

Thank you for your interest in this topic. If you have any questions about this, or any issue, please contact our office at 214-642-8737

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## Newsletter of Stonebriar Counseling Associates

### ☐ Stress is No Respector of Persons

We become physically drained and emotionally strained when we are preoccupied with busyness that our reaction ends up being an over-reaction. Therefore, by definition, stress is any type of action or situation that places conflicting or heavy demands upon a person. And, these demands upset the body's equilibrium and may chronically be irritating or upsetting. Life alternates between times of calmness---stress---and crisis. Psychologists have long noted that people are more efficient and productive when they have some stress (it can build character, enhance creativity, keep us on our social toes as law abiding citizens). However, if stress becomes intense, the efficiency begins to decrease accordingly. What is stressful to one person may not be to someone else. So, what makes people unprepared to handle stress?

People can experience either external or internal stressors. For example, external stressors include adverse physical conditions (such as pain or hot or cold temperatures) or stressful psychological environments (such as poor working conditions or abusive relationships). Internal stressors can also be physical (infections, inflammation) or psychological. An example of an internal psychological stressor is intense worry about a harmful event that may or may not occur.

### ☐ Acute or Chronic Stress

Stressors can also be defined as short-term (acute) or long-term (chronic). Acute stress is the reaction to an immediate threat, commonly known as the *fight or flight* response. The threat can be any situation that is

experienced, even subconsciously or falsely, as a danger. Some of the common acute stressors include: noise, crowding, isolation, hunger, danger, infection, and imagining a threat or remembering a dangerous event. Under most circumstances, once the acute threat has passed, the response becomes inactivated and levels of stress hormones return to normal, a condition called the *relaxation response*. Frequently, however, modern life poses on-going stressful situations that are not short-lived and the urge to act (to fight or to flee) may be suppressed. Stress, then, becomes chronic.

Common chronic stressors include: on-going highly pressured work, relationship problems, loneliness, and persistent financial worries. Studies suggest that the inability to adapt to stress is associated with the onset of depression or anxiety. In one study, two-thirds of subjects who experienced a stressful situation had nearly six times the risk of developing depression within that month. Some evidence suggests that repeated release of stress hormone produces hyperactivity in the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis and disrupts normal levels of serotonin, the nerve chemical that is critical for feelings of well-being. Therefore, on a more obvious level, stress diminishes the quality of life by reducing feelings of pleasure and accomplishment, and relationships are often threatened.

Strange as it may sound, the psychological effects of stress may cause people difficulty in finding a purpose or meaning in their given circumstance. Contrary to viewing the action or situation as a beneficial/learning experience, those that are mentally or physically stressed view the incident as a threat to their personal control or sense of entitlement ("I deserve better than

this." "This crisis should not be happening to me."). Some experts describe an exaggerated negative response to stress as "catastrophizing" the event (turning it into a catastrophe). An overly angry or hostile response to stressful situations may be dangerous to the heart. Studies in 1998 and 2000 have reported a correlation among women between anger, irritability, and hostility and narrowing of the arteries, a major risk factor for heart disease. The 1998 study also reported that suppressing anger was associated with this risk. People under chronic stress may try to self-medicate by frequently seeking relief through drug or alcohol abuse, tobacco use, abnormal eating patterns, or passive activities, such as watching television. The damage from these self-destructive habits is compounded by the effects of stress. And the cycle is self-perpetuating; a sedentary routine, an unhealthy diet, alcohol abuse, and smoking promote heart disease, interfere with sleep patterns, and can lead to increased rather than reduced tension levels. Drinking four or five cups of coffee, for example, can cause changes in blood pressure and stress hormone levels similar to those produced by chronic stress. Animal fats, simple sugars, and salt are known contributors to health problems. Instead of recognizing what tasks can be reasonably accomplished or which tasks are in their control and which ones aren't the individual is governed by the situation. The end result is feeling that there is no hope for change. Because everyone is at risk for stress (In one poll, 89% of respondents indicated that they had experienced serious stress in their lives) there are a number of signals that we should be on the alert.

## ☐ Symptoms of Stress

In response to stress, a part of the brain called the *hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal* (HPA) system is activated. There is a release of Steroid Hormones. The HPA systems trigger the production and release of steroid hormones (*glucocorticoids*), including the primary stress hormone *cortisol*. Cortisol is very important in marshaling systems throughout the body (including the heart, lungs, circulation, metabolism, immune systems, and skin) to deal quickly with stress. However, there is also the release of catecholamines. The HPA system also releases these neurotransmitters or chemical messengers known as *dopamine*, *norepinephrine*, and *epinephrine* (also called adrenaline). Catecholamines activate an area inside the brain called the *amygdala*, which apparently triggers an emotional response to a stressful event. (In the case of stress, this emotion is most likely fear.) Neurotransmitters then signal the *hippocampus* (a nearby area in the brain) to store the emotionally loaded experience in long-term memory. During a stressful event, catecholamines also suppress activity in areas at the front of the brain concerned with short-term memory, concentration, inhibition, and rational thought. This sequence of mental events allows a person to react quickly, either to fight or to flee from it. It also hinders the ability to handle complex social or intellectual tasks and behaviors. For example, an individual may demonstrate an excessive amount of daydreaming or fantasizing about "getting away from it all." Or, they may find that their thoughts trail off while speaking or writing (i.e. "'What did I just say?"). They may have difficulty understanding why they lose their train of thought. As stress intensifies, the heart rate and blood pressure may increase instantaneously. Breathing becomes rapid and the lungs take in more oxygen. Blood flow may actually

increase 300% to 400%, priming the muscles, lungs, and brain for added demands. The stress effect diverts blood flow away from the skin to support the heart and muscle tissues. This also reduces blood loss so that the physical effect is a cool, clammy, sweaty skin. The scalp also tightens causing the hair to seem to stand up. Just as there is a correlation between stress and the brain an anecdotal relationship exists between the brain and the intestine because both are mediated by many of the same hormones and nervous system. It is not surprising then that prolonged stress can disrupt the digestive system, irritating the large intestine and causing diarrhea, constipation, cramping, and bloating. Excessive production of digestive acids in the stomach may cause a painful burning. Irritable bowel syndrome (or spastic colon) is strongly related to stress. Some research indicates that sleep disturbances due to stress can further exacerbate irritable bowel syndrome.

## ☐ Solutions For Reducing Stress

Perhaps the best general approach for treating stress can be found in the elegant passage by Reinhold Niebuhr, "Grant me the courage to change the things I can change, the serenity to accept the things I can't change, and the wisdom to know the difference." The process of managing stress is life-long, and will not only contribute to better health, but a greater ability to succeed if one fervently acknowledges that trying to usurp control should not be part of one's agenda. An essential key for emotional and physical health is identifying stress and being aware of its harmful effect on our lives. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. Remember that the process does not come easy or natural to anyone (although skilled stress-copers make it look easy). It requires a conscientious, determined

effort to *learn long before the troubles arrive*, an openness to many solutions, the courage to try different kinds of solutions, and a willingness to honestly evaluate the effectiveness of your efforts to handle stressful situations. However, all require work toward change: changing the source of stress and/or changing your reaction to it. How do you proceed?

### **1. Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions.**

Notice your distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over your problems. Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about meaning of these events? Determine how your body responds to the stress. Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?

### **2. Recognize what you can change.**

Can you change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely? Can you reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)? Can you shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)?

### **Don't overwhelm yourself**

by fretting about your entire workload. Handle each task as it comes, or selectively deal with matters in some priority. Can you devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?

### **3. Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress.**

The stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger...physical danger and/or emotional danger. Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms and/or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster? Are you expecting to please everyone? Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent? Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation? Work at adopting

more moderate views; try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you. Try to temper your excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and the "what if's."

**4. Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.**

Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal. Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Medications, when prescribed by a physician, can help in the short term in moderating your physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer.

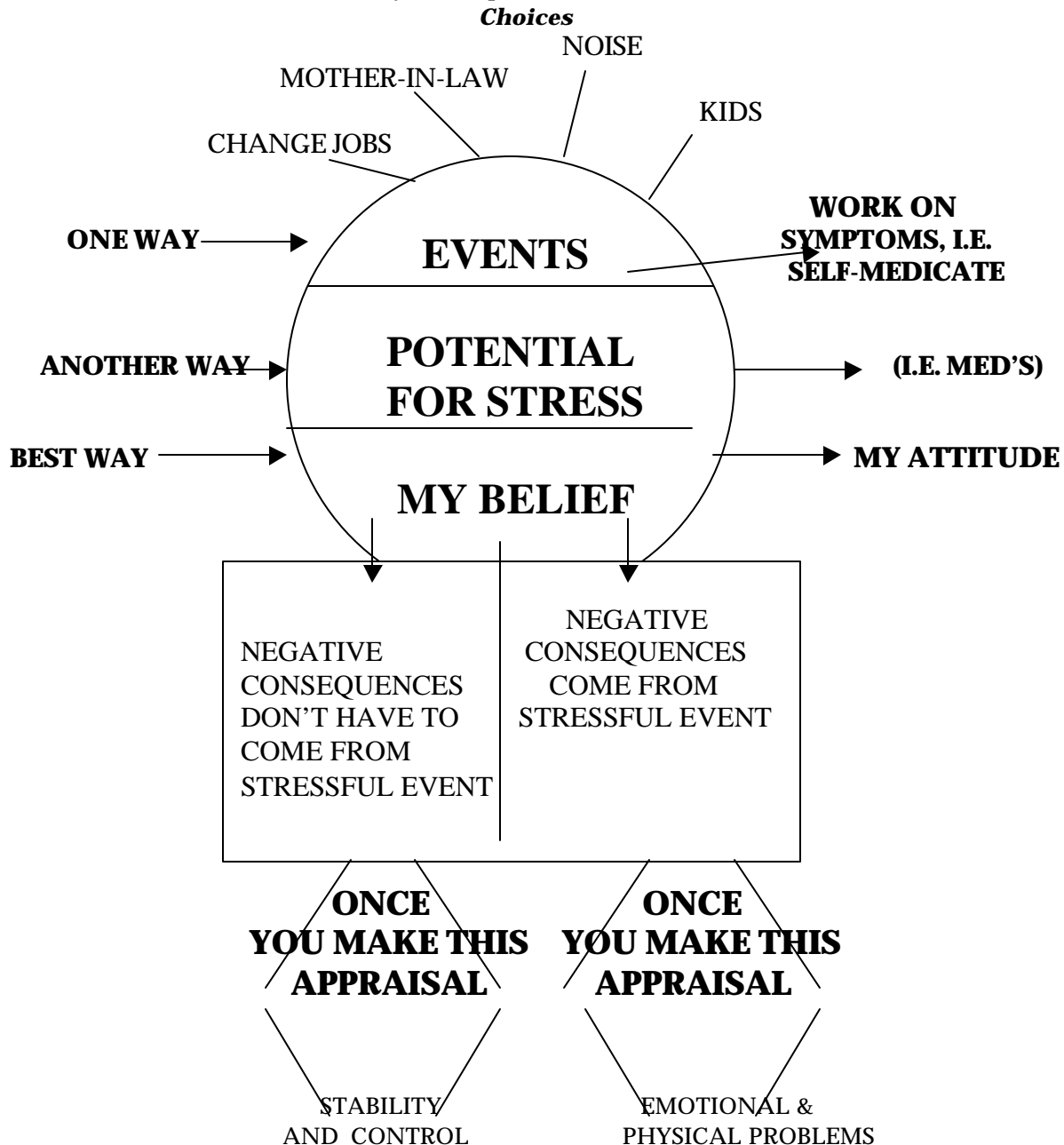
Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long-term solution.

**5. Build your physical reserves.**

Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging). Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals. Maintain your ideal weight. Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants. Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can. Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as

**6. Maintain your emotional reserves.**

Develop some mutually supportive friendships/relationships ("As iron sharpens iron so one man/woman sharpens another," Prov. 27:17). Pursue realistic goals that are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share. Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows.

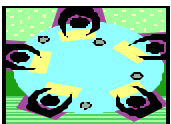




# Newsletter of Stonebriar Counseling Associates

From the desk of....

**Bob Good**



**Sexual Addiction Group Meeting  
Tuesday Nights at 7:00 pm  
Location: SCA office**



Dear Educator and Ministry Leader:

Question: How can you tell if your day is going to turn sour?

Answer: You see a "60 Minutes" news team in your office. You turn on the news and they are showing emergency routes out of town. Your twin sibling forgot your birthday. Your car horn goes off by accident and remains stuck as you follow a group of Hell's Angels on the freeway. Your boss tells you not to bother to take your coat off. Your income tax check bounces. You put both contact lenses in the same eye! If you are like me, we often dream of days without tension. And yet it seems that with every move we make the tensions of life exert more pressure upon us. **Stress** is often characterized by feelings of uneasiness, apprehension, dread, tension and worry. According to the Academy of Family Physicians, two-thirds of office visits to family doctors are prompted by stress-related symptoms. "Patients who had ischemia in response to mental stress had a three-fold increase in the risk of death compared to people without mental stress," says David S. Sheps, M.D., lead author and associate chief of the division of cardiovascular medicine, University of Florida Health Sciences Center, Gainesville. "This adds to a growing body of evidence that links mental stress and bad outcomes in individuals with coronary artery disease." Previous studies have shown that reduced blood flow during mental stress tests is linked to significantly higher rates of adverse cardiac events.

Currently, health care costs account for approximately 12% of the gross domestic product, escalating yearly. In terms of lost hours due to absenteeism, reduced productivity, and workers' compensation benefits, stress costs American business 300 billion dollars a year or \$7,500 per worker per year for this condition. Physically, stress is either directly or indirectly related to coronary disease, cancer, lung ailments, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide.<sup>1</sup> Let's face it, with the pace of life increasing there is little or no time for rest and relaxation. I am convinced that if the pain of stress has not already penetrated into your life - it soon will. Conversely, stress can have positive effects. According to Dr. Theodore Lidz, Sterling Professor and former Chairman at the Department of Psychiatry, Yale School of Medicine - trauma can produce defenses that serve well in later emergencies. So that it is not a matter of adhering to a norm, but one of balance and integration. It is when life becomes 'out of balance' or when the pressures of life begin to dominate our area of focus that ultimately may lead to a physical or emotional breakdown. Therefore, this month's article is dedicated to helping us understand what causes stress and how to deal with it when it happens to us or someone we know. I have also included a stress chart (p.5) that measures the most common areas of stress and the degree to how that pressure may cause physical/emotional impairment.

Sincerely,  
Bob

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<sup>1</sup> "Stress: Can We Cope?" Time, June 6 1983 pp. 48-54.



**The Impact of Life Crises, and How to Minimise Them**

Life crises such as death of a spouse, divorce or bankruptcy can disrupt even the best stress management regime. Different life crises have different impacts. In many cases, however, it may be possible to anticipate crises and prepare for them. It may also be useful to recognize the impact of crises that have occurred so that you can take account of them appropriately. Some very interesting work in this area has been done by Drs T H Holmes and R H Rahe, with the *Social Readjustment Scale*. This allocates a number of 'Life Crisis Units' (LCUs) to different events, so that you can evaluate them and take action accordingly. While this approach is obviously a simplification of complex situations, using LCUs can give you a useful start in adjusting to life crises. INSTRUCTIONS: The idea behind this approach is to run down the LCU table totalling the LCUs for life crises that have occurred in the previous 2 years.

*Life Crisis Units and the Probability of Illness*

<i>LCUs</i>	<i>Probability of illness</i>
300	80%+
200-299	50%
150-199	33%

The LCU table is shown below:

*Life Crisis Scoring Table*

<i>Event</i>	<i>LCUs</i>
Death of spouse	100
Divorce	73
Separation	65
Jail term	63
Death of close family member	63
Personal illness or injury	53
Marriage	50
Fired at work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Change in health of family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sex difficulties	39
Gain of new family member	39
Business readjustment	38
Change in financial state	38
Death of close friend	37
Change to a different line of work	36
Change in number of arguments with spouse	35
A large mortgage or loan	30
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
Change in responsibilities at work	29
Son or daughter leaving home	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Spouse begins or stops work	26
Begin or end of school or college	26
Change in living conditions	25
Change in personal habits	24
Trouble with boss	23
Change in work hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in school or college	20
Change in recreation	19
Change in church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
A moderate loan or mortgage	17
Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in number of family get-togethers	15
Change in eating habits	15
Holiday	13
Christmas	12
Minor violations of law	11



## Upcoming Free Workshop

Please RSVP



### Spousal Abuse-Signs To look for/When To Refer—OCT 23, '03

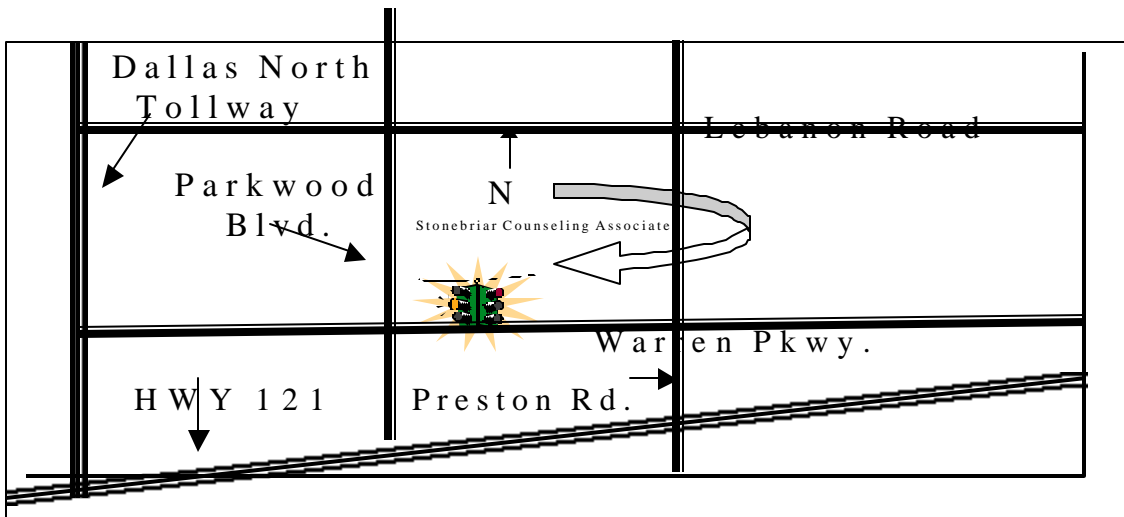
(Free Coffee and Donuts) Time: 6:30 PM

Location: 3550 Parkwood Blvd., Suite 301, Bldg. C, Frisco, Texas

Call SCA office at 214-642-8737 to register



**New Location!!**



### Mission Statement

Stonebriar Counseling Associates (SCA) is purposefully passionate in providing quality psychotherapy from a Christian perspective that influences the treatment of psychological, emotional, and mental health issues.

To this end, SCA is committed to glorify God by:

- Believing that each person has the innate ability for personal growth and wholeness.
- Seeking a variety of approaches to help you learn new skills and find more choices so as to manage life's changes with a broader range of solutions for recognizing your strengths.
- Accepting all people with respect and love regardless of age, sex, race, religion, ethnicity or socio-economic status.
- Thoughtfully affirming and carefully following the morals of the Christian faith and the ethics of the professional governing boards.
- Providing research and development for new and innovative programs, seminars, and workshops in order to further the well-being and self-sufficiency of each client.