**Taking Stress from Burnout to Balance**

Hello Health Enthusiasts. When it comes to stress, how in tune are you to your personal stress signals? Stress affects people of all ages and from all walks of life. So, when stress happens, are you listening to what your body is telling you? April is National Stress Awareness Month and a good time to tune in and increase awareness of personal stress triggers.

Stress signals vary from physical and emotional to behavioral, and all forms require our attention. Its cause can be rooted in things, such as work, relationships, family issues, changes in health, or even happy life events like planning a wedding, a trip, or buying a new home. One of the most important things to remember about stress is that we all experience it differently. What might be stressful for one person might not be stressful for another. That’s why knowing our personal triggers can help us develop coping strategies.

Physical symptoms may present as headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, difficulty sleeping, changes in appetite, digestive issues, increased heart rate, or high blood pressure. Emotional symptoms can be feelings of anxiety, irritability, mood swings, feelings of overwhelm or helplessness, and difficulty concentrating. While behavioral symptoms might be over-eating, social withdrawal, procrastination, and difficulty with decision making.

It’s important to quiet the mind long enough to hear what the body is saying. That might mean unplugging from technology for a few minutes to “just be” or getting up 15 minutes earlier each day to have quiet time for yourself. Once you are aware of a signal, it’s time to take action. Not sure where to start? Take your favorite positive *self-care* “treat,” something that makes you feel good that you only allow yourself to do once in a while, and turn it into a “treatment” for when life seems out of control. For example, I *treat* myself to an occasional craniosacral session with my Naturopathic Physician which always leaves me feeling wonderful. But, I schedule those visits more frequently as a *treatment* for when stress is out of control. It helps!

When stress is chronic, cortisol levels are at a steady high which can lead to serious health problems including high blood pressure, heart disease and depression. We often think of cortisol as the notorious stress hormone that in excess keeps us high strung and aids in the storage of belly fat and that is true - but when balanced, cortisol serves the body well. It helps with regulating sleep cycles, reducing inflammation, managing how the body uses carbohydrates, fats, and proteins and controlling blood pressure. It comes to the rescue when we need that fight or flight response to kick in or to stay alert and focused for a test or meeting.

Engaging in physical activity, massage, practicing breathing techniques, and taking time for self-care can be extremely helpful in reducing stress; but did you know that certain foods can also have a stress reducing effect? In an article from the Cleveland Clinic, Dietician Courtney Barth, MS, RDN, LD, CPT, explains, “The best way to lower cortisol in the body is to focus on an anti-inflammatory diet. That means fewer processed foods and more whole foods.” “The goal is to eat foods that reduce inflammation in your body, thus reducing cortisol levels.”

Barth’s suggested foods are those high in vitamin B (particularly B-12 which helps with the metabolism of cortisol) such as eggs, beef, chicken and nutritional yeast. Foods high in omega-3 fatty acids such as salmon, avocado, walnuts and olive oil that can reduce inflammation. Magnesium rich foods (pumpkin seeds, bananas, broccoli, spinach) are also suggested as are protein rich foods (for balanced blood sugar levels) and probiotic rich gut healthy foods. Using food to create hormonal balance is something to be mindful of. It’s something we can control.

Overall, it’s important to pay attention to stress signals and take steps to manage stress before it gets to the chronic stage. An entire month is dedicated to assessing and better managing stress levels, for good reason. If you’re not routinely engaging in stress reducing activities, be patient with yourself and remember the 1% rule. Choose one thing to do consistently - progress over perfection. Learning to recognize personal triggers, followed by action is key, as is seeking help when needed. By doing what you can to manage stress, you’ll be well on the road from burnout to balance- a much better place to be!

***In honor of Stress Awareness Month, I am offering free 30 minute nutrition/stress assessments in my Guilford office on Saturdays. Assessment includes stress reducing techniques & recipes.***

***Questions or comments? Contact me at joann@wellnessfusion.net. This monthly column is here for you, for the health of t!***