself, and take care of yourself! The philosopher John Locke once said “a sound mind in a sound body is a short but full description of a happy state in this world.”