



## Handling Life's Challenges

Stress is a natural part of life. There is no such thing as a stress-free life. The world around us is constantly changing, so we are always in the process of adapting to change. This means that we have to alter our thinking and actions to handle life situations as they arise on a daily basis.

### Can Stress Be Positive?

The way we see and respond to change determines whether a situation causes positive or negative stress. The way we interpret a situation (stressor) determines how our mind and body react. For example, if someone is facing a divorce and they see the divorce as a threat to survival then they may become frightened and depressed. Another person facing a divorce may be happy to have the relationship end and celebrate the divorce by going to lunch with a friend. Therefore, seeing a stressor from different points of view determines if the situation is a threat or opportunity.

### Stress Response

Stressors we see as threats trigger a body and mind reaction known as the "fight or flight" response. This is a standard

stress response that is automatic when our mind sees something as threatening. When we experience the "fight or flight" response we interpret a stressor as overwhelming and our mind and body rev up to protect us. When threatened we have two choices: (1) run away from the threat to our lives (flight) or (2) stand and confront the frightening event (fight). For example, if we saw someone we loved get hit by a car our whole body would go into emergency response. Our heart rate would increase, blood pressure would go up, muscles would tense, we might sweat, and breathe faster.



We would be shocked by the accident and get nervous and scared. Our stomach might become upset and our hands cold

and clammy. Our body would be on high alert and ready for action to handle the outcome of the accident.

### Stress Management

How long our body stays on high alert depends on how we perceive and think about the stressful event. The thoughts and beliefs in our mind control how we react to a stressful event. Therefore, stress management begins with how we think about ourselves and what happens to us in our lives. Remember the people getting a divorce. One perceived the divorce as life-threatening, and the other celebrated the divorce. The person experiencing the divorce as a negative event could become stuck in the automatic "fight or flight" response and develop ongoing health problems such as high blood pressure and depression. The person celebrating the divorce does not experience the "fight or flight" response because they did not perceive the divorce as a threat. Therefore, if we can change the way we think about stressful situations we can avoid the harmful effects of stress on the body and mind.

## How can I overcome stress?

So now we know what the way we think controls how we will react to stress. If we have a positive life attitude and hope about our future then we are more likely to see stressors as normal life challenges. If our view of the world is negative and hopeless, then we are more likely to see stressors or life changes as threats.

Therefore, the key to managing stress is how we think about the world and the things that happen to us. How and what we think is so powerful that it can control our destiny. The old adage "do you see the glass as half full or half empty" is true. If you see the glass as half full you will view yourself and changes in your world with op-

timism. If you are pessimistic and negative you will see the glass as half empty. This means we need to monitor our thinking and be willing to change negative thoughts that drag us down. If we are able to think of life events as challenges rather than threats we will be happier and healthier in our everyday lives.

*Special thanks to Kathy Scary for her help with this article!*

**The Berrien County Health Department has five locations to serve you:**

Benton Harbor		Niles		Three Oaks
769 Pipestone	M-139 Office	School Based	1205 N. Front St.	21 N. Elm
P.O. Box 706	2106 S. M-139	870 Colfax Ave	684-2800	756-2008
926-7121	927-5623	925-4500		

**Or visit us on the web at [www.berriencohlthdept.org](http://www.berriencohlthdept.org)**

## Berrien County Health

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Preventing Disease,  
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## Stepping Up to a Healthier You!

December is Stepping Up to A Healthier You month. This month, the health department will bring you information about topics to keep you healthy during the hectic holiday season, including: Stress Management, Winter Safety, Healthy Eating for Christmas, and Alcohol Awareness. For questions about any of these topics, please call the health department at **926-7121**.

### Tips to handle stress:

1. Identify what makes you feel stressed; plan for what you can change, and don't worry about what you can't.
2. Take a few minute break to calm down— listen to music or call a friend.
3. Remind yourself that this event will pass before you know it.
4. Instead of "fight or flight," train yourself to have a "relaxation" response to stress. Say a prayer or repeat a phrase that calms you when you encounter a stressful situation.



If you feel unable to handle the stress in your life on your own, there are many resources to support you.

**For more information, call the health department at 926-7135.**

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