Stress and Diabetes

Stress is any feeling that bothers you or puts a strain on your body or mind. Some people describe stress as an uncomfortable feeling of tension. Others describe it as a feeling of excitement and challenge. Stress is a part of everyday life and everyone has it. Life is not perfect and many of its challenges can be stressful.

Stress can be both good and bad:

- Examples of “good” stress include getting married, the birth of a grandchild or a promotion. These types of stress can add interest and excitement to your life.
- Examples of “bad” stress include traffic tickets, doing poorly on a test in school, going through a divorce or the death of a loved one. These types of stress can be upsetting and hard to deal with.

The body’s response to stress

When the body is under stress, it releases hormones made by the endocrine glands. The body also has a rise in heart beat, blood pressure and blood sugar. You may have heard this reaction called the “fight or flight” response. Release of these hormones gives a quick source of energy for coping with stress.

These body changes can be harmful for anyone, but high blood sugar can be especially dangerous for people with diabetes. Stress can easily upset the balance of medicine, diet and exercise you use to control your diabetes. Uncontrolled diabetes may lead to diabetes emergencies and complications over time.

Signs of stress

High blood sugar caused by stress often causes warning signs. Learn to identify how your body shows signs of stress. Recognizing stress is the first step in dealing with it.

Do any of these signs of stress sound familiar?

- Apathy or lacks emotion or interest
- Avoiding people
- Clenched teeth
- Constant tiredness
- Crying spells
- Diarrhea
- Emptiness
- Feeling discouraged
- Feeling helpless
- Frequent or prolonged boredom
- Frequent self-criticism
- Headaches
- Hunched, tight shoulders
- Neck stiffness or tightness
- Nervous laughter
- Problems sleeping
- Prolonged frustration
- Rapid heartbeat
- Rapid or shallow breathing
- Sweating
- Tight mouth or jaw
- Tightened fists
- Twitching
- Upset stomach
You may have only a few or several signs of stress. Knowing how you feel when you are under stress is an important step towards learning to deal with it. Take time to answer the following questions for yourself:

• Can you tell when you are under stress?
• What causes stress for you?
• What situations are stressful for you?
• What are two or three personal signs of stress for you?
• How do you usually deal with stress?
• Do you feel overwhelmed or like you are running on empty? How do you handle these feelings?

**Diabetes and stress**

It is common to feel overwhelmed about managing diabetes with everything else that is going on in your life. You may feel your body is no longer under your control. It is natural to sometimes feel angry, guilty, depressed, frustrated and helpless about having diabetes and managing it day by day.

Your thoughts, feelings and attitudes about diabetes and taking care of yourself have a powerful effect on your body. A good place to start is to accept diabetes as a challenge. Next, make a plan for how to live well with diabetes and manage stress. Your plan should include:

• Good nutrition.
• Exercise.
• A way to improve your attitude.
• Training on relaxation techniques and stress management.
• A commitment to lifelong learning.

You may want some help to learn how to deal with stress. Challenge yourself to learn how to relax. Use stress management techniques and exercises, such as meditation or guided imagery. Many communities offer courses on a variety of stress or behavior modification techniques.

**Coping with stress**

The best way to live with stress is to prevent it. When that is not possible, learn to reduce it as well as control how you respond to it. Listed below are ten ideas that may be helpful in coping with stress:

1. **Prevent or avoid stress.** Do not put yourself in situations or with people who you know cause stress. Try to catch yourself before you overreact or get angry. Anger can change energy from positive to negative. Although you cannot always change what happens to you, you can control how you react or respond to what happens.

2. **Think positively.** Negative thoughts often end up in negative results. Try to find at least one positive thing, even in the most challenging situations. Practice saying “I can”, “I will” and “I’ll give it a try”. Positive thoughts often lead to positive results.
3. **Find someone you can talk to.** Talk openly to someone you trust when something is bothering you. Suffering in silence causes stress to build up inside. Do not be afraid to ask for what you want. Sometimes finding a good listener lets you “think aloud”. This can be very helpful and lets you look at a problem differently. After thinking out loud, learn to listen to suggestions and advice. Your good listener may be your spouse, friend, co-worker, clergyman or a health care professional.

4. **Make time for yourself.** Plan some time every day just for you. If you are not used to doing this, start with 15 minutes a day. Take time to read that book you have had for six months, treat yourself to a movie or indulge in a leisurely bubble bath. Be adventuresome! Try a new hobby or get involved with a club you want to join. Find time to enjoy life’s simple pleasures and learn how to be kind to yourself.

5. **Set realistic goals.** Do not set yourself up for failure by setting unrealistic goals. Begin with daily goals then move to weekly or monthly goals. Start with small goals and celebrate your successes. Keep your goals simple, practical and just for you. Soon they will become part of your daily routine. Part of goal setting is being able to identify what is most important. Do you often feel that the clock or other people set your agenda? Take time to concentrate on what is really important to you. You will probably find several things that you do out of habit, which are not necessary and a waste of time and energy. Focus on what is really important to you. Finally, recognize that you are human. If you do not reach your goal, reevaluate and start again. Remember, each day is a new beginning.

6. **Exercise.** An exercise program is a great way to relieve stress. Exercise also helps control weight and glucose levels, both important in managing diabetes. Exercise also gives you an opportunity for time to yourself. If you have not been exercising, check with your doctor first. Choose an activity you enjoy doing. Be sure to include a warm-up and cool down period. Slowly work up to exercising at least 30 minutes, 5 days a week. Be sure to protect your feet and wear comfortable clothes. There also are some simple exercises you can use when you feel stressed. These include muscle relaxation, deep breathing, yoga and meditation. Consider a YMCA, community center or local school for group sports.

7. **Get support.** Join a diabetes support group in your community. Many communities also have support groups for families of people with diabetes. Many support groups are directed by local or national diabetes organizations. Diabetes support groups allow you to meet other people who face some of the same challenges you do living with diabetes. Community and spiritual groups can also provide an opportunity to meet people, make new friends and take a few minutes to do something just for you.

8. **Follow a healthy diet.** What we eat affects our health. People with diabetes see this everyday as they check their blood sugar levels. Part of having a healthy mind is a healthy body. Diet is the cornerstone of diabetes management. It is also an area of challenge. It is important to follow your diabetes meal plan. If you are having problems or have questions, make an appointment with a dietitian (preferably a Certified Diabetes Educator or CDE). Together, you will review and change your meal plan as needed. A dietitian can make suggestions for changes and give you new ideas to make your meal plan more realistic to follow.

9. **Embrace humor.** Everyday we have opportunities to laugh at ourselves. Laughter helps reduce stress and tension. It is important to find humor in life’s everyday challenges. Make sure you know the difference between laughing at or with someone. Humor begins with you. Can you laugh at yourself? Can you share laughter?
10. Commit to life long learning. New information, research and technologies are being discovered everyday about diabetes. To learn more about diabetes:

- Keep doctor appointments. Most people see their diabetes doctor every 3 to 4 months. This is a good time to ask questions and learn more about your diabetes.
- Make an appointment with a diabetes educator to review your diabetes plan, learn a new skill or just talk about your diabetes. You may be pleasantly surprised to learn about new foods and products (sugar substitutes), new glucose meters that are quicker and easier to use and that have memories, and better ways to take your medicines (insulin by pumps, timing, etc.). If you are lucky enough to have an interested spouse, family member or friend, bring them along and make it a family affair.
- Attend diabetes meetings and classes.
- Become a volunteer at a local diabetes agency.
- Subscribe to diabetes magazines, such as *Diabetes Forecast* or *Diabetes Self-Management*.

In summary

Nothing stays the same for very long and change is a part of life. Change is closely linked with stress. Although we cannot always control the changes and stresses in our lives, we can choose how to respond to them. Imagine how boring our lives would be if we never had change!

Your emotional health is closely linked with your physical health. Health in both areas requires learning how to recognize and manage stress. Since stress is a natural part of everyone’s life, it is important for you to think about what causes you stress, whether it is diabetes or another part of your life. Learning how to recognize your own personal stress symptoms is the first step. Begin to take an active role in decreasing the effects of stress on your body and in your life. Try some of the suggestions mentioned earlier.

Although we cannot control all the stress in our lives, we can learn to control our reactions to it. Controlling stress will also have a positive effect on your diabetes. Good luck!