

# STRESS AND COPING by Wendy Helms, Ph.D.

## HOW STRESS WORKS:

- 1) Although we speak of “stress-full” events, stress is NOT “out there” lurking in situations. Stress is in the individual’s *response* to events. Events by themselves have NO emotional content but may be *interpreted by the perceiver* in many different ways. *Stress is a function of the individual’s efforts to adapt to the demands of the environment.*
- 2) **THE STRESS RESPONSE**, also known as *the fight or flight response*, is an “alarm” signal which is triggered when the individual interprets a situation/event as threatening. The body receives an instantaneous burst of *adrenaline* causing increased heart rate, changes in breathing and digestion and muscular tension. This is a *natural and automatic* mechanism designed by nature to *mobilize* the individual to cope with a “threatening” situation - to give a burst of energy necessary to either fight or run away from the threat. If the threatening situation is resolved, the body gets an “all clear” signal and a shot of *nor-adrenaline* which triggers the relaxation response and returns the body systems to balance.
- 3) The automatic stress response works well in cases where the individual is *actually, physically threatened*. The problem is that the stress response can also be triggered by *painful memories of past, unfinished events, future, imagined events, or present perceived threat to one’s security or self image*. Emotions commonly associated with the stress response are FEAR, ANGER & GUILT. Long-term unresolved fear, anger and guilt can lead to the development of physical illnesses related to chronic “mobilization”..
- 4) It is not the event but the individual’s THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS (“*self talk*”) about the event that can trigger the stress response in the body.
- 5) People who do not understand the natural and positive nature of the stress response may interpret their own physical stress symptoms as further cause for alarm, intensifying the stress response and causing a *negative feedback loop* so that they are *anxious about being anxious*.
- 6) **COPING requires AWARENESS**. Understand how stress works and NOTICE what kind of events tend to trigger your own stress response. NOTICE what you are telling yourself about the situation to interpret it as threatening. Remind yourself that you are not a victim, you have **A CHOICE**.

## YOU CAN CHOOSE TO COPE IN ONE OF THREE WAYS:

1. **Take action to change the situation.** If positive ACTION is not possible or if you CHOOSE not to act (e.g. change jobs), then you can CHOOSE to:
2. **Change what you are telling yourself (your “self talk”) about the situation** - “RE-FRAME” your interpretation so that the situation is no longer felt as threatening.
3. **Change your physical response.** BREATHE DEEPLY - focus your mind in your body – do some T’ai Chi Chih movements until you feel more calm, centered & back in balance. This works especially well when you also change your “self talk”.

And remember:

**DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK!**