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Wellness in Tough Times

At some point in our lives, we all experience the type of stress that is almost unbearable. It consumes us, eats us alive and spits us out into a new version of ourselves. Contrary to how it feels, we are not alone in this journey and we CAN recover. The key here is to ask yourself, your friends and your loved ones: "How can I best cope with today's issues and bounce back during those moments?"

We have all heard the slogan "Nebraska Strong," and the assumption of that translation is "Because we are Nebraskans, we should be able to handle anything that comes our way." The Wellness in Tough Times Team at Nebraska Extension interprets that slogan very differently. Being Nebraska Strong can also mean that we have the strength to reach out for and accept help in times that are stressful. It takes strength to realize that we may be taking out our anger on others. It takes strength to muster up courage to acknowledge that stress is making life too difficult to manage. It takes even more strength to face that stress head-on and gather all defenses possible to conquer it.

Recognize and React to Symptoms of Ongoing Stress in Yourself

Do you find yourself experiencing new feelings or behaviors?

- Emotional – difficulty making decisions, lack of joy, moodiness or hopelessness.
- Physical – lack of energy, headaches, frequent illness, teeth-grinding.
- Behavioral – sleeping too much or too little, alcohol or drug use, isolation, impatience.

If you are experiencing these feelings or behaviors, use helpful self-talk and let go of blame, telling yourself things like, "This is a learning experience." "I did the best I could in that situation." "I must remember to focus on controlling what is controllable."

Keep things in perspective. Ask yourself "Are my fears realistic?" "Next year, how important will this be?" "Is my reaction beneficial?" "What can I do that is within my control?"

Be aware of automatic assumptions you make in certain situations. Sometimes when stressed, we tend to blame others for our issues. Try to look at the matter as a challenge to overcome with creative strategies rather than as a hopeless problem that others have caused.

Reaching out Is Nebraska Strong

Connect with a positive friend who is supportive, because starting a conversation about your stress can be the best therapy possible. Brittin Oakman wrote that being our messy, imperfect, authentic selves

helps create a space where others feel safe to be themselves, too. Your vulnerability can be a gift to others.

Consider a confidential phone line program or a professional counselor if you feel overwhelmed and hopeless regarding any issue in your life. More and more Nebraskans (especially more men) are doing this. You are not alone. Nebraska is fortunate to have the Nebraska Rural Response Hotline, (800) 464-0258, available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Central Time. Calls to this number are answered by an experienced and knowledgeable individual who will recommend the appropriate contact for free confidential services to eligible individuals throughout rural Nebraska. Typical topics include: financial distress, financial counseling, farm mediation, relationship distress, any mental health needs, estate and succession planning, legal issues and more.

Self-Care for Stress Management

Self-care is not selfish. It is crucial to ongoing mental health. Develop a stress-resistant personality with these self-care tips:

- Stay active and sit less.
- Keep a regular sleep schedule with a consistent waking time. That's right – a consistent *waking* time! If you are not sleepy at bedtime, it is not wise to try forcing sleep. What is important is focusing on waking at approximately the same time every day. This helps maintain that internal circadian clock in our brains, leading to better stress tolerance. In addition, get plenty of outdoor light in the morning, and lower household lights in the evening.
- Try cutting out processed foods that are formed and packaged.
- Drink plenty of water to avoid mental symptoms such as confusion and fuzzy thinking.
- Prioritize time for leisure activities or pick up a neglected hobby.
- Spend time with people and pets you love and avoid negative people.
- Set realistic goals and expectations.
- Look for humor in everything you do.
- Politely stand up for yourself and say “no” if there is too much on your plate.
- Share responsibilities and ask for help if you could use it.
- Realize that even if you are in a tough situation, others are living a worse scenario.
- Find ways to give to your community that cost you nothing, such as volunteering, performing random acts of kindness for strangers or making efforts to check in with those who could use an uplifting conversation. Giving, itself, can be the best way to decrease your own stress!

Just Breathe

There is one more incredibly easy self-care regimen that is often overlooked: just breathe, and control that breathing.

Cortisol is the fight-or-flight hormone released in stressful situations. Excess cortisol threatens our physical and mental health. It can be helpful to address urgent needs, but too much of it is harmful. A growing number of scientific studies reveal evidence that controlled breathing reduces cortisol levels in the bloodstream.

A solution to feeling stressed can be as simple as slowly counting to four while inhaling and counting to six while exhaling, continuing for several minutes. Longer exhales send a calming signal to the brain.

Could Others Be Reacting to Their Own Stress?

Everyone perceives stress differently and individuals react to stressful situations very differently. The difference we witness in each other is something to keep in mind as we navigate tough times. Some people hold it all in and withdraw from social connections. Some individuals lash out in anger. Others react with physical problems like headaches, upset stomachs or even chronic respiratory problems. Many suffer from sleep deprivation as stress builds, resulting in accidents and injuries.

Just for a minute, try dropping all judgments of someone and consider this: if a person you know is exhibiting a behavioral or physical change, perhaps it is a way of dealing with stress or a result of added stressors. Chronic stress may not look the same on them as it looks on you.

Mental health education is not black and white. It is not the ability to identify a weed or insect and apply exact solutions. At Nebraska Extension, we know that mental well-being is complicated and hidden to the untrained eye, but we also know the research behind stress and effective coping strategies to combat chronic stress. For a variety of resources to help lower stress levels, visit ruralwellness.unl.edu or contact Susan Harris at susan.harris@unl.edu.