



A Healthy Outlook!

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The Effects of Stress on Health and the Benefits of Therapeutic Massage

During times of stress, our bodies undergo change, which can wreak havoc on our emotions, health, and well-being. During a normal day, our systems fluctuate between a healthy balance of sympathetic and parasympathetic arousal. A good example would be our reaction upon seeing flashing red lights in the rear view mirror of our car, and feeling that sudden surge of adrenaline, in expectation of being pulled over by an angry police officer. This is caused by the sympathetic nervous system signaling a need for emergency action, and rallying the forces of the brain and the pituitary and adrenal glands, culminating in a flood of hormones and chemical messengers. Once the police car passes and we realize it was not interested in us, we breathe a sigh of relief, our system begins to relax, and we return to a calmer, parasympathetic, homeostatic state.

This fluctuation between sympathetic and parasympathetic arousal goes on throughout the course of every day and is perfectly normal. Damage is caused when we are under a great deal of ongoing stress, causing our bodies to remain in fight-or-flight overdrive. A state of readiness for emergency action is like being in constant "on" mode, never allowing for rest, relaxation, or storage and reserve of energy. This causes numerous changes in the body with resultant psychological and physiological manifestations, setting us up for illness and disease due to a breakdown in proper function of the immune system and other healthy bodily functions.



The effects of stress on the body may include any of the following:

- Mental confusion, lack of concentration, impaired memory
- Insomnia
- Muscle weakness
- Excessive release of stored fats and sugars, and impairment of protein, fat, and carbohydrate metabolism
- Rise in cholesterol levels
- Decrease in libido, impotence
- Chronic headaches
- Irritability and agitation, anger and aggression
- Depression, anxiety attacks, mood swings, PMS
- Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia
- Exacerbated allergies and asthma
- Chronic high blood pressure
- Reduction of antibody production

There are a variety of things that can be done to address the impact of too much stress (contact the EAP for an individual consultation). One method to address stress is with therapeutic massage. Therapeutic massage can be beneficial toward combating the

effects of stress and assisting the body to switch from a driven sympathetic state to a calmer parasympathetic state. Far from simply making you feel good, massage has an impressive range of health benefits and effects:

- Improves efficiency of the digestive and immune systems, and promotes proper metabolism of fats, carbohydrates, and proteins.
- Helps relieve mental stress and enhances capacity for calm thinking and creativity.
- Releases endorphins and serotonins, the body's natural pain killers.
- Increased libido due to calming of sympathetic nervous system response and resultant release of stress hormones.
- Assists toward decreasing mood swings,

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How to Forgive a Person for Past Hurts

No one gets through life without being hurt by another person. We all have experienced the pain of a thoughtless remark, gossip, or lie. If you have experienced an unhappy marriage, the devastation of infidelity, or suffered physical or emotional abuse, you know what it feels like to be hurt. It is tempting to hold on to these feelings and build a wall of safety around yourself, but the best way to heal may be to forgive the person who hurt you.

What Forgiveness Is

When you forgive another person, you no longer allow their behavior to cause you anger, pain, bitterness, or resentment. When you choose not to forgive, you make the choice to hold on to your feelings of resentment, anger, and pain.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Forgiving another does not mean you will never again feel the pain or remember the thing that hurt you. The hurtful experience will be in your memory forever. By forgiving, you are not pretending the hurtful behavior never happened. It did happen. The important thing is to learn from it while letting go of the painful feelings. Forgiveness is not about right or wrong. It doesn't mean that the person's behavior was okay. You are not excusing their behavior or giving permission for the behavior to be repeated or continued. When you forgive another, it does not mean you wish to continue your relationship with them. This is a separate decision. You can forgive a person and live your life apart from them. Forgiveness can only take place because we have the ability to make choices. This ability is a gift that we can use whenever we wish. We have the choice to forgive or not to forgive. No other person can force us to do either.

Steps to Forgiveness

The experience of forgiveness is a process. Since each situation is unique, it is impossible to predict how long it will take or which steps will be the most important to carry out. Here are some ideas for beginning the process:

1. Acknowledge your feelings of anger and hurt. Sometimes it seems like it might be easier to deny the feelings or

push them back down, because it hurts to feel them. In the long run, denying these feelings only causes you more pain and actually prolongs the hurt.

2. Express your feelings constructively. No matter how badly you were treated or how angry you are, it is never acceptable to harm anyone else. You may need to find a neutral third party to talk to until you feel calmer toward the person who hurt you.

3. Depending on the situation, the person who hurt you may still be a danger to you, physically or emotionally. It is important to protect yourself from being harmed again.

4. At some point, you will see that you are harmed by holding on to feelings of hurt and anger. These feelings can take up space in your psyche and intrude on your sense of well-being. You may feel physically ill. This is when you will be ready to make the decision to stop hurting.

5. Be willing to see the situation from the other person's point of view. This will help you develop compassion, which will eventually replace the feelings of anger. One helpful technique is to write a letter to yourself as if you were the other person. Use his or her words to explain the hurtful things that were done to you. This takes you out of the victim role and helps you restore your power.

6. It is not necessary to know why the hurtful behavior happened. Even if you do learn the reason, you probably won't feel any better. Chances are, the person who harmed you isn't sure why he/she did it either.

7. Think about the part you played in the situation. Don't blame yourself; rather, forgive yourself for the role you played.

8. Recall a time when you caused harm to another person, and that person forgave you. Remember what the guilt felt like. Then, remember how you felt when the other person forgave you. You probably felt grateful and relieved. Remember

how this felt and consider giving this same gift to the person who hurt you.

9. Make a list of the actions you need to forgive. Describe the specific actions that caused you harm. State what happened as objectively as possible.

10. Make a list of any positive aspects of your relationship with the person who hurt you. This can help you regain some perspective and not paint the picture in completely negative terms.

11. Write a letter to the person who harmed you. This letter is for your healing; you do not need to mail it. Describe any positive aspects of the relationship and express your forgiveness for the hurtful behaviors. Express all of your feelings, both positive and negative.

12. If you have decided to end your relationship with the person you have forgiven, have a ceremony to symbolize it. You may wish to burn the letter and the list, or you may visualize some kind of ending.

13. Sometimes the person you need to forgive is you. You can begin to forgive yourself by realizing that when you made the mistake, you did not set out deliberately to hurt another person. If you had known how to make better choices, you would have. You did the best you could at the time.

14. Make the forgiveness tangible. You may choose to send the letter to the person you are forgiving or tell a trusted friend what you have done.

Once you let go of the pain and release yourself from past hurts, you will most likely feel a greater sense of freedom and well-being. Now you are free to move on with your life without bitterness and resentment. You no longer need to look back on your past with anger. ■

Adapted from an article by Janet Erdman, clinical manager, Collins Counseling Associates, Algonquin, NY, in the *Therapists Newsletter*. Used with permission.

Cutting

What Is Cutting?

Injuring oneself on purpose by making scratches or cuts on the body—enough to break the skin and make it bleed—is called cutting. Cutting is a type of self-injury. Most people who cut are girls, but boys self-injure too. People who cut usually start cutting in their young teens. Some continue to cut into adulthood.

People may cut themselves on their wrists, arms, legs, or bellies. Some people self-injure by burning their skin with the end of a cigarette or lighted match. When cuts or burns heal, they often leave scars or marks. People who injure themselves often hide the cuts and marks so no one else knows.

Why Do People Cut Themselves?

It can be hard to understand why people cut themselves on purpose. Cutting is a way for some people to manage emotions that seem too painful for words to express. Some people cut because they feel desperate for relief from bad feelings; they may not know better ways to get relief from emotional pain or pressure. They might cut to express strong feelings of rage, sorrow, rejection, desperation, longing, or emptiness.

Most people who cut have not developed ways to cope, or their coping skills may be overpowered by emotions that are too intense. When emotions don't get expressed in a healthy way, tension can build up—sometimes to the point where it seems almost unbearable. Cutting may be an attempt to relieve that extreme tension.

The urge to cut might be triggered by strong feelings the person can't express—such as anger, hurt, shame, frustration, or alienation. People who cut sometimes say they feel they don't fit in or that no one understands them. A person might cut because of losing someone close or to escape a sense of emptiness. Cutting might seem like the only way to find relief or express personal pain over relationships or rejection.

Most people who cut aren't attempting suicide. Cutting is usually a person's attempt at feeling better, not ending it all. Although some people who cut do

attempt suicide, it's usually because of the emotional problems and pain that lie behind their desire to self-harm, not the cutting itself.

People who cut or self-injure sometimes have other mental health problems that contribute to their emotional tension. Cutting is sometimes (but not always) associated with depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, obsessive thinking, or compulsive behaviors. It can also be a sign of mental health problems that cause people to have trouble controlling their impulses or take unnecessary risks. Some people who cut themselves have problems with drug or alcohol abuse or have had a traumatic experience, such as living through abuse, violence, or a disaster. Self-injury may feel like a way of "waking up" from a sense of numbness after a traumatic experience. Or it may be a way of re-inflicting the pain they went through, expressing anger over it, or trying to get control of it.

What Can Happen to People Who Cut?

Although cutting may provide some temporary relief from a terrible feeling, even people who cut agree that it isn't an effective way to get that relief. For one thing, the relief doesn't last. The troubles that triggered the cutting remain—they're just masked over.

People don't usually intend to hurt themselves permanently when they cut. And they don't usually mean to keep cutting once they start. But both can happen. It's possible to misjudge the depth of a cut, making it so deep that it requires stitches (or, in extreme cases, hospitalization). Cuts can become infected if a person uses nonsterile or dirty cutting instruments—razors, scissors, pins, or even the sharp edge of the tab on a can of soda.

Cutting can be habit forming. It can become a compulsive behavior—meaning that the more a person does it, the more he or she feels the need to do it. The brain starts to connect the false sense of relief from bad feelings to the act of cutting, and it craves this relief the next time

tension builds. When cutting becomes a compulsive behavior, it can seem impossible to stop. So cutting can seem almost like an addiction, where the urge to cut can seem too hard to resist.

What Can You Do?

Talk to your teen in a calm and gentle manner, with understanding and compassion. Confronting your child with anger or frustration may make matters worse. Offer him/her the opportunity to talk while you listen. If you suspect your child is cutting, seek help right away. It is important to have him or her assessed by a mental health professional. The counselor will help identify whether there is a primary mental health issue underlying the cutting and provide or recommend treatment for that issue. The counselor can help your child learn healthy ways of expressing and coping with uncomfortable and painful feelings and find new ways of finding relief from stress and tension. The EAP is a fine place to start. We can meet with you and your child for the initial assessment and make recommendations for effective treatment. ■

Adapted from an article on Kidshealth.org

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depression, anger, aggression, and anxiety attacks by removal of lactic acid and corticosteroid buildup.

- Improves digestion, peristalsis, and release of digestive enzymes-aids in correcting gastritis and irritable bowel conditions.
- Enhances more efficient function of every bodily system. ■

Adopted from an article written by Allison Harris NCTMB, LMT from Oasis Holistic Healing Arts Therapeutic Massage in Rockville. She can be reached at 240-631-8868. She is offering a 20% discount on her fee to all MCPS staff. You can obtain additional information about massage at <http://www.amtamassage.org/>, the site for the American Massage Therapy Association.

Ask the EAP

Q.

I am having a really hard time getting along with my coworker. She ignores my efforts to have friendly conversation and refuses when I ask her to work together to get a job done. What can I do?

A.

You might want to try the Dispute Resolution Program. It provides free, voluntary, and confidential mediation for employees having conflict in the work-

place. Employees who have used the service have found it to be an effective way to resolve relationship problems at work. Get more information on the program by going to the Web site (www.montgomery-schoolsmd.org/info/respect/mediation.shtm) or calling the Dispute Resolution Program at the EAP, 240-314-1041.

Do you have a question for the EAP? Send us your questions via Outlook or the pony to Jeff Becker.

Quote:

Every man's work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else, is always a portrait of himself.

—Samuel Butler



Upcoming Dates and Events to Remember

December

December 1 — World AIDS Day:
Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS
For further information, go to
unaids@unaids.org or
www.unaids.org/en/default.asp

January — National Blood Donor Month:
AABB (formerly the American Association of Blood Banks) 301-215-6526
publicrelations@aabb.org
www.aabb.org

National Birth Defects Prevention Month:
March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
888-MODIMES (663-4637)
www.marchofdimes.com

February — National Children's Dental Health Month:
American Dental Association
312-440-2500
publicinfo@ada.org
www.ada.org/goto/ncdhm



A Healthy Outlook!

To help employees with troubling issues before they become overwhelming.



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE

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You may contact us or send your questions and comments to
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Please note that e-mail is not necessarily confidential.

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