

Stress: The Silent Killer

Q. I work in newspapers, and everyone I interact with is always stressed. Is all stress bad? How can I manage it?

–J.S., Atlanta, Georgia

A. When we feel stress, a chemical reaction occurs, and the adrenal glands release hormones. Normally you will feel a boost of energy but later will feel really tired.

God placed this mechanism in us for our survival. He gave it so we'd have that extra burst of strength and speed we'd need in demanding situations.

In this sense, stress is not bad. The problem lies with high levels of stress that go unmanaged for a long time. This can be very dangerous to your health.

Stress can be physical or emotional. Physical stress might include exposure to an extreme temperature. Emotional stress could be realizing you haven't enough money to pay your rent.

Most prolonged stress is emotional. Primarily it stems from a traumatic experience the person is unable to cope with. Stress like this can keep a person in a continual state of "fight or flight," and over a long period of time this provokes pathologies, including heart disease and cancer.

More than 80 percent of my patients experienced a traumatic event within three years of their cancer being diagnosed. A job layoff, divorce and death of a child top the list.

I am not a big fan of managing stress with prescription drugs. Most of these medications address the symptoms but not the causes. They can be addictive and cause long-term damage to the immune system and organs. Instead, I prescribe exercise, a healthful diet and vitamin supplementation.

Yet most important of all is your spirituality. I encourage

you to pray.

This may sound like something your pastor says, but I want you to consider the role prayer plays in relieving stress. Prayer can be therapeutic on both natural and supernatural levels.

In the natural sense it is documented that prayer causes the whole body to relax (haven't you ever dozed off while praying)? Prayer also works just because people believe it will (scientists call this a "placebo effect," but I refer to it as a "faith effect").

In the supernatural sense prayer can be empowering if it's done in the name of Jesus. Each day, set aside a specific time for prayer therapy. Get in a quiet place for about 10 minutes and talk to Jesus about your daily activities.

List the stressful things in your life and turn them over to God one by one. Keep a journal of how Jesus helps you have victory in each of them. And don't forget to visit your doctor regularly!

Q. I have arthritis. Is it safe for me to take a prescribed, steroid-based medication for this?

-M.G., Dallas, Texas

A. As a doctor, I wouldn't be very popular if I said pharmaceuticals are not safe. What's being prescribed to you is the standard treatment.

However, I do have suggestions for some natural alternatives that you may want to consider. Why not ask if your doctor will oversee your use of natural supplements? The goal would be to lower your dosage of prescription drugs.

A good friend of mine, Dr. Sheldon S. Hendler, is the author of the Physicians' Desk Reference for Nutritional Supplements. This is the book physicians refer to for indications that will help them determine the use of vitamins and natural substances

in treating illnesses.

It states that both shark cartilage and glucosamine combined with chondroitin sulfate may have some anti-inflammatory qualities, though there is not enough scientific evidence to verify if either have pain-relief or anti-arthritic mechanisms.

My personal experience with shark cartilage and glucosamine is that many of my patients have been able to completely substitute steroids with them. That's good because prolonged use of steroids can be devastating to your health.

If you decide to seek natural alternatives, the use of them must be administered under medical supervision. Vitamin and herbal remedies can be as powerful as pharmaceuticals and can overload your liver and kidneys. But, in my experience, they can be less damaging long term than medications, if used correctly.