

Is Stress Hurting Your Health?

Stress affects us all. In fact, 75-percent of Americans say they experienced at least one symptom related to stress in the last month. It can leave you feeling overwhelmed, worried or run-down. For Julia Wachuta, school is a big source of stress.

“When I get stressed out, I feel really hopeless. I feel like, I just feel like I can’t do it anymore sometimes.”

Julia is a junior in college who also lives with Bipolar Disorder. Stress can make her feel overwhelmed.

“Take one thing at a time and try to solve the problem because if you look at everything at once, there’s really no solution to everything at once.”

When Julia is feeling stressed, she turns to activities that she loves -- reading, writing and crocheting. These sorts of calming techniques can prevent stress from taking over the mind and body – triggering things like trouble sleeping, nervousness and anxiety. Stress causes your body to release hormones, Adrenaline and Cortisol, that can cause your heart to race, your breathing to quicken, and your muscles to tense up. It’s all part of your body’s “fight or flight” response, an automatic response that your body has to prepare you to deal with danger, to either fight the threat or flee to safety. If your stress is ongoing, or chronic, your body is constantly on the alert. That isn’t healthy for your body or your mind.

“They are responses that are pretty taxing on the body and on the brain. So, symptoms of chronic stress, depending on how long it lasts, you can get things like physiological or physical changes in the body.”

Those physical changes can include Heart Disease or Stroke, High Blood Pressure, Obesity, and stomach problems. Chronic stress can also aggravate lung conditions like Emphysema, and it can cause sexual side-effects. For the mind, stress can trigger panic attacks and episodes of depression.

“The biggest single trigger for me is stress.”

Jim Hill lives with depression and he constantly monitors his stress level. He has learned coping skills to manage stress and keep his depression in check.

“I’ve learned how to meditate. I do that as frequently as I can. Exercise is absolutely essential.”

Along with meditation and exercise, Jim also makes sure he eats a healthy diet to keep his stress level down.

“Those changes in those kinds of lifestyle habits are really also very important and they helped me a great deal.”

Another stress management tool is getting enough sleep.

“If we don’t get enough sleep, the simple answer is we’re going to be worn down. We’re not going to have the resources to be able to cope effectively with continued stressors.”

If you are experiencing chronic stress, or symptoms that may be related to chronic stress, a mental health professional can help.