

Planning for Transitions: Managing Stress

“Life is one big transition.”

Willie Stargell

Life is full of transitions. Do you think about the transitions or changes that you may experience in the future? Some transitions in life are gradual and occur over a long period of time, such as the time between childhood and becoming an adult. Other transitions may occur quickly and very unexpectedly, such as becoming a caregiver to a family member or neighbor who suddenly becomes ill. We experience transitions in many aspects of our lives. In our work lives, as we change careers and as we move into retirement. In our health, with the natural changes of aging and within our families when children leave the home, or when death or changes in relationships change our social circle.

Successfully navigating life's transitions can take time, skill in managing the stress that is inevitable with change and patience. Throughout this year we will be exploring some of the common transitions that Island seniors face, such as:

- Becoming a caregiver
- Moving to a new house or living situation
- Being discharged from hospital to home
- The transition to retirement.

Though you may not be experiencing these changes in your life at this point, taking the time to consider what a change in your life might mean and undertaking some advance preparation may help you successfully manage the changes in life.

We will begin this series by looking at an essential skill to managing transitions - managing stress effectively. Like many good health promoting habits you can establish patterns of behavior that can help build your physical and mental resources to deal more effectively with unexpected stresses.

Stress and your body

Would it surprise you to learn that all stress is not bad? Feelings of stress may be caused by both positive and negative events. Major life transitions such as the death of a family member or close friend, serious illness or job loss cause feelings of stress, but you may also feel stressed when planning or taking a vacation, moving to a new house or during a major celebration – such as a birthday or seasonal holiday. What one person might find stressful (such as planning a trip) may not bother another person. But while some stress can make you feel energetic, sharpen your body's reactions and thinking processes, severe stress can negatively affect health. Many people feel “stressed out” when the demands of daily life seem to be too much to manage.

According to the Canadian Mental Health Association, there are three stages to your body's response to stress:

1. Mobilizing energy – at this stage you may notice that your heart beats faster and you may be breathing more quickly.
2. Consuming energy stores – as the stress continues the body begins to use stored energy (fat and sugar) for fuel. You may notice that you feel tired, anxious or have problems with your memory and concentration.
3. Draining energy stores - with continued stress your body will begin to require more energy than you can provide, resulting in problems with sleeping, personality changes and increasing errors. Long term exposure to severe stress may also result in health problems such as mental illness, heart disease or ulcers.

Though we can't always control life events that may be stressful, taking action can help to reduce and cope with the effects of stress on the body.

Self care

A key tool in stress management is self care. Good self care includes eating a healthy balanced diet, staying physically active and getting a good night sleep. Canada's Food Guide is an excellent resource for information on the portion sizes and number of food group servings that form the basis of a healthy diet. Copies of Canada's Food Guide are available from Health Canada at www.hc-sc.gc.ca or in regular, large print or Braille from the PEI Seniors' Secretariat at 1-866-770-0588.

Physical activity can also be a powerful tool to reduce the tension associated with stress. People who stay active through enjoyable exercise tend to report a more positive mood, less anxiety, more energy and better sleep – all while increasing their strength, balance and flexibility! Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Older Adults contains great tips to get started on an active lifestyle and is available at www.paguide.com or from the PEI Seniors' Secretariat.

Getting a good night sleep can help you feel well rested and better able to manage stress. Unfortunately many people struggle with a variety of sleep problems including: difficulty getting to and staying asleep, early morning waking, sleeping too much and feeling sleepy during the day. The National Sleep Foundation www.sleepfoundation.org offers useful tips to increase the quality of your sleep. The Foundation recommends setting the stage for rest by avoiding known stimulants, such as caffeine, alcohol, smoking, and exercise at least two hours before bedtime; maintaining a routine of going to bed and waking at the same time each day; creating a comfortable bedroom that is used only for sleeping; and avoiding daytime naps.

In part two of this series next month on planning for transitions we will continue our focus on stress management, the importance of building supportive relationships and problem solving techniques.