

Recognizing stress

Stress is a normal and inevitable part of our lives, whether it is due to work, family, relationships, or our surroundings. For many of us, stress is such a common part of our existence that we may not even consciously notice how it affects us.

Sometimes, stress appears in our lives due to a specific experience, such as sexual assault. When this happens, it is common to feel sudden and intense physical or behavioral changes. Some survivors might wonder if they are going crazy. It can be reassuring to know that these changes are normal reactions to a very stressful experience.

Recognizing the signs of stress, whether they are related to sexual assault or not, is the first step toward successfully managing stress. The following are some common physical, behavioral and emotional symptoms of stress. Remember that not everybody will experience all of these symptoms.

Symptoms

- Body tension in specific parts of the body, or overall stiffness
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Crying easily or often
- Anxiety/fear/apprehension
- Irritability/uncontrolled anger
- Changes in sleeping patterns
- Increased/decreased appetite
- Inability to concentrate
- Changes in menstrual cycle
- Diarrhea/constipation/cramps
- Rash/blotchiness
- Nausea/shakes/sweating
- Self-destructive behavior
- Drug/alcohol abuse

For survivors of sexual assault, these signs of stress can appear immediately following the assault, or weeks, months, or even years later.

Often, stress resurfaces with “triggers,” such as the anniversary of the assault, or a physical environment that reminds the survivors of the assault (location, smells, etc.). Other triggers can be seemingly unrelated life changes such as marriage or the birth of a child.

Family and friends of a survivor can also experience stress due to the assault of a loved one. It is important not to overlook or minimize the impact stress can have on individuals other than the survivor. Family and friends need to care for themselves as well as provide support to the survivor.

Regardless of the situation, there are ways to reduce the impact of stress. What techniques work best will be different for different people, and may even change for each individual as time passes. However, consistent use of relaxation techniques will not only reduce stress in specific situations, but will also help each of us decrease the overall amount of stress in our lives.

Relaxation

Relaxation techniques can be used to reduce feelings of tension and anxiety related to stress. They can also become an enjoyable part of a daily schedule and help build a more calm and healthy lifestyle.

The following list contains some suggestions for relaxation techniques. In time you will discover what works best for you. You may want to experiment with these suggestions and develop your own techniques.

Techniques

- Remember to breathe in times of stress. Pay attention to your breathing pattern and keep it slow, deep, calm, and rhythmic.
- Create a soothing atmosphere: dim lights, listen to music, light candles, remember special places, times and people, or imagine a relaxing situation.
- Do something you enjoy: read a good book, watch light TV, take a hot bath, garden, cook, have a cup of tea. Do whatever relaxes you.
- Do something physical, like walking, stretching, dancing, sports, etc. Physical exercise releases stress and tension.
- Reassure yourself that you are safe.
- Remind yourself that you are capable.
- Remind yourself of your value.
- Have others remind you are safe, capable, and important.
- Remind yourself that there are things you can do to feel less tense, that you do have some control.
- Take time out to be alone or with others, depending on your needs.
- Build a strong and positive support network.
- Talk to others; call a friend.
- Call KCSARC's 24-hour Sexual Assault Resource Line. Trained, professional counselors are available to help provide resources and make referrals for services. Call 888.99.VOICE.