

# UNDERSTANDING STRESS

By Jane Miller

## Part One: Our bodies and Stress

### Introduction:

Stress and the effects of stress are now considered part and parcel of modern-day living.

The unreliability of constant employment and ever changing technology have increased the demands of the work-place and pressure has spiralled for us to adapt.

Simultaneously, the previous stress buffers of social support networks disintegrated as we saw the extended family diminish to nuclear and single-parent family structures, and job relocation forced us to abandon familiar social ties and recreational routines.

As these changes accelerated, particularly in the eighties, the phenomenon of stress was identified and defined, a profile of sufferers emerged and the development of techniques to manage these problems began to take shape.

Now, as the 21st century approaches, we have realised "it" isn't going to go away. Every worker must understand and accept the process, and more importantly accommodate the appropriate stress management techniques in order to survive with one's health and sanity.

### Definition:

Stress can be defined as a response by the body and mind to pressure that cannot be managed [Stephen Palmer]. Stressors [agents or circumstances capable of triggering a stress reaction] can be classified as follows:

i) External physical stressors: eg. noise, crowding, pollutants.

ii) Internal physical stressors: eg. our internal biological systems; ingested chemicals or drugs; personality attributes/ attitudes to change or challenge.

iii) Social environmental stressors: eg. major life changes themselves [such as divorce or job change] and their consequences; absence of a social supportive network; interpersonal relationships; organisational work stress.

**As the 21st century approaches every worker must understand that stress isn't going to go away. We must accept the process and accommodate stress management techniques in order to survive with our health and sanity**

### The Physiology of Stress:

The body is designed to deal effectively with acute pressure; in fact, initially, the physiological response enables the body to be in a better state to deal with the situation ie. once the nervous system has been stimulated by the perception of stress it facilitates a quicker blood flow to the brain for clearer thinking, increased concentration, improved judgement, and decision-making; other parts of the body are also altered in readiness of any physical demands. Once the situation is dealt with however, the body returns to its equilibrium. But if the stress which stimulated this response continues then

researchers believe that the chemicals that facilitate the useful short-term change can if unabated lead to weakening the body, leading to so-called chronic symptoms or illness, as well as simultaneous psychological problems. Hypertension, coronary thrombosis, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes mellitus and depression are all ailments associated with chronic stress.

Thus to protect our bodies, we need not only to deal effectively with the stressor [as will be discussed] but also to learn to listen for early warning signs: headache, indigestion, palpitations, breathlessness, nausea, clenched jaw or fists or recurrent illness are some detectable clues.

The "speeding-up" response of our bodies necessary in dealing with the stressor must be reversed as soon as is possible in order for our bodies to remain healthy, particularly if the stressor is unavoidably ongoing. Simple deep and slow diaphragmatic breathing is extremely effective and can be done anywhere, anytime.

For short or long term stress, relaxation techniques done on a regular basis also help bring the body back to its peaceful equilibrium [one's mental patience also returns]; there are also many "alternative" therapies on the market even here in Riyadh designed to counteract the daily build-up of stress in our bodies: massage, reflexology, aromatherapy etc. The most widely researched meditation practice is Transcendental Meditation [TM] which has a profound effect on brain wave activity and has been proven to alleviate the effects of stress.