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LIFESTYLE STRATEGIES TO REDUCE CAREGIVER STRESS

Last week's issue of the *Oast & Hook News* provided some strategies to reduce caregiver stress. This week's edition, courtesy of the National Care Planning Council, will discuss lifestyle strategies on how to reduce caregiver stress.

Lifestyle Changes to Reduce Stress

- Exercise. Exercise is a powerful and effective way to fight stress. It is recommended you do about 30 minutes of moderate exercise at least 3 days a week.
- Develop a support group and maintain social contacts. Participating in a support group can help manage stress. Sharing coping strategies in a group setting lets you help others while helping yourself. It may also help you to realize that some problems have no solutions and that accepting the situation is reality. Social support has a huge impact on reducing stress. Many studies show that social support decreases the stress response hormones in our bodies.
- Get adequate sleep. Sleep isn't a luxury; it's a necessity. Sleep restores the body and mind and helps us maintain our mental and physical health. Studies have shown that people who get seven to eight hours of sleep each night enjoy better health and live longer than people who get less sleep.
- Pursue diversions, hobbies and relaxing activities. Go to a movie, a play, a sporting event, immerse yourself in a hobby, listen to some favorite music or take a walk. It cannot be emphasized enough how important it is as a caregiver you spend some quality time alone every week, doing exactly what it is you like to do.

Reduce Stress Through Proper Nutrition

- Eating too much. Many people react to stress by overeating. Eating too much for a long period causes obesity. This causes your heart and lungs to work harder, overloads your organs and reduces stamina.

- Not eating properly. Some people react to stress and stress-induced depression by not eating or eating poorly. If you eat a good, well-balanced diet, your body will be receiving all the nutrients it requires to function properly.
- Coffee, tea, caffeinated soft drinks, and chocolate. Caffeine is a stimulant. One of the reasons you probably use it is to raise your level of activity. This chemical actually enhances the stress response and thus increases your existing stress. Small quantities probably do little harm, but large quantities over a long period produce excessive stress and lead to many of the physical ailments attributed to chronic stress.
- Alcohol. Some people react to stress by imbibing in alcohol. In small amounts, alcohol may help you relax. In large amounts, alcohol may increase stress as it disrupts sleep.
- Tobacco. In the short-term tobacco use seems to relax people, but the toxic effects of nicotine raise the heart rate and enhance the stress response. After the initial period of giving up smoking, most ex-smokers report feeling much calmer.
- Sugar and refined flour. Sugar can be a stimulant for people experiencing stress and stress-induced depression. Sugar-rich foods (the starch in refined flour is also a form of sugar) can raise your energy level in the short-term. The problem is your body copes with high levels of sugar by secreting large amounts of insulin, which in turn, quickly reduces the excess amount of sugar in your blood stream often causing blood sugar levels to swing too low.

Controlling Stress With Mind and Body Calming Techniques

- Music therapy. Listening to music does wonders to alleviate stress.
- Laughter therapy. Numerous studies show that laughter has the uncanny ability to greatly reduce or eliminate stress.
- Meditation. If you have ten free minutes a day, you can reduce stress, reduce insomnia, lessen anxiety and depression, and decrease your chances of developing cardiovascular disease.
- Tai Chi, yoga, acupuncture, massage therapy, and aromatherapy. All help calm the body and mind.
- Pet therapy. The saying, "A dog is man's best friend," is certainly true when it comes to dealing with your body's stress response. Many people feel more relaxed when companion animals are present. Several studies have shown that pets are good for us in numerous ways. For example, petting an animal is known to lower your heart rate, lower your blood pressure, and brighten your mood. Another study found that simply watching fish in an aquarium made patients waiting to undergo medical procedures less anxious. In fact, "pet therapy" is frequently used in hospitals and nursing homes to increase socialization and to reduce depression, loneliness, anger, and stress

The attorneys at Oast & Hook can assist clients with their long-term care and care management needs.

Ask Allie

This week's edition begins a new column in the *Oast & Hook News* – “Ask Allie.” Our favorite feline staff member will answer questions from our readers. This week's question is a bit of a “softball,” but it's a good place to start.

O&H: Allie, the newsletter has focused the past three editions on caregiver stress. In your opinion, what is the best way for caregivers to relieve stress?

Allie: Meow! Of course, my first choice would be pet therapy, as we mentioned this week. My presence in Oast & Hook's Portsmouth office is proof certain of the calming effect that pets can have in working environments (except when I start chewing on the plant in the lobby). If caregivers for our clients don't have pets of their own, then they can take a break and visit with friends or family members who have pets, visit with the animals at the various humane societies in our area, or they can always visit with me!



Please feel free to e-mail your questions to Allie at: allie@oasthook.com.

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