Managing stress is a crucial component for any of life’s challenges. This can be especially true for people who experience diagnostic shock after learning they have a chronic illness or who are coping with the daily complexities of long-term issues. Although stress may not be the cause of ill health, it contributes to many disease conditions that put a person at risk physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. In the United States, stress has become pandemic accounting for 80 percent of all healthcare issues in this country (Mariano, 2013, p. 86).

We are all “works in progress” as our biology adapts to any current situation. Each day, with or without a diagnosed illness, the body is in flux, trying to constantly acclimate to both its internal and external environments. Having a chronic disorder intensifies these transformations, and the strain of coping is magnified. Many medical conditions present challenges that may signify physical body changes, habit modifications, and relationship adjustments. Anxiety and fear of the unknown, anticipated pain, surgery, and projected mortality are potential realities that contribute to perceived stress as a person copes with acute or long-term, life-altering experiences.

For some chronic diseases, it is not uncommon for a person to survive beyond the age of 80 or 90 with well-managed treatment, even when their condition is considered to be incurable. Also, healing (vs. curing)
Building Resiliency

The focus of healthcare in our nation has begun to shift to a more integrative approach with innovations and attention to wellness and healing. The World Health Organization (2005) stated that “If the major risk factors [poor nutritional choices, inactivity, and smoking] for chronic disease were eliminated’ a significant percentage of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer could be prevented. They predicted that without proper care and attention, millions of people would die prematurely from a chronic disease. Years later, the CDC (2013) is of the same opinion that unhealthy food preferences, increasing inactivity, and tobacco usage are the underlying causes of chronic illness. Furthermore, prolonged stress can affect the body’s ability to regulate inflammation, which also increases the risk of the development and progression of diseases (Cohen, et al., 2012).

Since many health solutions are within our ability to manage, Swarbrick (2006) encouraged viewing wellness as a “conscious, deliberate process” (p.311). It requires someone, whether cured or healed, to address both their health predicament and the stress response an illness will elicit, and to then make choices that affect their path going forward. On occasion, the need arises to adjust behaviors and beliefs to the circumstances that are present. It is during times of strife that a person needs support in order to confront the demands of their situation. One major way to address the stress and find an element of homeostasis and restoration of self is to build resiliency. This involves learning how to fortify health and utilize tools to obtain or maintain wellness during any demanding event. Becoming resilient can provide ways to infuse healing into life’s daily experiences as a method to cope, adapt and thrive.

Nourishing the Whole Person

The stress response sets off a series of physiological events that results in the body needing to replenish nutrients and process food, thoughts and emotions to sustain health. Complete nourishment comes from more than food’s basic components of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. While these are essential for healing, it can become routine to focus solely on fundamental nutrition and lose sight of life’s mosaic and what provides sustenance in its many forms. Health professionals need to be mindful aware that resiliency embraces feeding not just the cell but the soul as well, especially as a person journeys the wellness-to-illness-to-healing continuum.

Realizing the need for an individual to commit to this process for improved health and overall wellness, Swarbrick (2006) addressed the justification for a comprehensive practice. An inclusive nourishing plan should embrace personal reflections, community connections, creative learning opportunities at work and home, fitness activities for the mind, body and spirit, and interactions with nature. These concepts are represented in Holistic Nourishment for Healing and Resilience (see p. 21).

Empowering People to Follow Their Path

Since the body already has the remarkable, innate ability to heal itself, we need to advocate for a way to help others engage in healing and cope with challenges in their lives. It is not surprising to note that while chronic stressors can exhaust our resources to manage effectively, “optimism and perceived control show considerable consistency and stability as individual protective factors” for coping (Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007). An integrative approach helps empower people to take control of their choices, modify their lifestyles, and thrive (Thornton, 2013, p. 5). A fundamental principle of holistic nursing is the notion that illness, as a natural part of life, is an opportunity for learning and movement toward change (AHNA & ANA, 2013). Holistic nurses are encouraged to not only find balance in their own lives, but to help coach others to discover harmony within their own “self-care strategies and healing paths” (Frisch, Dossey, Guzzetta & Quinn, 2000,

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The importance of community support and the necessity to accept one’s self are prerequisites for change (Brach, 2003). Shealy (2002) observes that personal and positive visions are important for self-healing. Healthcare is starting to show trends toward person-centered care that focuses on honoring behavioral changes elicited by personal choice and self-management. While illness can be life-changing, a holistic strategy to wellness can generate “internal motivation and active participation in a person's treatment” in order to manage both the issues at hand and the accompanying stress (Swarbrick, 2006, p.311). This activates personal responsibility as the impetus to move toward healing. Shealy (2002) succinctly summarizes wellbeing: “Health is a wonderfully complex interaction between genes and environment, between attitude and behaviour, between lifestyle and chance…[yet] most often we remain healthy unless we lead a stressful life” (p.1).

With nurses continuing to lead the way, both health and care can become more synonymous with healthcare for a preventative and wellness-oriented approach to managing lifestyle change and stress. Commitment to modify behavior and attitude is influenced by the personal will to achieve a future benefit and is best when this drive is internalized. Nurse coaches agree that an individual’s motivation affects self-efficacy and outcomes (Southard, Hess & Bark, 2013, p. 208). They offer motivational interviewing and appreciative inquiry as evidence-based solutions to improve health and promote healing (p. 206). Whether nurses are practicing self-care or coaching a person toward managing their state of wellness, tools such as self-awareness and resiliency help create a sense of balance among the many ways to nourish the body, mind and spirit, so they can be in optimum condition during life’s challenges.

References:

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