

## Managing Stress

Many people equate their first few months or years of struggling with a disability or chronic illness as being continually in crisis. Both the individual with the disability and those involved in providing care or assistance to them may be "stressed out". The person with the disability or the family member may be told to "calm down". When most people hear these words they do exactly the opposite, they tense up. We think if we or someone else is having to tell us to "calm down", things must be really bad.

Most people don't know how to calm down especially in a crisis situation. Our society talks a great deal about relaxation and leisure but the focus is always on relaxing by going some place (a cruise), getting away from the problems of the day (going out for dinner), or taking medication (a pill that will allow us to get rid of our headache and relax). There is very little that our society teaches us as children or adults about how to relax when we can't take two weeks off from the job to visit the Caribbean, can't afford a night out and are tired of using a drug to calm down.

Luckily the formula for being able to calm down was available to most of us as very small children. We were taught, as children, before attempting to cross a busy street, to STOP, LOOK, and LISTEN. This basic formula for crossing busy streets is also the basic formula for crossing busy intersections in our lives. In being able to calm down and deal with the crisis we must first stop what we are doing, look at what is going on around us, and listen to what is going on inside of us.

In order to calm down, we must first recognize the signals of stress that our body gives us. Everyone reacts differently to stress, however, there are a number of responses that we all have in common. The signal may be a tightness in our muscles, nervousness, or knots in our stomach. These physical manifestations of tension tell us that something is "wrong" in our environment, and in our response to what is happening around us. Do not ignore these signs of stress. Left unattended, they can lead to physical and/or psychological breakdown. If you are to cope with a crisis in your life, you must first get control of yourself and your body.

It is normal to feel anxious in a crisis situation. In fact, we should. In order to deal with the crisis, some anxiety and tension is helpful. Too little or too much, however, tends to get in our way in coping with the situation at hand. Finding the balance is the trick.

When we begin to feel anxious and uptight in a crisis situation, we often begin to focus on the symptoms of anxiety. Specifically, we might focus on our sweaty palms or our pounding heart. Without making use of relaxation exercises to gain control over these anxiety symptoms, focusing on them usually only increases our perspiration and heart rate.

Many people, in a crisis situation, make things worse by expecting the worst. These people frequently tell themselves negative things, and thereby increase the likelihood that these things may actually occur. The self-fulfilling prophesy! If we expect disaster, disaster often occurs. Obviously what these people need to learn is to stop telling themselves negative things, what Wolfolk and Richardson have called "negative self-talk." For these people, negative thinking is the chief contributor to their anxiety, tension, and helplessness. Worry usually only produces more worry and usually encourages people to avoid the situation that they are worried about. In other words, many people never find out whether their worries are really justified and whether things were really as bad as they thought because they never take the

risk of putting themselves in the situation that they are worried about. They tend to avoid these difficult situations and never learn that the events that they are worrying about, if they did occur, might not be as devastating as they think. This kind of worry is often self-perpetuating.