



# EQUAL HEALTH

*The USU Center for Health Disparities newsletter funded by the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities*

## Stress and You

■ Michele M. Carter, Ph.D.

### Are you stressed?

**H**ave you ever felt as though you had too much to do and not enough time to do it? Have you noticed that you don't concentrate as well as you used to or that you have been feeling more on "edge" recently? You could be experiencing excess stress. Stress can be defined as the unpleasant feeling we get when the demands placed on us (sometimes by ourselves) exceed our resources. While the experience of stress is common, not many of us know how to manage it successfully. In this feature we will provide some basic information about stress (for example, causes, consequences) and some proven tips to help manage your stress level.

### Stress and Our Bodies

One of the reasons that stress is important to pay attention to (in addition to it feeling uncomfortable to experience) is that stress can have a very real effect on our bodies. It has been shown that stress in-

creases the cortisol produced in our bodies. Increase cortisol has been associated with weight gain, our digestive system, cardiovascular system, and immunological system. As such, prolonged stress has been linked to common conditions such as:

- High Blood Pressure
- Digestive Problems
- Headaches
- Common Cold
- Ulcers
- Mental Illness

**STRESS TIP!** Reducing stress can have the reverse effect and lower our chances for contracting any of the above or help in

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### SPOTLIGHT ON

## G.O.S.P.E.L. Volunteer Annabell Owens

■ Christiane Minnick

**A**nnabell Owens is a busy lady. It took a couple of tries by phone before she was able to tell me I had finally reached her at a good time and we could talk. At 70, Annabell is active in her church, and has good friends and a large family who sometimes "keep me busier than I want to be," she said with a hint of a laugh in her strong voice. She is enjoying her retirement years in good grace and good health,

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**Stress, cont.**

reducing the duration of impact of many of them. So lower stress = better health!

**Indicators of Stress**

While stress is a common emotion (in fact, very few of us can avoid all stress), the face of stress can take many forms. For some us it will be a decrease in our usual activities, irritability, concentration problems, muscle tension, or dietary changes.

Additional signs of stress might include:

- Worrying
- Moodiness
- Agitation
- Restlessness
- Short temper

- Inability to relax
- Headaches or backaches
- Diarrhea, constipation, nausea
- Insomnia
- Chest pain, rapid heartbeat
- Skin breakouts (hives, eczema)
- Loss of sex drive
- Frequent colds
- Neglecting responsibilities
- Nervous habits (for example, nail biting, pacing)

**STRESS TIP!** Early signs of stress can be any change in your usual behavior. Once you notice a change, it may be time to enact your stress plan.

**Identify the Source of Stress:**

Once we notice that we are experiencing stress, one of the first steps is to identify the where the stress is coming from. Some of the most common sources of stress include work (for example, deadlines, conflicting job demands, excessive workload) and our interpersonal relationships (for example, arguments, resentment, unrealistic expectations, unexpressed anger).

Some of the top stressors are:

- Spouse's death
- Divorce
- Marital separation
- Jail term
- Death of a close relative
- Injury or illness
- Marriage
- Fired from job
- Marriage reconciliation
- Retirement

**STRESS TIP!** All sources of stress are not negative! Positive events like wed-

dings or a job promotion can tax our resources and produce extensive stress. Since they are positive, we will often not recognize them as stressful.

**Developing a Stress Plan:**

As unpleasant as stress can be to experience, there are some proven ways to help manage stress and in some cases prevent it. One of the keys is to effectively learn to manage our time. We all have busy, demanding lives. In some cases, simply learning more effective time management can help to reduce day to day stress. You may find to techniques below useful in improving your time management skills.

- Create a balanced schedule. All work and no play often produces burnout.
- Don't over-commit. Avoid scheduling back-to-back or trying to fit too much into one day.
- Prioritize. List tasks to be done, and do them in order of importance.
- Break tasks into small steps. And focus on one manageable step at a time.
- Cut down your to-do list and distinguish between "shoulds" and "musts."
- Delegate. Do you have to do it yourself? If not, share the responsibility.

In addition, we can all benefit from learning how to manage stress from interpersonal relationships. Below are some useful strategies to work on.

- Learn how to say "no." Know

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Suggestions for articles and comments are welcome. Please email [equalhealth@usuhs.edu](mailto:equalhealth@usuhs.edu).

**Stress, cont.**

- your limits and stick to them.
- Avoid those who stress you out. Limit time or end the relationship.
- Control your environment. If the news is stressful, turn off the TV.
- Avoid hot-button topics. Cross off things from your conversation list that stress you out.
- Express your feelings. Resentment builds stress.

Finally, we can use some techniques that have proven useful in managing the symptoms of stress. For example, relaxation techniques like learning to engage in slowed diaphragmatic breathing can go a long way in reducing the physical symptoms of stress. You may also want to consider investing in a relaxation tape or two to use to help you gain some calm at the end of a hectic day. You may even want to try progressive muscle relaxation as a way to rid yourself of some of the muscle tension.

**STRESS TIP!** While all of the relaxation techniques are useful, not all of them work for everyone. You may have to try a few to find the one that produces the most relaxation for you. Also, remember that these techniques will take some practice to become efficient at using them, so you will have to dedicate some time to making them work for you.

Hopefully the information here will be of some use to you as you learn how to recognize and manage your stress. And, always remember, that if the stress

is too difficult to manage on your own, there are professionals you can contact to help you work on your stress management skills. So you are not alone!

For additional information or resources, please contact Dr. Michele Carter at (202) 885-1712 or email [mcart@american.edu](mailto:mcart@american.edu).

**About Michele Carter, Ph.D.**

Michele M. Carter received his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from Vanderbilt University. He completed three years post-doctoral training under the direction of David H. Barlow at the Center for Stress and Anxiety Disorders, University at Albany, State University of New York. In the fall of 1994 he joined the



faculty at American University and is currently Associate Professor of Psychology and Director of the M.A. Program. He has also been affiliated with the Center for Health Disparities since 2003 and plays an active role in research at the Center. Dr. Carter's primary professional interests are in the understanding and treatment of anxiety and mood disorders and African American psychology. He has published numerous articles, book chapters, and has made many presentations

on these topics. To help him reduce his own stress, Dr. Carter is an avid golfer and enjoys fishing. He takes his own advice and makes sure that he always has time for these activities as well as his family. ■

**Annabell Owens, cont.**

both of which she wants others in her extended community to be able to enjoy, as well. Annabell is one of two outreach workers at Lee Memorial AME Church in Kensington for the program known as G.O.S.P.E.L., or *Glorifying Our Spiritual and Physical Existence for Life*. Developed by Debbie Gold of Montgomery County's Department of Health and Human Services, G.O.S.P.E.L. works toward addressing the issues in minority communities that contribute to poorer health, shortened lives, and less access to healthcare services and providers – and Annabell is a dedicated foot soldier of the revolution, sharing information on health resources, taking blood pressure readings, encouraging and motivating, and lending an ear when it's needed.

That's what community is all about, as Annabell will tell you. It was five years ago this past February that her husband, Kenneth Owens, died, and also five years ago that Lee Memorial's then-pastor Reverend David Sparrow brought back news of the brand-new program called G.O.S.P.E.L. and asked for volunteers. "He knew I was having a hard time

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***Annabell Owens, cont.***

dealing with my husband passing, and he said it might be the ideal thing for me to work with, to get my mind on other people and off of myself, and I agreed,” Annabell said. “I’m one of those people who believe in giving back, so it was an ideal situation for me.”

Reaching out to others and her strong faith are what have sustained her. Something, as Annabell says, kept telling her to go ahead and retire at age sixty-five from a career as a computer systems analyst with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a career she enjoyed and might have kept working at just a little while longer, if not for that something. As it turned out, Annabell retired in January 2002, which allowed her a final, happy year with her husband, who had lived with cancer for eleven years in relative good health, ten years and six months more than his doctor has originally predicted. That something, Annabell now believes, was “the voice of the Lord, telling me to [retire] now, because He gave me a whole year to be home with him. It was a comfort to me afterwards.”

It was shortly after, at her pastor’s suggestion, that Annabell became involved with G.O.S.P.E.L. Originally, she says, the idea was to try to get people to stop smoking, and to direct them to the community programs and resources if they needed help. As she and other outreach workers from the original seven churches involved began meeting and talking with people, they found out that a lot of people had already

stopped smoking (“although not all,” she says) and instead were asking for help with other health-related concerns. And so, with the churches and Debbie Gold (whom Annabell describes



**G.O.S.P.E.L. volunteer Annabell Owens**

as an “octopus, with many arms reaching out”) working together, G.O.S.P.E.L. evolved, and continued to evolve. Having just recently celebrated its fifth-year anniversary, G.O.S.P.E.L. now has eleven community churches involved, hosts an annual Heart Healthy Symposium, has created partnerships with other organizations working to eliminate health disparities, and participates in events like the Maryland Freedom Walk, which it worked to bring to Montgomery County from Baltimore, where the walk originated.

Among the many classes she has taken, Annabell received training to allow her to take blood

pressure readings, and to recognize when to refer someone to their physician immediately. “We know what to look for and how to direct people,” Annabell said. As an outreach worker, she herself — as well as the other outreach workers — is the resource, bringing new health-related information to her church, handing out flyers and contact cards so congregants can reach her at home if they wish, going to health fairs and other community events to spread the message.

That message? At home, at Lee Memorial, it’s counseling that health is not just spiritual health, and not just physical health, either. It’s both, together. Annabell believes, first, that if a person gets their spiritual life in order, that person will be more open and receptive to the message of physical health. And often when discussing physical health, the outreach workers use biblical scriptures to illustrate their point. More generally, however, the message Annabell wants the wider African American community to hear is to take control of your own health. She encourages everyone who crosses her path to see their doctor once a year for a physical so that if there is indeed a health issue, it can be controlled or cured early, before it’s too late. This is the attitude — “I’m fine, I don’t have any problems” — that Annabell hears most often and counsels against.

In addition to this basic piece of advice, Annabell believes that everyone has a right to know

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***Annabell Owens, cont.***

everything about their health that will help them live a longer, healthier life. Often, she said, people would tell her that they had left their doctors' offices feeling rushed and not fully understanding what they had been told, or even knowing the right questions to ask. "Doctors assume that what they tell you is all you want to know," Annabell said. To counter this, G.O.S.P.E.L. compiled a list of questions people should ask their doctors. "We tell people to take these questions with them when they see their

doctors, and to say, 'I understand if you have other patients, but these are the questions I need you to answer for me.' And the doctor will usually spend those extra five or ten minutes because they see that this person is not solely relying on them, but that they have some knowledge about what's going on," Annabell said.

"Most people are living longer these days, and if you're going to live long, you want to be able to do things, you don't want to just live your life in a nursing home if it's

not necessary, unless you want to," Annabell said with a laugh. "People can do things now to make life better later on." And to that end, Annabell said, she has made some changes, as have many of the others on the G.O.S.P.E.L. team, one of whom was able to head off a potential stroke with a timely visit to his doctor. "The program has helped educate me, as well — helped me change my eating habits, most of them, in fact. I'm not a vegetarian and I'm not going to tell anyone I am, but I do eat a whole lot less meat and a lot more vegetables." ■

**VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES****Health Disparities Among African Americans**

African Americans are at greater risk for obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, and cardiovascular disease than Caucasians. Day-to-day stress may contribute to these various diseases. The Human Performance Laboratory at the Uniformed Services University is studying why African Americans are at greater risk for these diseases by looking at measures of health (e.g. blood pressure), stress, lifetime experiences, lifestyle, and markers of health in blood and saliva. To learn more about the study and how stress may affect your health, please call 301-295-1371 or email the humanperformancelab@usuhs.mil.

**African American Parenting Styles Study**

American University is conducting a study that examines the different contexts in which parents choose to use various discipline behaviors (e.g. spanking). The survey includes a number of items about parents' discipline behaviors, as well as demographic questions including ethnic identity, and takes about 30-40 minutes to complete. Participants must have partial or full responsibility for at least one child between the ages of 2 and 10 years old. In order to participate, parents need to email Morgan Pleasant at mp1324a@american.edu, who will then send a link to the study survey. One out of every 50 participants will win a \$100 cash prize!

**Senior Health Insurance Counseling**

A Maryland Senior Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program (SHIP) volunteer will meet with individual seniors and family members to answer questions about claims, supplemental insurance, Medicare, etc. Call (301) 590-2819 to make an appointment.

**DATE:** Tuesday, July 8, 2008

**TIME:** 11:00 a.m.

**LOCATION:** Wheaton Branch  
Montgomery County Library

**DATE:** Wednesday, July 16, 2008

**TIME:** 10:00 a.m.

**LOCATION:** Gaithersburg Branch  
Montgomery County Library

**DATE:** Tuesday, August 12, 2008

**TIME:** 11:00 a.m.

**LOCATION:** Wheaton Branch  
Montgomery County Library

**Free Diabetes Education Classes**

**DATE:** July 9, 16, 23, 30, 2008

**TIME:** 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

**LOCATION:**  
Stewartown Homes  
9310 Merust Lane  
Gaithersburg, MD 20876

**CONTACT:** Diane to register,  
(301) 421-5767

**Blood Pressure Screening**

This free service is provided by the American Red Cross.

**DATE:** Wednesday, July 16, 2008

**TIME:** 10:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

**LOCATION:** Wheaton Branch  
Montgomery County Library

**Blood Pressure Clinic**

Blood pressure reading and blood monitoring test for glucose offered for adults by a registered nurse from Arden Courts Assisted Living.

**DATE:** Thursday, July 17, 2008

**TIME:** 1:30 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

**LOCATION:** Kensington Park Branch  
Montgomery County Library

**1st Annual Montgomery County African Health Fair**

**DATE:** Saturday, July 19, 2008

**TIME:** 11:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

**LOCATION:** Montgomery College Takoma Park Campus

Charlene R. Nunley

Student Services Center

7625 Fenton Street

Silver Spring, MD 20912

**CONTACT:**

Chinelo Nwanko (301) 628-3453

Michelle Markey (301) 628-3435 ■

**EAT HEALTHY!**

■ *FC2(SW) Adam Race USN, Command Fitness Leader, USU*

**R**emember the food pyramid that said you had to eat 6–11 servings of grains, 2–4 servings of fruit, and 3–5 servings of vegetables? That pyramid is long gone!

In 2005, the USDA implemented a new pyramid called **MyPyramid**. It is tailored to meet the individual needs for everybody. Visit [www.mypyramid.gov/pyramid/index.html](http://www.mypyramid.gov/pyramid/index.html) for more information.

The following link is to MyPyramid Plan. It will give you insight into how many of which food group you should be having daily: [www.mypyramid.gov/mypyramid/index.aspx](http://www.mypyramid.gov/mypyramid/index.aspx).