



HEALTH AWARENESS

Stress Affects Body And Mind

(NAPSA)—Stress matters. At least that's what health research tells us. Recent studies have shown that stress can affect your body and mind—and not in a good way.

Our bodies evolved to be finely attuned to a predator's attack. When we sense danger, our bodies quickly release hormones into our bloodstream that increase our heart rate, focus our attention and cause other changes to quickly prepare us for coming danger. Stress was—and still is—crucial to our survival.

The type of stress we're adapted to deal with, however, is the short, intense kind—like fearing a bear will make a lunch of us. The stresses of modern life—like money trouble, difficulties at work or bad traffic—may not be as extreme, but we often have little time between periods of stress to recuperate. The chronic stress can eventually take both a mental and physical toll.

It's long been known that blood pressure and cholesterol levels go up in people who are stressed. Studies have now linked chronic stress with cardiovascular problems like hypertension, coronary heart disease and stroke.

The immune system is also affected by stress. When your immune cells are bathed in high levels of stress hormones, they get tuned down. People under a lot of stress, like caregivers of people with Alzheimer's disease, are more likely to get the flu or a cold.

Chronic stress affects the brain, too. Brain cells bombarded by stress signals eventually start to shrink and cut connections to other brain cells. The network that coor-



Having people you can talk to when life gets tough can help you cope better with stress.

dinates our thoughts, emotions and reactions starts to rearrange. That may explain why studies have linked high levels of stress hormones with lower memory, focus and problem-solving skills.

You can take several steps to help you cope better with stress. First, get enough sleep. Sleep deprivation throws your stress hormones off balance.

Develop a network of people you can talk to when life gets difficult. People who have larger social networks live longer.

Keep yourself healthy and fit so your body's better able to deal with stress. Exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, don't smoke and don't drink to excess.

If your stress seems too much to manage, talk to your health care professional. Many therapies can help you deal with stress and its consequences. The effects of being chronically stressed are too serious to simply accept as a fact of modern life.

—Adapted from *NIH News in Health*, a publication of the National Institutes of Health (newsinhealth.nih.gov).