

NAMI EDUCATION MEETING

JULY 10, 2008

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STRESS MANAGEMENT

A quote by the poet Robert Frost from one of the handouts Dr. Norris gave out was “ the reason why worry kills more people than work is that more people worry than work.” People who have high stress and anxiety are more prone to disability due to mental and physical disorders.

Dr. Norris spoke about what causes stress, the experience of stress, toxic exposure in the environment leading to stress, what stress feels like to us, health effects of stress, the physiology of relaxation and stress reducing techniques.

Dr. Norris is Executive Director of Science of Health and Energy, Inc. This organization offers information and educational programs in integrative and complementary healing modalities. Dr. Norris is trained in psychopharmacology and holistic therapies. She has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D in psychology/psychopharmacology, and is Adjunct Professor and Scientist in Residence at American University.

Dr. Norris began the presentation by asking what causes stress in our lives. Some of the reasons for stress are: work deadlines, dealing with people at the job, kids, having a mentally disabled child (not being able to predict the future for that child), change due to finances – not having enough to do what you want to.

Lack of sleep, a poor diet, and disease can predict how you react to stressors. You would be set up for a lower threshold for stress reaction.

Toxic exposures in the environment affect how you deal with stress. Some of those exposures are things in food, gas in new carpeting or houses, and perfume.

In order to understand stress Dr. Norris asked what stress feels like. Answers given included crampy shoulders, feeling of not wanting to go to bed, shortness of breathe, clamped stomach, venting onto others, grinding of teeth, insomnia, heart palpitations, general restlessness. Dr. Norris pointed out that people feel stress in different ways in their bodies. One should understand how they react to stress.

Dr. Norris also noted the difference between empathy and compassion. In the case with empathy one feels another’s pain so you can understand it. Most people don’t realize that the pain is the other person’s pain. Compassion is the love without the empathy. “I touch your feelings but don’t linger there.”

Stress affects heart disease, arthritis, the immune system, the number of T-cells, serotonin levels, and the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines which can lead to inflammation in your arteries.

Unhealthy ways of handling stress are: self medicating with alcohol, not taking time for yourself, overeating, too much PC, or TV, sleeping too much, hitting someone, or self mutilation.

Dr. Norris spoke about the benefits of relaxation in dealing with stress. Relaxation brings up the serotonin levels. Endorphins are released and they reduce the feeling of pain. Relaxation also enhances the immune system.

We can learn to elicit the relaxation response to stress in our bodies. Stress reducing techniques suggested by the audience members were: “I Love Lucy Tapes”, going to a concert, physical exercise (a vigorous walk), calling a friend, keeping a journal, doing volunteer activities, listening to classical music, shopping, taking a massage, spending time at a spa, taking care of personal hygiene, heating healthy foods, avoiding food additives, drinking water during the day, and walks in nature.

A simple answer to a request that one does not want to do is: “How nice of you to ask but I can’t do that—my plate is full right now.”

It is important to consider the power of positive thinking. Counseling, biofeedback, meditation, and prayer are useful ways to relax too. Prayer makes one feel peaceful, cared for, and loved. Prayer is healing. One should find what is inside of yourself that you believe. It is helpful to think of what you are grateful for.

The advantage of relaxation is an improved emotional state. There is a feeling of greater creativity. One looks better – at peace. Methods of eliciting the relaxation response in the body are physical exercise –(aerobic, strength training, flexibility), yoga, Tai Chi, Pilates, and vigorous walking that gets you perspiring, and meditation. When one practices these techniques, the benefits will last all day long!

Dr. Norris closed the session with a meditation exercise. Meditation is a brain state associated with healing. Breathing is the easiest thing to control. One can use breath control as a stimulus in meditation. This leads to a more peaceful, calm, and restful state.

Learning how to manage stress through relaxation techniques will lead to emotional, physical, and spiritual growth. Mastering relaxation techniques will enable us to have a more fulfilling life.

Notes taken by Rochelle Banta