How to Cope With Daily Stress and Multiple Sclerosis

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MS and Stress: How Does Stress Affect Multiple Sclerosis?

Chronic illnesses like MS have a strong connection to stress levels. The symptoms can trigger stress, and the opposite is also true; stress is a common cause of MS relapses or symptom aggravation. Let’s look at how stress and MS and affect one another and how to overcome this.

What Is Stress?

Stress triggers the release of certain chemical in the brain. It all starts in the hypothalamus, which releases a hormone that triggers a response from another two glands: the pituitary gland and the adrenals. The result is the production of stress hormones – adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol.

These hormones not only influence how we cope with stress, but also biological processes such as body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, appetite, metabolism, mood, sleep, how we perceive pain and the function of the immune system. Furthermore, the stress response and the immune system response share a some of the same pathways.

Therefore, it is no surprise that an autoimmune condition such as MS becomes aggravated during stressful situations.

Deal With Stress, Don't Try to Avoid It

Everyone is exposed to stressful events, whether they have MS or not. No matter how much you try to seclude yourself from the world, stressful events occur. In fact, continued seclusion from the outside world can actually increase feelings of stress and produce a negative emotional response.

Although it can be helpful to reduce the number of stressful events that you expose yourself to, it is much more important to find ways to effectively manage stress levels and reduce the ways that stress negatively affects your condition.

Consider these tips for better coping with stress:

Recognize Early Signs of Stress

Knowing the symptoms of stress will help you to take action sooner rather than later. Stress manifests on different levels:

- **Emotionally –** Symptoms include anger, memory problems and inability to focus, excessive worry, sadness and mood swings.
- **Physically –** You may experience stooped posture, sweaty, cold hands, low energy and weight changes

(either weight gain or weight loss).
- **Behaviorally –** Changes associated with stress include an impulse to overeat and consume alcohol or drugs, and relationship issues.

Look out for these changes and when they arise, act fast.

Next page: relaxation exercises and looking on the bright side.

Relaxation Exercises

When you can actively feel the effects of stress, it is important to find ways to relax. Take time to stop and address your feelings about the issue. Calm your mind so that you can actively consider potential solutions and ways to improve your situation.

To help you do these things, try one or both of the following exercises:

- **Two-minute relaxation –** During this exercise, you have to switch your emotions and thoughts to yourself and the way you breathe. Firstly, take a couple of deep breaths, while exhaling slowly. Try to "scan" your body mentally. looking for parts or areas of your body that feel tense. Loosen up those areas, and relieve the tension. Make circular movements with your neck and roll your shoulders a few times, while relaxing your muscles. Think about a beautiful, relaxing place (like the beach on a nice day) and hold that image for a few seconds. Take another deep breath and exhale slowly. Continue this exercise for a total of two to three minutes.
- **Deep breathing technique –** During this exercise, imagine a small area on your belly, just below your navel. Focus on that spot and imagine you breathe into it, and let your whole abdomen get filled with air. Think that your abdomen is like a balloon, and let the air in and out slowly and rhythmically. As you take deep breaths you will feel more and more relaxed.

During these exercises you should sit in a quiet room, in a comfortable position (i.e. on a sofa), and keep your mind open and relaxed, free of distracting thoughts and emotions.

Look on the Bright Side

Rather than looking at how difficult a situation is, try to focus on what you can do to change or improve the situation. The stress hormone cortisol can be beneficial to the body in short bursts, but long-term effects can be damaging. Thus, dwelling on a stressful situation without doing anything to positively influence the outcome can lead to an increased risk of a flare-up.

Preventing the Effects of Stress

Eating a healthy and balanced diet combined with a regular exercise routine can help prevent some of the negative effects of stress on the body. It is also important to get enough sleep and make lifestyle changes that promote overall health and well-being.

Don't Be Afraid to Call an Expert

Counseling or stress management classes can go a long way to reducing the effects of stress on both the body and the mind, and teaching you how to properly process your feelings.

Resource:

WebMD (Multiple Sclerosis and Stress Management)

Arthritis Today (Managing Stress)