

Epilepsy and Stress

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Whether you are worried about a big exam or having problems at work, the stress of a situation can trigger seizures. People with epilepsy must take into consideration hunger, lack of sleep, missed medications, fevers or illness and stress as possible triggers for seizures. All these factors can lower a person's seizure threshold, increasing the likelihood of having a seizure. The seizure threshold is the susceptibility of a person to have seizures.

"Although epilepsy may take place in the brain, it may profoundly influence the morale, well-being, self-image and lifestyle...may briefly change the way a person thinks, feels and acts.... But how someone thinks, feels and acts may also change his or her epilepsy." Dr. Tim Betts. *Epilepsy and Stress* (British Medical Journal 15.8.92)

It is medically accepted that a number of common nonspecific environmental factors may lower a person's seizure threshold. These include psychological stress, menstruation, poor nutrition, sleep deprivation, alcohol or sedative drug withdrawal, fever, infectious processes, head trauma, and various toxic and metabolic conditions which can disrupt water, pH and electrolyte balance, and energy metabolism.

As stress lowers the seizure threshold, people with epilepsy should establish an effective stress management system. Stress is nothing new. A certain amount of stress can be advantageous at times. It may give you the stimulation and motivation necessary to overcome the many obstacles that could prevent you from achieving your goals. However, if your stress level is too high, it may negatively affect your overall health, everyday performance and social behaviour.

Are You Stressed?

At times, stress can be difficult to pinpoint and understand. The Canadian Mental Health Institute states: "Strangely, we are not always aware that we are under stress. The habits, attitudes, and signs that alert us to problems may be hard to recognise because they have become so familiar."

The following simple test created by the Institute may help determine how stressed you are?

Your Stress Index

Give yourself 1 point for each time you answer yes to one of the following questions.

Do you frequently:

- neglect your diet?
- try to do everything yourself?
- blow up easily?
- seek unrealistic goals?
- fail to see the humour in situations
- others find funny?
- act rude?
- make a "big deal" of everything?
- look to other people to make things happen?
- have difficulty making decisions?
- complain you are disorganized?
- avoid people whose ideas are different from your own?
- keep everything inside?
- neglect exercise?

- have few supportive relationships?
- use sleeping pills and tranquilizers
- without a doctor's approval?
- get too little rest?
- get angry when you are kept waiting?
- ignore stress symptoms?
- put things off until later?
- think there is only one right way
- to do something?
- fail to build relaxation time into your day?
- gossip?
- race through the day?
- spend a lot of time complaining
- about the past?
- fail to get a break from noise and crowds?

What Your Score Means

- **1-6 — There are few hassles in your life.** Make sure, though, that you are not trying so hard to avoid problems that you shy away from challenges.
- **7-13 — You've got your life in fairly good control.** Work on the choices and habits that could still be causing you some unnecessary stress in your life.
- **14-20 — You're approaching the danger zone.** You may well be suffering stress-related symptoms and your relationships could be strained. Think carefully about choices you've made and take relaxation breaks every day.
- **Over 20 — Emergency!** You must stop now, rethink how you are living, change your attitudes, and pay careful attention to diet exercise and relaxation.

Managing Stress

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation is a powerful tool which can help you deal with stress. There are many effective relaxation techniques. Results will obviously vary from person to person. Many people simply do not know how to relax. Patience is the key for these people, as it may take some time to learn. The following example of a relaxation technique may be helpful to you.

- Find a warm, quiet room where you will not be interrupted.
- Sit in a comfortable chair, take off your shoes, uncross your legs and rest your arms on the arms of the chair.
- Close your eyes, be aware of your body.
- Start to breathe slowly and deeply, expanding your abdomen as you breathe, then raising your rib cage to let more air in until your lungs are filled right to the top. Hold your breath a couple of seconds and then breathe out slowly allowing your stomach and rib cage to relax to empty your lungs completely. Do not strain; with practice it will become much easier. Continue this slow, deep, rhythmic breathing while you relax all of your muscles. Remember to breathe deeply and to allow a feeling of physical well-being spread throughout your body. Deep breathing provides extra oxygen to the blood and causes the body to release endorphins, naturally occurring hormones which re-energize and promote relaxation.
- Visualize a favourite, peaceful object or place and when you decide to open your eyes, tell yourself you will be perfectly relaxed but alert.

Meditation

Meditation has to do with relaxing the mind, focusing on your breathing, and using techniques such as observing thoughts and emotions. Research shows that meditation can contribute to an individual's psychological and physiological well-being. This is accomplished as meditation brings the brainwave pattern into an alpha state, which is a level of consciousness thought to promote healing.

There are many documented benefits to meditation, such as decreased anxiety, decreased irritability and moodiness, decreased depression, improved learning ability and memory, increased self-actualization and increased emotional stability.

Exercise

Having the opportunity to participate in sport and recreational activities is important for everyone, including people with epilepsy. Lack of understanding about epilepsy and how it affects each person differently, can mean people with epilepsy are cautioned against taking part in some activities where this is not necessary. In fact with qualified supervision where appropriate and applying the necessary safety precautions there are little that you should avoid if you have epilepsy.

Regular exercise will help you keep fit and promote a healthy appetite. Exercise provides a sense of well being, as well as a break from day to day worries. It can give you a sense of achievement and control over your body. Simple movements such as stretching, rocking, and moving hands and arms can relax and calm the body.

Of course, common sense dictates that certain activities need special accommodations or must be avoided. The greater the frequency and severity of an individual's seizures, the greater the need for that person to limit or modify athletic activities.

Most sports can be safely pursued by individuals whose seizures are not fully controlled. With just a few extra safety precautions, they can enjoy most activities, even ones that many would consider dangerous. For instance, a woman with complex partial seizures enjoyed downhill skiing and was able to continue in the sport by always skiing with her husband and using only beginner or intermediate trails. A man with rare tonic-clonic seizures roller blades every weekend and stays safe by consistently wearing a helmet and knee and elbow pads.

Water Sports

Water sports, including swimming, snorkeling, jet-ski riding, windsurfing, and sailing, are risky for people with epilepsy, but with a few accommodations they also can be safely pursued.

Water sport safety tips

- ✓ They should never be done alone.
- ✓ At least one person participating in the activity or observing it should be aware of the possibility of seizures and know basic life-saving techniques.
- ✓ Always wear a high-quality, properly fitted life vest when near the water to help prevent drowning.
- ✓ Always wear a medic alert bracelet or necklace

Contact Sports

Contact sports such as football, rugby, basketball, soccer, and ice hockey are generally safe for people with seizures. However, family members may worry about the chance of head or bodily injury, which is common in these sports. People with epilepsy have no greater chance for injury during these sports than people without epilepsy. The chances of serious injury are small compared with the positive effects of team participation.

Most individuals with epilepsy can safely exercise in a gym and use exercise equipment. For those who have uncontrolled seizures, a buddy system may be needed when using equipment like treadmills or bicycles. For example, a female who has occasional complex partial seizures, only exercises on the treadmill when her friend is present. The friend supervises the exercise to prevent injury if she has a seizure. Activities like scuba diving, rock climbing, skydiving, hang gliding, and mountain climbing should be avoided by individuals with uncontrolled seizures. These sports require full concentration, and any episode of loss of consciousness may lead to injury and possible death.

Recreation safety tips

- ✓ Always have a “buddy” for activities that require considerable exertions and that are likely to cause injury
- ✓ Take frequent breaks and drink plenty of water
- ✓ Wear protective clothing (elbow or knee pads, helmet, protective eyeglasses or goggles) whenever possible.
- ✓ When bike riding, avoid busy streets; ride on bike paths or side streets
- ✓ Always wear a medic alert bracelet or necklace or carry a medic alert card

Recreational activities are very important for socializing and happiness. Achieving the balance between a safe life and an active life is possible by making the necessary adjustments in sports activities.

Time Management

Time management is a skill that develops with time and experience. Techniques such as establishing priorities, using lists, notes and a diary, taking time for yourself, and rewarding yourself for a job well done, may be effective. Remember: time is valuable so use it wisely.

Improving Self-Esteem

A low self-esteem may cause stress in many people. By focusing on your skills and positive characteristics, you can build on positive thoughts about yourself. Increasing your self-esteem involves actively learning about yourself and taking more control of your life.

Anxiety Management

Anxiety has been described as a vague fear that something bad or unpleasant is going to happen, even if there is no real threat. It generates that worried, "uptight" feeling. Help diminish anxiety by taking control of your life and identifying your fears. Do not anticipate that problems will always occur. Anxiety may result from holding back feelings you can't cope with or don't understand; or it may grow out of a conflict between what you would like to do and what you think you ought to do.

Ten Ways to Help You Reduce Your Stress Level

1. **Exercise** either indoors or outdoors. It's up to you. At least 30 minutes of vigorous exercise 3 to 4 times a week.
2. **Breathe slowly and deeply.** Try to close your eyes to enhance the effect.
3. **Eat correctly.** Remember to always eat a nutritious breakfast before you leave your home. Your body needs the energy to fight stress.
4. **Talk to someone** about your problems and your worries.
5. **Manage your time** by organizing your life: make lists, keep a calendar, plan ahead and set priorities.
6. **Sleep.** Make sure you get enough!
7. **Visualization.** Practise closing your eyes, and imagining you're on your dream vacation!
8. **Hobbies or Clubs.** Take up a hobby or join a club! What are your special talents.
9. **Remember:** coffee, tobacco, and non-prescription drugs should not be relied upon as stress relievers.

10. **Laugh.** Laugh a little! Laugh a lot! How long has it been since you have seen a funny movie or heard a good joke?