

Management Methods for Coping with Stress

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This is the final article in a four-part series on management topics. Upon completing the article, the reader should be able to: (1) define and recognize the physical and emotional impact that stress has on the body; (2) identify positive and negative stress modifiers; and (3) utilize techniques to eliminate or lessen stress.

Work-related stress affects all of us. The harmful effects of stress and the need for stress management have been documented in television and radio reports and in newspaper, magazine and journal articles. Many of these articles have pointed out that stress has not only cost business, industry, and the government thousands and thousands of dollars annually, but that rising health care costs and in some instances, increased length of hospital stays have been attributed to stress-related illnesses. Health care practitioners are confronted on a daily basis by potentially stressful situations. Since the advent of DRGs, many of us have been forced to continue to provide high quality health care with a reduced technical staff for increasing patient loads, consisting more and more of patients who are seriously ill (1). For nuclear medicine technologists, this situation is compounded in that there is currently a critical shortage of qualified technologists (2,3) and that technologists are now responsible for an increasing amount of record keeping in order to maintain proper documentation for federal, state, and other regulatory agencies.

In view of these facts, it becomes increasingly important for technologists to recognize stress. Ways and methods must be formulated to either eliminate stress or lessen its impact. Finally, a plan of action to effectively manage stress must be developed.

WHAT IS STRESS?

In order to deal with stress management, we must be able to recognize it and be aware of the impact that stress has on the body (4). According to Walter J. McNerney, President of Blue Cross and Blue Shield Associates, "Stress is the body's physical, mental, and chemical reaction to circumstances that frighten, excite, confuse, endanger, or irritate" (McNerney WJ, *personal communication*, 1989). The body responds to stress through a variety of physical and chemical changes (Fig. 1). Heart rate increases, breathing becomes more shallow, blood pressure increases, and the palms of the hands become moist under stress. Chemically, a surge of adrenalin and

glucocorticoids occurs (Fig. 1). Blood levels and the severity of the stressor are the determining factors for whether the body either will continue to produce adrenalin or whether the system will return to normal production. Stress has two readily identifiable cycles, a distress cycle and a wellness cycle (Fig. 2). Both cycles involve the same stressors, but the wellness cycles incorporates the most effective methods for minimizing stress. In effect, the wellness cycles is turning a perceived negative action or event into a positive reaction. Stressors can be either pleasant, unpleasant, or anything in between. Interestingly, it has been found that people who undergo an abundance of positive stressors have as many problems coping as those who encounter an abundance of negative stressors (5).

Effects of Stress

Why is it that some people seem to encounter any situation (stressor) and treat it as a common everyday occurrence, while others seem to fall apart at the drop of a hat? Physical strength, education, wealth, and religion do not seem to be decisive factors. However, the decisive factors that appear to separate the two can be traced to the simplest form of motivation, that which results from the most basic needs. Everyone is strongly motivated by the following needs:

1. Something purposeful to do.
2. Someone to care about.
3. Something to hope for.

When these needs are satisfied, people respond positively.

As health care managers, we must first care for ourselves in order to provide better care for our patients and our staff. Therefore, recognizing stress and taking the necessary actions to reduce its impact is imperative. In the following sections, effective techniques for minimizing stress are provided (6).

MINIMIZING AND MANAGING STRESS

What we do on a day-to-day basis to relieve stress is as important as a long-term plan of action. Daily stressors may include, for example, lack of time, difficult or unpleasant tasks, pressures of responsibility, and negative professional attitudes. The following points on time management, supervisor's role in managing stress, professional attitude, and oral presentations are offered to help in the development of a stress-management plan. Since the result of a given technique will vary according to the individual, it is important to find and utilize the method(s) that work best for you.

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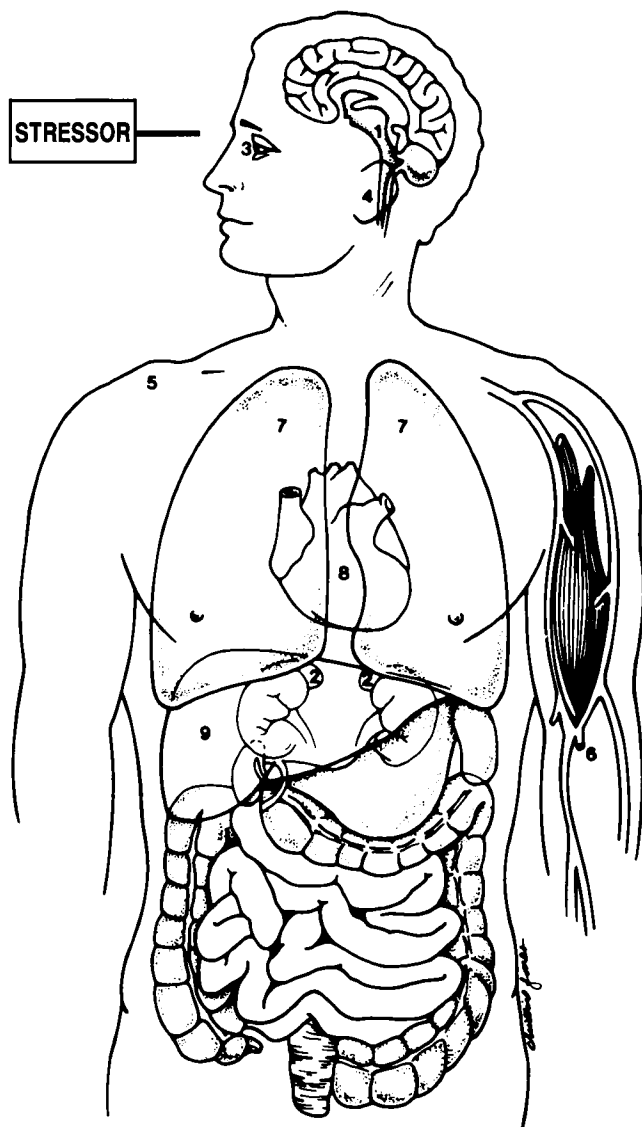


FIG. 1. The body's reaction to stress. (1) Hypothalamus stimulates the pituitary gland to release ACTH into the blood circulation. (2) ACTH travels to the adrenal gland causing the release of epinephrine and corticoid hormones. (3) Pupils dilate and vision becomes more acute. (4) Hearing becomes more acute. (5) Body surface temperature drops. (6) Small blood vessels constrict, blood supply to the muscles is increased; blood pressure increases and the blood supply to the extremities decreases, causing the fingers and toes to become cold. (7) Respiration quickens and becomes more intense, causing an increase in the amount of oxygen in the bloodstream. (8) Heart rapidly pumps blood to the brain, thus reducing the blood supply to the stomach and intestines (digestion could be affected). (9) Liver converts glycogen into glucose, which is needed by the brain and muscles (1).

Time Management

Lack of time to successfully complete tasks is a negative stress modifier. In order to make more functional use of time, it is necessary to evaluate just how time is spent. During the course of a day, a great deal of time is spent nonproductively. The following is a list of some of the more common on-the-job time wasters:

1. Starting a job before thinking it through.
2. Doing nonproductive things out of sheer habit.
3. Keeping too many unnecessary records.
4. Paying too much attention to "low return" tasks.
5. Failing to anticipate crises.
6. Making unnecessary phone calls.
7. Socializing too much.
8. Failing to build good barriers against interruptions.
9. Doing things that should be delegated.
10. Doing things that are not part of the job.
11. Failing to plan and prioritize.
12. Doing personal activities prior to starting business work.

Stress resulting from time constraints may be lessened by actively incorporating the following time-management strategies (Kinnal S, *personal communication*, 1989):

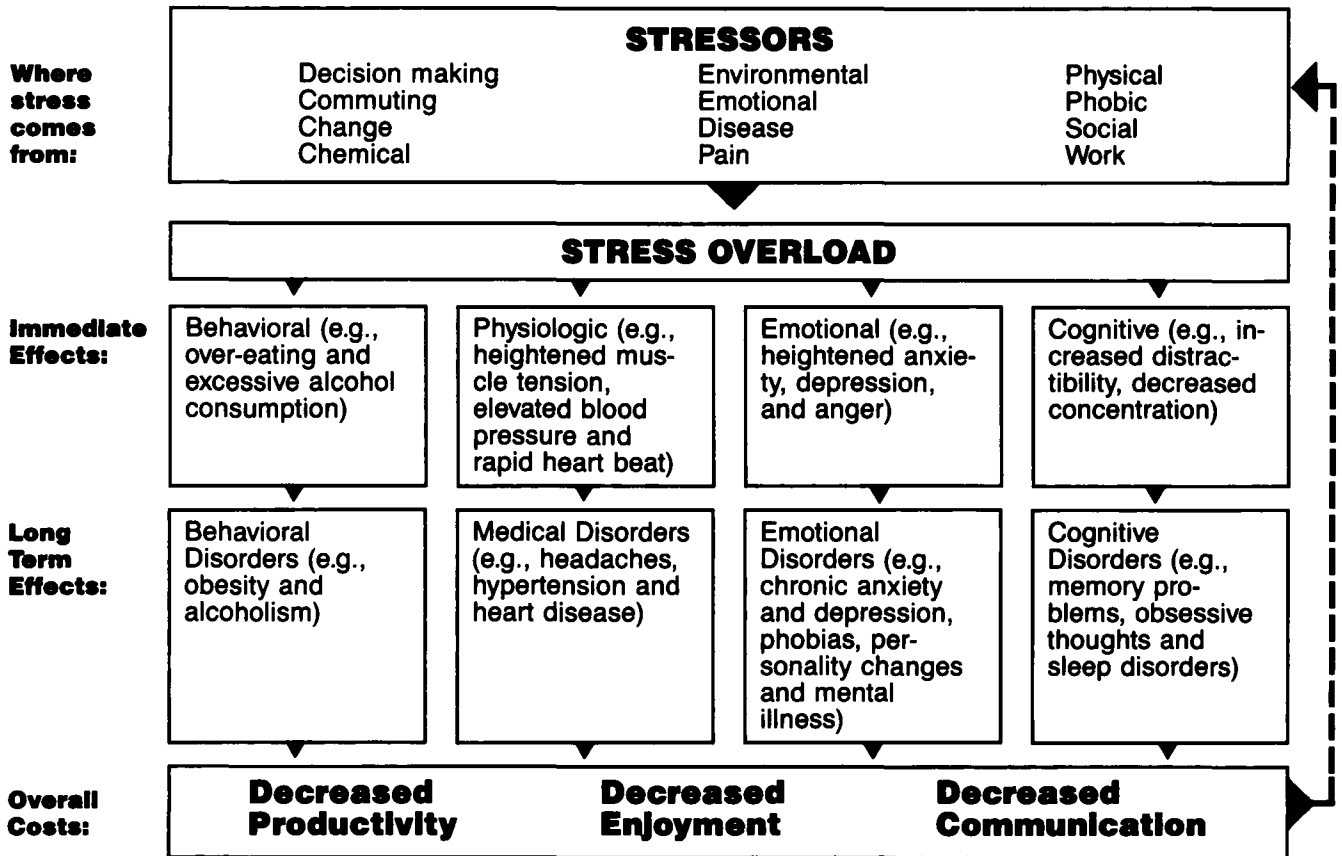
1. Organize. It is the major factor in boosting productivity and efficiency.
2. Devise a daily schedule to improve productivity.
3. Make a list of things to do and refer to it several times daily.
4. Take advantage of your high and low energy periods. Do tough tasks during high energy; routine tasks during low energy.
5. When not working, relax to recharge.
6. Make quick decisions on small details.
7. Give every job a due date or time.
8. Do not postpone little jobs. They pile up into mountains.

Good time management also includes using small chunks of time advantageously. For example, take five minutes and make a list of job tasks that can be done in five minutes such as returning a phone call, outlining a report or memo, or filing a small pile of documents. Other quick tasks may include skimming a short article or procedure, making an appointment, or proofreading a letter or report. Keep this list handy. Use it when small chunks of time are available or when you just feel the need to accomplish something concrete. You will never find time for everything. If you want time for something, you have to make time for it. Talking about time is a waste of it. Doing is not. Manage activities, not time. You cannot control the number of hours in a day, but you can control what you do with those hours.

Completing unpleasant or difficult tasks (i.e., a phone call or a report) at the beginning of the day is both effective time- and stress-management techniques. Try to get into the habit of tackling unpleasant tasks in this manner, because postponing only makes matters worse and increases stress. Once the task is completed you do not have it hanging over your head, and the rest of the day will be easier if you rid yourself of that stressor.

The amount of time devoted to a given task, goal, or issue is the strongest indication to employees of the importance a manager places on the task. Regardless of what is said, if little time is devoted to a subject, employees will not perceive it as a priority. Try to make a comparison between what you say

DISTRESS CYCLE



WELLNESS CYCLE

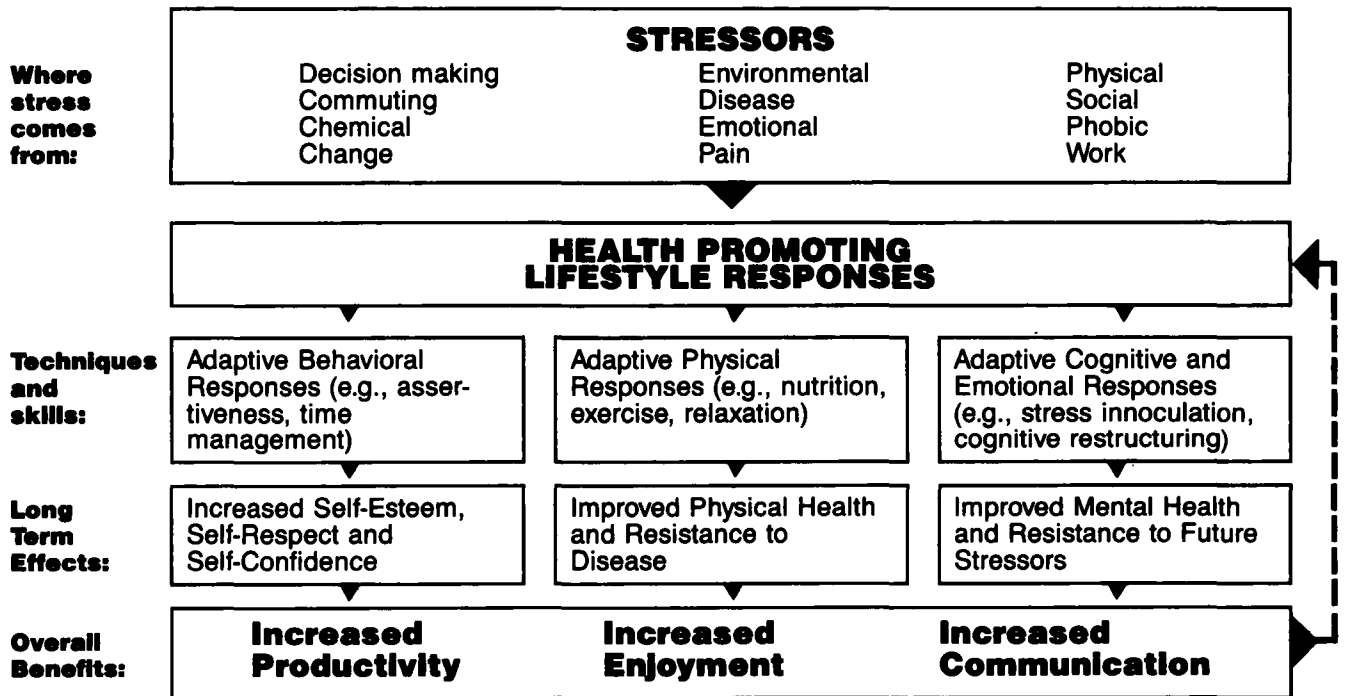


FIG. 2. The two stress cycles (1).

is important and how you spend your time if you are a supervisor.

The Supervisor's Role in Stress Management

The supervisor's primary role is to assist and ensure that the staff effectively fulfills its role in meeting departmental objectives. The responsibilities and resulting pressures inherent to this role provide automatic negative stressors. Good leadership and communication skills are necessary components for lessening stress in the development and maintenance of the supervisor/employee relationship, a critical link in the organization chain. This relationship works to help both the manager and the staff in that staff is provided with a framework for departmental methods and procedures as well as guidelines for setting goals and achieving higher levels of success. It is also the mechanism in which the department hears from its employees (i.e., suggestions, concerns, and interests). Only the supervisor can make this key relationship work. If you are a manager, how well do you communicate with your staff? Table 1 offers an exercise in assessing supervisor/employee communication (Kinnal S, *personal communication*, 1989).

TABLE 1. Evaluating Supervisor/Employee Communication

To assess the quality of communication with your supervisor, read the following statements and circle A (for agree) and D (for disagree)		
1. I can ask my supervisor for help without feeling embarrassed.	A	D
2. My supervisor recognizes the good things I do.	A	D
3. I understand what my supervisor expects of me.	A	D
4. My supervisor encourages me toward improvement when I need it.	A	D
5. I am aware of the reasons for major decisions made by my supervisor this year.	A	D
6. My supervisor understands my personal goals.	A	D
7. I know at least two specific things I can do to get a better rating at my next performance review.	A	D
8. My supervisor provides constructive criticism.	A	D
9. I feel free to disagree with my supervisor during discussion.	A	D
10. My supervisor is aware of the basic problems I entail in performing my job.	A	D

Count the number of As circled. If you have 10, communication is just about perfect; 8-9, good; 6-7, about average; 5 or less, needs improvement.

Note to supervisors: review the questions once more, but this time imagine how your employees would respond.

Since employees look to the supervisor to provide direction, it is important to remember that people do not learn by being told. They learn by experiencing or envisioning the consequences of their actions. Supervisors should give direction by developing broader goals and sharing them with employees in addition to providing necessary motivation. Spending time clarifying responsibilities and/or priorities one-on-one helps the employee to understand his/her role. Other management techniques include continuing to communicate priorities and information; making sure that deadlines are set for projects; inquiring about project status or other concerns; and being available for guidance. As a supervisor, you should see your job as eliminating barriers and not just directing.

It is best to lead by example. The following points should help you function better in the role of a supervisor:

1. Ensure that your actions and decisions are relevant to the situation.
2. Set clear and reasonable objectives for yourself and others.
3. Listen, write, and articulate effectively.
4. Develop your own style.
5. Realize that there is no one way that is right.
6. Work with others not over them.
7. Maintain professionalism. Set the example.
8. Always plan for the future.
9. Recognize the value and necessity of training.
10. Be a developer of people.
11. Be action-oriented.

Encouraging Motivation. Lack of interest or sufficient motivation towards the job can be stressful for both employee and supervisor. Although motivation must derive from the individual, the supervisor can aid in strengthening motivation in the following ways:

1. Identify with each employee one or two areas of current interest that is job-related.
2. Find a specific way to allow the person to address these areas in his/her job.
3. Encourage the employee to set goals, which connect personal interest, challenge, or need to job activities.
4. Provide positive feedback on accomplishments.

The supervisor is encouraged to find ways to use employees' strengths while realizing that people are not only different but are motivated differently. It also may be necessary to use close supervision when it is evident that the employee cannot or will not effectively manage a situation.

Developing A Positive Attitude

As an employee or supervisor, a positive attitude will help to reduce stress as well as generate confidence on the part of your patients. In order to develop a positive attitude, you need to ask yourself: Where does it come from? How do you

get it? What are the elements? The following points may be considered in your thought process.

1. Believe in yourself. Have faith in your abilities and potential.
2. Desire to achieve. Those who keep trying almost always succeed.
3. Acquire the necessary resources (e.g., knowledge, tools) and do not be afraid to seek help.
4. Expect the best result. Aiming high will improve the outcome.
5. Be persistent. Do not believe in defeat and do not give up easily.
6. Make decisions. Keep moving forward. Mistakes can be overcome.
7. Nurture creativity. We all have more than we think. Keep generating ideas.
8. Do not fear criticism. Never ignore this source of information.
9. Trust in others, it is self-fulfilling.
10. Practice the habit of being happy. You own it and you can control it.
11. Treat all people with the same respect that you treat yourself.

Oral Presentations

As professionals, nuclear medicine technologists are called upon at times to give oral presentations to other staff members, at educational meetings, etc. These situations can be stressful, particularly for a neophyte. However, the stress level can be reduced by learning and using a few simple techniques. When in this situation, remember that without fail, almost every speaker you have heard give a presentation felt nervous, so do not feel that you are the only one! By utilizing the following guidelines, you will be adequately prepared and have the confidence needed to reduce your stress level.

1. Be prepared. Know your material and practice or rehearse.
2. Do not memorize your whole presentation but do memorize your key points. You will be much more at ease if you know what you want to say and when to say it.
3. Do not be afraid to go a little fast. A fast pace can be more interesting and the material will be better retained by the audience. People will stop you if you get a little ahead of them.
4. Try to pay as much attention to your audience as you do to your material. Remember, the goal is not to present the material, your goal is to have it received!
5. Do not be afraid to stop occasionally and ask if there are any questions. It gives your audience permission to

ask (sometimes they need it) and it gives you a chance to collect your thoughts. If you stop twice, and no one asks a question, do not stop again until the end of your presentation.

6. Remember, do not get upset if you omit something. You are the only one who knew it was there, and the audience will never miss it. If it is really important, you will find a way to work it in during your question and answer period.
7. Relax. You never look as nervous as you feel.
8. When using visual aids, strive for simplicity. Too much detail is confusing. The following tips are also helpful: use a consistent style throughout your presentation; develop a smooth continuity from one visual to the next; make the visual pleasing to the eye; avoid gaudy or brilliant colors (they can be distracting); communicate the central meaning of each visual with impact; and introduce the visual before showing it.

CONCLUSION

Although stress is the body's response to any demand, either pleasant or unpleasant, how the stressor is handled is most important. Do we repress our feelings and let the stress accumulate? Or do we try to find positive releases for our stress? Methods of positive stress modifiers and negative stress modifiers have been discussed. It is up to the individual to find the methods best for them. Experiment! Learn when to take care of situations and when to relax.

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