

Recognizing stress for what it is

By Alice Greene
Special to CNC

Everywhere you turn right now, there seems to be bad news with potentially scary consequences. The natural reaction is to feel anxiety, a sense of helplessness and some anger. Do you feel this way? If so, you are likely dealing with a fair amount of stress and you may not fully realize the extent or impact of it. On a scale of 1-10, where 10 is extreme stress, where would you say your stress level is right now?

You may not really know how to answer that, but your body might. Stress starts off as a psychological response to situations you perceive as overwhelming, threatening, unpleasant or beyond your control; and for many people the financial crisis is all of those things. Your perception of and response to this crisis is determining the extent it is taking a toll on you mentally and emotionally. The greater your fear and anger, coupled with the feeling you can't do anything about it, the worse you feel emotionally.

If this persists for any length of time, you will start to experience physical symptoms. These may be back or shoulder pain, headaches, higher blood

pressure, insomnia, irritable bowel, weight gain around your mid-section, getting sick more easily or emotional eating. The symptoms can get more severe if the toll affects your autoimmune system and you become more prone to serious diseases. How long before you have physical symptoms depends on how stressed you were before all this news began and on how your body handles stress. It will differ for each person. Are you starting to experience any of these physical indicators of stress? If so, you may be more stressed than you realized.

It could be in your head

The sooner you recognize your stress level, the sooner you can take action to lower it. Too often, most of us deny how stressed we are and fail to make changes before we get physical symptoms that force us to look at or change our situations. This is what happened to me many years ago when I was suffering from chronic fatigue, constant back pain and daily nausea. I didn't think I was all that stressed, even when my doctor asked if I might be, since nothing was physically wrong with me. I told him I didn't think so, when that

couldn't have been further from the truth. It took several more years and repeated months in bed with chronic fatigue before I finally concluded he was right. I had been in denial and had allowed my feelings to be repressed. I also didn't believe I had choices, when I did. My beliefs were so narrow that I never considered they were limiting me or unique to my way of seeing things.

It is how we respond to a situation physically and emotionally based on our beliefs that determines just how stressed we become and how long we remain in that state. Two people, faced with the same situation (such as this financial crisis), can have very different reactions. No doubt you've heard this before, but have you ever really thought about what this means for you or what your options really are? Looking at all the options is still hard for me sometimes, but it is helpful to be reminded that there are many ways to see a situation even when you don't want to hear it or believe it.

What about you? Are you aware not everyone shares your perceptions of this financial and economic

downturn, even people in similar positions as you? Some are looking for the silver lining or for new opportunities. Others recognize that as companies scale back, some firms are still investing in new ideas in order to come out ahead when the markets rebound. And a surprising number of people simply refuse to be impacted by the negative news at all and create their own version of reality that allows them to succeed where others wouldn't dare. In some ways this is a perfect time to pitch new ideas to organizations and be heard since things are quieter in most businesses.

You have a choice as to how you see and respond to external factors in your life. It is when you don't believe you have choices and feel at a loss that you are most stressed and at risk for physical symptoms. If that is your situation right now, there is something you can do for yourself that will help. You can take better care of yourself physically by getting enough sleep, increasing your activity, eating healthy foods and doing some stress reduction techniques such as paying attention to your breath. You can also focus on how blessed you really are with gratitude and look for evidence that good things are happening despite all the bad news.

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