Effects of Stress on the Body and Mind

We like to be prepared for anything at any time so we can stay safe. We want to know what is around the corner. Luckily, our bodies have a way to prepare ourselves for anything—stress. Stress is our body’s natural physical and mental response to a threat. Chemicals are released that increase heart rate and blood pressure, quicken breathing, and tighten muscles—we are ready for the threat if needed. In small doses, stress is helpful in preventing injuries (e.g., stopping the car quickly when someone walks into our path). We recover quickly once the threat passes.

What if the threat is ongoing? During these unprecedented and challenging times, we face many unknowns. How long will this last? Will I test positive for COVID-19? Am I a carrier? Am I and those around me taking the proper precautions? Are my finances stable? Are my loved ones safe? On and on, the unknowns go! These unknowns can lead to ongoing stress. When our stress response is ongoing, it affects our health and can make us sick. And, we may not even realize it is happening. So, the first step in managing our stress is knowing the symptoms. Stress symptoms appear in our body, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

- **Body**: We can experience headaches, fatigue, aches and pains, and tightened muscles. Symptoms can also include increased heart rate, clenched jaws, upset stomach, and changes in sleep.
- **Thoughts**: Symptoms can include constant worry, forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, and negative thinking.
- **Feelings**: When we think negatively, we feel negatively. Common feelings can include agitation, frustration, feeling overwhelmed, withdrawn, and difficulty relaxing.
- **Behaviors**: Stress can show up as changes in appetite, avoiding responsibilities, fidgeting, pacing, nail biting, and increased substance use (e.g., alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco).

There are long-term impacts on our health if we do not manage stress. In addition to mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, chronic physical conditions can develop. These conditions can include heart disease, weight gain, stomach issues, skin and hair problems, and sexual problems.

Good news is we can effectively manage stress using strategies such as:
- Staying connected to family and friends virtually or with proper social distancing during COVID-19
- Keeping a sense of humor
- Making time for fun activities such as painting, listening to music, reading
- Getting regular exercise
- Practicing relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing and meditation
- Getting good sleep
- Eating well-balanced meals
- Avoiding tobacco and limiting caffeine and alcohol intake

The My Health Coach Program is here to help you manage the stress around these uncertain times with a holistic approach to self-care. You can work with a TrestleTree Health Coach to find personalized ways to manage your stress and put good coping skills into place. Your unique life circumstances drive the content of coaching. The program is open to benefits eligible employees and dependents. We are just a phone call away, so call us toll-free at 866-237-0973 to schedule your appointment with your Health Coach.