



JUST BETWEEN FRIENDS

SOMEONE IN THE FAMILY—AN OTHER STORY™

by Mark Chenven, M.D.

The challenge of caring for someone with an emotional illness is always underestimated. As a working professional, I see this daily in the distress of parents, in the worries of partners, and/or in the pain and loss expressed by children within a family. This awareness helps guide my efforts in treating patients and it should inform our collective efforts in designing and providing service programs for the community. Considering how best to assist those “others” touched by a family member’s illness or disability is, in part, simply humane and plain common sense. The bottom line, clinically and fiscally, is that it is a critical element in providing the most effective care for those in need.

For anyone with a serious emotional, substance abuse or developmental problem, the support of parents, partners and others often makes the difference between disease and recovery, between disability and functionality, and between despair and hope. A supported, informed and empowered family can make the difference, but getting there takes effort and is a challenge not often openly addressed.

For those in the family who are caring for and caring about an affected relative, the stress and challenges can be extreme—with uncertainties about when, if and how to help; feelings of guilt, frustration and anger; and worries about finances and the future all taking their toll. Family members’ health, their own personal relationships, their work productivity, and their very peace of mind are regularly challenged as they endeavor to support that “someone in the family” with special needs.

As members of the Women’s Council will well appreciate, caring for a member of the family is a job that takes time and resource; but, as importantly, it is also a matter of relationships and feelings, of knowledge and support, and of defined priorities and healthy adaptation. The best care requires that the needs of the client and the needs of the family be concurrently addressed.

Some examples from the Vista Hill family of programs:

- Providing therapeutic childcare and engaging a grandparent to be a member of the service team not only helps the identified patient— a parent in recovery in ParentCare—it also supports each family member in their individual development and their cohesiveness as a family.
- Enhancing the classroom education provided for developmentally disabled children at the Stein Center with counseling and support services for parents helps to address the entire family’s welfare while also better supporting the child at home.

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Mission Statement

As women of today we want to improve the lives of women of tomorrow by increasing awareness and knowledge of mental health issues. We wish to remove the stigma of mental illness by educating the public. It is also our goal to empower women through increased awareness of mental health issues and encourage a holistic approach to mental health care which acknowledges everyone’s physical, mental, and spiritual needs.

To Become A Member

For information and to receive a membership brochure, please call Linda Jones at 858-514-5153.

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Renée Bannasch
Editor

Stress

In 1983 *Time* magazine called stress “The Epidemic of the Eighties” and referred to it as our leading health problem. The problem has progressively worsened since then.

It has been estimated that 75-90 percent of all visits to primary care physicians are for stress related problems.

In terms of lost hours due to absenteeism, reduced productivity and workers’ compensation benefits, stress costs American industry more than \$300 billion annually.

What is stress? Stress is your body’s physical and psychological response to anything you perceive as overwhelming.

Stress is linked to six of the leading causes of death; heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide.

A threat to your life or safety triggers a primal physical response from your body, leaving you breathless, with your heart pounding, and your mind racing. From deep within your brain, a chemical signal speeds stress hormones through the bloodstream, priming your body to be alert and ready to escape danger. Concentration becomes more focused, reaction time faster, and strength and agility increase. When the stressful situation ends, hormonal signals switch off the stress response and the body returns to nor-

mal; but in today’s modern society, stress doesn’t always let up. Stress hormones continue to wash through the system at high levels, never leaving the blood and tissues. The stress response that once gave ancient people the speed and endurance to escape life-threatening dangers runs constantly in many people today and never shuts down. Research shows that such long term activation of the stress system can have a hazardous, even lethal effect on the body.

In contrast to archaic stress, contemporary stress tends to be more pervasive, persistent and insidious because it stems primarily from psychological rather than physical threats. The automatic responses that were originally designed to be beneficial—increased heart rate and blood pressure to the brain to improve decision making; rise in blood sugar to furnish more fuel for energy—as life saving measures to facilitate primitive man’s ability to deal with physical challenges, are now potentially damaging and deadly. The nature of stress for modern man is not an occasional confrontation with a saber toothed tiger but a host of other emotional threats like getting stuck in traffic and disagreements with customers, co-workers or family members that occur in the course of a day. Too much stress affects your endocrine

MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN THE UNITED STATES

The results of a recent study done by an international team of researchers and published in the *Journal of Health Affairs* indicates that among five countries studied, the United States has the largest percentage, 29%, of mentally ill citizens. The United States also scored the worst in treating those with serious problems, caring for only one in three people who needed treatment.

This study was based on a survey of more than 23,000 people in the United States, Canada, Chile, Germany and the Netherlands. Researchers attributed the lack of treatment in part to the stigma associated with getting mental health care in the United States and partly to the lack of private health insurance available to cover treatment for mental illness.

Symptoms of Acute Stress

- A combination of anger or irritability, anxiety, and depression
- Tension headache, back pain, muscular tension
- Heartburn, acid stomach, diarrhea, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome
- Rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, dizziness, migraine headaches, shortness of breath

Coping with Acute Stress

- Allow yourself regular leisure time
- Plan a daily exercise program
- Set goals for yourself, reorder your priorities
- Don’t combine too many activities
- Learn how to say no

system, your autonomic nervous system, the hypothalamus in your brain, your limbic system and your immune system, weakening it and making you more susceptible to colds, coughs, and infections. It also contributes to hypertension, strokes, heart attacks, diabetes, ulcers and flare-ups of arthritis and asthma. Chronic stress has also been associated with impairing the body's resistance to viral linked disorders ranging from AIDS to cancer.

A stress overload activates areas of your brain that then send involuntary impulses to organs elsewhere in your body. When you

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become stressed, your body switches into the ‘fight or flight’ mode. Constant anxiety can destroy immunological balance, leading to an overgrowth of harmful bacteria and infection as the natural balance of friendly and unfriendly organisms that normally co-exist in our digestive and urinary systems is destroyed.

Research in the areas of brain neurotransmitters, prostaglandins, enzyme systems and metabolic activities may help to explain how stress can contribute to depression, anxiety and their diverse effects on the gastrointestinal tract, skin and other organs.

One of the leading causes of stress for adults is job stress, but stress levels have also escalated in children, teenagers, college students and the elderly for other reasons. Increased crime, violence and other threats to personal safety as well as peer pressures that lead to substance abuse and other unhealthy life style habits; social isolation and loneliness; the erosion of family and

religious values and ties; and the loss of other strong sources of social support all contribute to the rise in the stress related problems of today's society.

Acute stress is the most common form of stress. It comes from the demands and pressures of the recent past and the anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Daily stresses such as an auto accident that crumples the fender, the loss of an important contract, or a child's problems at school are examples of acute stress. Acute stress shows up in many people's lives, tends to be short term, and is highly treatable and manageable.

Chronic stress, on the other hand, destroys bodies, minds and lives. It's the stress of poverty, bereavement and dysfunctional families; it's the stress of unrelenting demands and pressures for seemingly interminable periods of time.

Chronic stress kills through suicide, violence, heart attack, stroke and perhaps even cancer. People wear down to a final, fatal breakdown. Because physical and mental resources are depleted through long-term attrition, the symptoms of chronic stress are difficult to treat and may require extended medical as well as behavioral treatment and stress management.

Researchers looking for new clues on how to handle stress are focusing on preventing the problem before it escalates. The key to successful management of stress appears to be minimizing the sources of stress by identifying them early and then learning to take control of stressful situations before they become harmful. No single strategy works for every individual and there is no panacea for dealing with stress, but there are numerous sources of information available on techniques to help alleviate stress as well as professional help for those with more serious problems.



RECOMMENDED READING

Necessary Losses
by Judith Viorst

I'm Not Slowing Down
by Ann Richards

Nature via Nurture...
Genes, Experience
& What Makes
Us Human
by Matt Ridley

Hate Hurts;
How Children
Learn and Unlearn
Prejudice
*by Caryl Stern-LaRosa
and Ellen Hofheimer
Bettmann*

Best Friends:
The Pleasures and
Perils of Girls' and
Women's Friendships
*by Ruthellen Josselson,
Ph.D.*

Did You Know?

An estimated 2.3 million Californians need treatment each year for addiction, but only 1.3 million of those qualify for publicly funded treatments.

The annual cost of substance abuse to Californians is \$32.7 billion; the cost to each Californian is \$340.

Only 17% of pregnant women needing treatment for drug addiction receive it.

The Value of Friendship

Harvard Medical School found that the more friends that women had, the less likely they were to develop physical impairments as they aged, and the more likely they were to be leading a joyful life. In fact, the results were so significant the researchers concluded that not having close friends or confidants was as detrimental to your health as smoking or carrying extra weight.

Someone in the Family *Continued from page 1*

- Vista Hill's family support programs (SAFIR, On Track, JAM, etc.) connect a struggling parent and a youth in trouble in a cooperative and collaborative effort to overcome problems and prevent progression to acute care and recidivism.
- Supporting a parent's understanding of their child's learning and emotional difficulties while helping them engage effectively with the school pays off for all—parent, child, school—in the Learning Assistance Center programs.

Many other quality providers in our community, in both private practice and organized programs, address these issues as well—for which we all should be grateful. In these times of dwindling resources for treatment and social services, the need to work together is greatly enhanced. In the best of times, the limited service options, the bureaucratic/managed care hurdles, and the other demands of life can drive concerned family and caretakers to distraction, unhealthy disengagement, and ultimately even to personal illness of their own. This is a largely unspoken consequence of inadequate resources for the treatment of mental illness and substance abuse conditions.

We need to do better to support the "others" in the family when someone becomes ill within the family. Combining the best of modern medicine, counseling, rehabilitation and educational services with useful guidance and affirming supports to family members improves our chances of helping out loved ones in need. Together, we can do better. Thanks again for your ongoing interest and support of our community efforts to improve services for all the "someones" and "others" amongst us.



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