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### Biology of stress

Our bodies have survival mechanisms for responding to immediate and long-term stress. However, one person's stress can be relaxation for another. While some are scared of spiders or walking along a cliff edge others actually enjoy the 'adrenaline rush' induced by bungee-jumping, mountaineering, extreme sports and free-falling from aeroplanes!

### Effects of stress

If stress becomes chronic and is not recognized or managed it can lead to several undesirable changes. These can include feelings of loneliness, emptiness, anger, hatred, frustration, swings in energy level and mood, concentration problems, restlessness, irritability, anxiety, fear, depression, sleep and digestive disturbances, re-experiencing events, self-reproach and guilt, even psychosomatic illness. Wow!

### Techniques for coping with stress

So stress must be avoided or managed. Care can be taken before, during or after working in a new post or different location.

Here are four well-tested methods:

1. Experience a good massage from a professional. But be selective as many massage parlours have other intentions. (Disabuse your mind of the idea that a sauna is relaxing - physiologically it is highly stressful).
2. Lie on your back and rest your hands on stomach or thighs. Now work through your body, starting with your feet and progressing to your face: tense the muscles. Hold the position - and relax. Bend your feet towards your knees hard; hold them in tension for a few seconds. Then relax. Repeat for your calves, thighs, buttocks, back, abdomen, chest and arms, neck and face (in a silent scream). Make sure the relaxation is complete and check from time to time that muscle blocks stay limp after tension. There are good tape recordings of music and instruction available if a prompt is needed.
3. A more advanced approach is to leave out the tension components and use your mind alone to ensure relaxation using the same progression from feet to head. This can be combined with observing the sensations in your skin where it contacts with the bed, and registering the sensations in your mind with detachment and equanimity. Just be aware, and survey the whole surface of your body systematically. Do you feel itch? Tingling? Pressure? Discomfort? With practice you can extend the approach to leaving the skin and entering body cavities such as the ears and mouth.
4. Slow breathing has been demonstrated to lower blood pressure, slow the heart rate and induce relaxation. We usually use two sets of muscles for breathing: the diaphragm and those between the ribs. While you are reading this, place your left hand on the bottom of your rib cage under your right arm. Try breathing only with your diaphragm when no movement will be felt here. Now take a huge breath in as if in panic; your rib cage will move up and out as in excessive exercise.

While lying on your back you are going to change your breathing from about 12 times a minute to half that amount. Concentrating on diaphragmatic breathing, Inhale maximally for six counts (seconds), hold for three, exhale totally with a deep sigh for six to nine, and hold for three; repeating the controlled breaths. Do this ten times for a start and increase to slow breathing for 15 minutes later if you can.

The last three exercises are best done lying on your back in bed but they can be practiced anywhere and at any time, even sitting at your computer or standing waiting for a bus.

On returning home do seek help or counselling if you need it. There is no shame associated with returning home wounded after a tough assignment

## Appendix 2. AVOIDING INFLUENZA

### Advice from the University of Kansas Hospital to Prevent Swine 'Flu

The only portals of entry are the nostrils and mouth/throat. In a global epidemic of this nature, it is almost impossible to avoid coming into contact with H1N1 in spite of all precautions.

While you are still healthy and not showing any symptoms of H1N1 infection, in order to prevent proliferation, aggravation of symptoms and development of secondary infections, some very simple steps can be practiced:

1. Gargle twice a day with warm salt water or Listerine (mouth wash). H1N1 takes 2-3 days after initial infection in the throat/nasal cavity to proliferate and show characteristic symptoms. Simple gargling prevents proliferation. Gargling with salt water has the same effect on a healthy individual that Tamiflu has on an infected one. Do not underestimate this simple, inexpensive, and powerful preventative method.
2. Blow the nose hard once a day and swab both nostrils with cotton buds dipped in warm salt water or Listerine. This is very effective in bringing down the viral population of the respiratory tract.
3. Boost your natural immunity with foods that are rich in Vitamins C and D. If you have to supplement with Vitamin C tablets, make sure that it also has zinc to boost absorption.
4. Drink as much warm liquids (tea, coffee, etc) as you can. Drinking warm liquids has the same effect as gargling, but in the reverse direction. The warm liquids wash off proliferating viruses from the throat into the stomach where they cannot survive, proliferate or do any harm.
5. Above all, wash your hands frequently with soap or hand disinfectant lotion, especially after visiting public places, touching door handles and work surfaces.

K.Gowriswaran, MBA  
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## Appendix 3. HAVING HEALTHY BABIES

### INTRODUCTION

Many ex-patriot workers have brought their children with them and others have given birth on the tropical island of Sri Lanka or in mainland India. In the West every birth is accompanied by some risk, which may be increased abroad if special care is not taken. Without the support of family and some medical services, pregnant mothers may prefer to resort to private clinics for ante- and post-natal care. The channelling system in Sri Lanka allows fast access to the best physicians available and many aspects of the health service, especially in the private sector, are better than those found at home.

The World Health Organization believes that about 10% of defects, and many other perinatal problems, can be avoided but some authorities put the possible reduction rate as high as 60% if appropriate guidelines are followed; mothers and fathers should adopt a healthy lifestyle at least three months before starting a pregnancy.

So an actual reduction in birth risks can be achieved with care, but the responsibility must be shared between mothers, fathers, and families. And midwives, nurses and doctors!

If you are already pregnant, you should consult your doctor to advise you about when you are safe to fly.

### KEY MESSAGES

#### Before marriage

1. Get vaccinated against German measles (*Rubella*). This infection, and some other infections, can damage the developing baby.
2. Do not marry a blood relative (i.e. the mother and father having at least one grandparent in common).

#### Before conception

3. Adopt a healthy life style. Healthy parents are most likely to have healthy babies
4. Have a health check *before* getting pregnant. Some illnesses, which are not controlled in the mother, may harm the developing baby.
5. Start folate (folic acid) supplementation to reduce the risk of damage to the embryonic brain, spinal cord and heart. This is especially important for mothers who have had an affected baby, or mothers who are taking anti-epileptic medicines. You may need iron supplementation as well.

#### After conception

6. Continue folate supplementation until at least the end of the third month of pregnancy.
7. Avoid smokers and smoking.
8. Avoid self-medication and alcohol during pregnancy, especially during the first three months.
9. Visit an antenatal clinic for a health check for you and your baby (babies?)

#### For the family

10. Have your children between the ages of 20 and 30 with two or three years between each child.
11. "Breast is best" so aim to breast feed without supplements for at least the first six months

There may always be a small minority of babies that require surgical and medical remedies at birth, but primary prevention of conceptions resulting in defective babies is more cost effective and less traumatic for families and communities than termination of faulty pregnancies (illegal in some countries), or tertiary care of disabled babies.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. Get vaccinated against German measles (Rubella). This infection, and some other infections, can damage the developing baby.

Some infections cause only a mild illness in the mother, but severe damage to the developing baby. Some of these, such as Toxoplasmosis, can be caught from cats and dogs. Others, like *Herpes*, are caught from other humans. These infections can damage the baby's heart, sight, hearing, brain or other parts of the body. *Rubella* is one of the worst, yet is most easily avoided, so make sure vaccination is completed before marriage or at least three months before getting pregnant. Generally avoid any infections and make sure that fever is reduced.

2. Do not marry a blood relative (i.e. the mother and father having at least one grandparent in common).

Parents who are married to blood relatives have a higher risk of having babies who need some medical aid at birth. Such babies have a greater chance of being still born or being born with mental and physical problems. Many congenital disorders are not seen at birth and only appear in childhood or even in adult life.

3. Adopt a healthy life style. Healthy parents are most likely to have healthy babies.

If you live in a healthy way, you can influence others to do the same. In any case healthy parents are more likely to have healthy children. Have a good balance of nutritious food, exercise and sleep. Parents should know their ideal weight for their height and not allow themselves to get overweight or underweight.

4. Have a health check *before* getting pregnant. Some illnesses, which can be controlled in the mother, may harm the developing baby.

Some diseases, if not controlled in the mother, can harm the developing baby. Mothers should have a health check for high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney diseases and anaemia before becoming pregnant. If the diseases are not controlled the mother and baby can be severely harmed.

5. Start folate (folic acid) supplementation to reduce the risk of damage to the embryonic brain, spinal cord and heart. This is especially important for mothers who have had an affected baby, or mothers who are taking anti-epileptic medicines. You can take folate without ill effects for months. Better earlier than later. So when you pack your honeymoon bag - pack your folate tablets!

6. Continue folate supplementation until at least the end of the third month of pregnancy.

Folic acid is present in most foods, particularly green vegetables, but prolonged cooking destroys it.

Folic acid (one of the B vitamin group) is most important for normal development of the fetal brain, spinal cord and heart. It needs to be taken daily (0.4 milligrams) particularly throughout the first three months of pregnancy, and starting at least one month before conception in order to be fully effective. Mothers who have already had a baby with defects of the brain and spinal cord, or who are being treated for epilepsy, should take 4 milligrams daily.

7. Avoid smokers and smoking.

For a long time we have known that mothers who smoke can damage the baby as well as their own health. Now we know that if the mother inhales smoke from others who are smoking, this can also damage the baby. If the father smokes in the company of a pregnant mother, the baby has a greater risk of prematurity, of low birth weight or of being affected by childhood cancers and other illnesses.

8. Avoid self-medication during pregnancy.

Many medicines should not be taken during pregnancy, but a few are relatively safe. If they are prescribed, they must be taken *exactly* as the doctor says. If too little is taken, the illness may not be cured. If too much is taken, it can be dangerous or even deadly. Antimalarials should be taken throughout pregnancy in endemic areas, but only as prescribed by a medical doctor.

Avoid alcohol during pregnancy.

Before handling chemicals used in agriculture, or for any purpose, look for warning signs on the container.

9. Have your children between the ages of 20 and 30 with two or three years between each.

The best time for child bearing is between 20 and 30 years of age. Mothers under 20 or over 30 (especially under 18 or over 35) have more problems with their babies than do mothers between 20 and 30 old. Families are best limited to two or three children with a couple of years between each child.

10. Avoid being bitten by insects or sharing your home with them, especially those which are known to carry germs and infections e.g. ants, flies, cockroaches and mosquitoes. It is usually relatively simple to fit mosquito netting to a house or apartment. If there are difficulties, make sure you use treated mosquito nets over beds at night, high-speed fans, insect repellents, and appropriate clothing (treated with DEET or citronella oil) in high-risk areas.

11. As your children grow, make sure that the recommended vaccination programme is followed.

12. Continue with your healthy lifestyle ready for the next addition to the family!

