

'Physician, Heal Thyself' By Managing Stress

Imagine yourself flying on an airplane at 35,000 feet when suddenly the cabin depressurizes. People are screaming. Some are praying. Oxygen masks drop from the ceiling. If you remember the instructions from the stewardess, you place the mask over your own face first before helping the person next to you.

Research demonstrates that stress can cause chemical changes in the body that can have a negative impact on people's mental and physical well-being. "High levels of stress contribute to health issues as diverse as depression, insomnia, heart disease, skin disorders and headaches," according to the Stress and Health Website (www.stress-and-health.com).

That's the story Kathleen Hall, Ph.D., tells physicians when they dismiss the idea of being proactive in reducing or managing their everyday stress. How can they help patients when their own health may be in trouble?

"Physicians are getting on board, but it took a long time," says Dr. Hall, a stress and work-life balance expert and founder of The Stress Institute (www.thestress-institute.com) in Clarkesville, Ga.

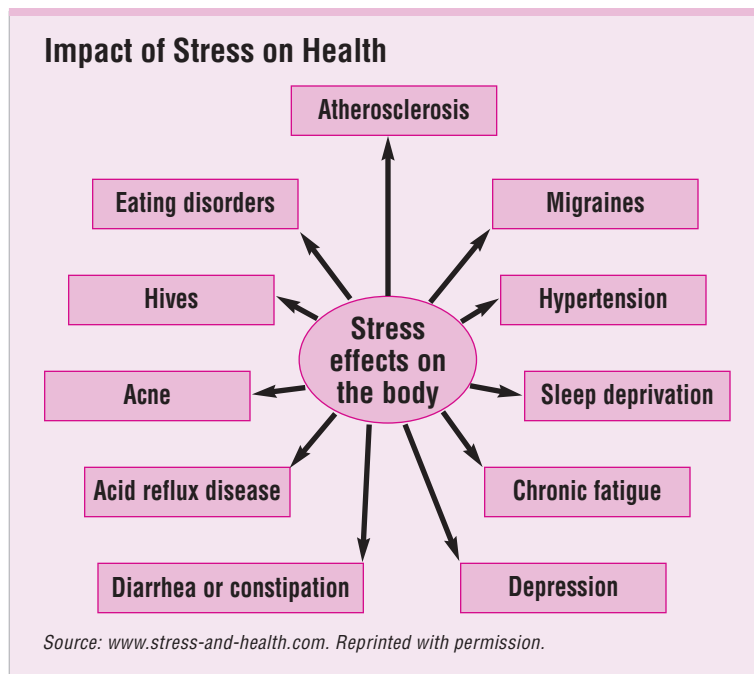
Ten to 15 years ago, she says, many physicians believed that stress was a "new age" concept and were skeptical about its effects on the human body. But now research has shown that stress can cause chemical changes in the body that can have a negative impact on people's mental and physical well-being. "High levels of stress contribute to health issues as diverse as depression, insomnia, heart disease, skin disorders and headaches," according to the Stress and Health Website (www.stress-and-health.com), sponsored by NCERx, a healthcare information and marketing firm based in Carlsbad, Calif.

Dr. Hall also cites a study that estimated that 75 percent to 90

percent of doctor visits are stress-related. Yet instead of turning to healthy alternatives, some physicians ignore their own stress and rely on alcohol, drugs or even serial marriages as a way out. They typically wind up in trouble with an ethics committee or find themselves on the other end of a lawsuit. That’s when they change. It’s not a matter of choice, she says, but of survival.

In the late 1990s, Dr. Hall worked for eight years as a facilitator for a cardiovascular, pulmonary and rehabilitation wellness program at the Habersham County Medical Center in Demorest, Ga. She promoted exercise, stress-reduction techniques, group support and proper nutrition to all of her patients, many of whom were physicians. But many were turned off by the approach and refused to participate.

So she relabeled the program SELF (Serenity, Exercise, Love and Food) Care. She says that people began to respond, partly because it piqued their curiosity. “It [offered] a different image, a different feel,” says Dr. Hall, author of *A Life in Balance: Nour-*



ishing the Four Roots of True Happiness (AMACOM, 2006). “It went through the heart instead of the brain.”

The program asks participants to conduct a self examination. For one week, they identify what feeds them, nourishes them and makes them feel authentic. Then they draw a line down the middle of a blank piece of paper. On one side, they list what irritates them and makes them angry. On the other, they write down what makes them laugh and what they enjoy about being a physician.

After doing his self-exam, one gastroenterologist discovered that he loved surgery, which was always scheduled in the mornings. But in the afternoons he saw patients, and he loathed conducting physicals and documenting patient histories.

“He was so angry that by 3 or 4 in the afternoon after listening to stories, he was almost insane,” recalls Dr. Hall. “We figured out different things for him to do in the afternoon.”

For instance, every Wednesday afternoon, he leaves the office for an hour-long massage. On other days, he takes 30-minute walks in the afternoon. She said that he feels completely different and is happier, calmer.

Another physician—a cardiologist—listens to 20-minute guided imagery tapes after seeing patients in the afternoon. The tapes totally center him, Dr. Hall says.

There are many simple stress-reduction techniques that physicians can practice between patients, Dr. Hall says, such as deep breathing from the diaphragm. “Your belly should be full when you’re breathing,” she explains. “When you exhale, it’s like pulling a string, pulling your belly back toward your spine.”

Often she encourages doctors to establish some type of ritual between patients, like taking three deep breaths while focusing on a three- to five-word phrase, such as “I am abundantly blessed” or “I experience great health and prosperity.” The power of such phrases is that within a short period of time, they can clear the brain and totally change an individual’s perceptions.

But ritual is not the same as habit. The difference, she says, is intent. Ritual demands mindfulness, attention and focus, while habit is simply performing the same steps over and over, which can raise stress levels for physicians. Since physicians are mostly left-brained, these phrases help doctors exercise their right brain, which is creativity.

Dr. Hall believes that many physicians have been stressed or angry for a long time and are not very happy people. To persuade the more stubborn ones to try such techniques, she plays by their rules and uses what they know and trust best: science.

She shares with them facts about how stress and stress-reduction techniques impact the human body. For example:

- Chronic stress can decrease your artery diameter by 35 percent.
- Laughing for just one minute can increase your artery diameter by 22 percent.
- Listening to music tremendously increases the level of serotonin—the healing hormone—in your body.
- Singing can increase your immunoglobulin A—a protein used by the immune system to fight disease—by 240 percent.
- When you perform between three and five minutes of any relaxation technique—such as deep breathing or meditation—the body switches to an alpha or resting state and produces serotonin.

“I give them a cafeteria [of solutions] so that even if they don’t listen to music in their office every day, they know they can laugh or sing, take some deep breaths,” Dr. Hall says. “They really don’t know the new science on stress. They’re so overwhelmed.”

Simply put, stress is a physiological reaction to an event that arouses us and is based on entering a new situation or one that we’ve tried before but haven’t been successful at, says Bill Gruchow, Ph.D, professor of public health education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

When we’re in such situations and don’t have an adequate coping mechanism, he says, our natural response is fight or flight. For most organisms—including humans—the most common response is avoidance, according to Dr. Gruchow. In other words, if you’re walking down the street and see someone you don’t want to talk to, you’ll turn the corner or cross the street. It’s perfectly natural to avoid unpleasant situations.

Stress enters the picture when we can’t avoid situations and don’t have coping mechanisms to deal with them, he says. Consider problems with a spouse or children. Unless you divorce your spouse or disown your children, you have to face the problem. So you have two choices: you can either learn how to avoid problems by maybe delegating stressful tasks to someone else or effectively deal with them, which can minimize your stress.

“Talk through what is particularly stressful, then find a way to develop coping mechanisms,” says Dr. Gruchow, adding that physicians can turn to self-help materials or professional counselors or learn from a role model.

Otherwise, you may begin to feel the effects of stress sometime down the road. Because long-term stress suppresses the immune system, he says, people become more susceptible to more serious health conditions like heart disease, cancer and high blood pressure.

The Stress and Health Website cites a 2003 Danish study that found that “middle-aged men who reported high levels of stress were twice as likely to suffer a fatal stroke compared with men who reported low stress levels. As little as one incident of stress a week doubled the chance of a stroke.”

But most people can't walk away from the two most important sources of stress: family and work. In fact, people work to be able to control their time and engage in loving relationships, which are the top two aspirations reported in a survey conducted by Dr. Gruchow. The third aspiration was spirituality.

He says that physicians invite stress into their lives when they set unrealistic expectations. They may be juggling too many tasks, seeing too many patients or even believing they can turn off their own feelings when delivering bad news to patients and their families. Whatever the scenario, they need to re-examine what else is important in their life, such as relationships. Despite their best intentions, physicians must realize they can't control everything and back off from feeling so

Early Warning Signs of Job Stress

- Headache.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Difficulty in concentrating.
- Short temper.
- Upset stomach.
- Job dissatisfaction.
- Low morale.

Source: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

stressed over situations they can't control and adjust their expectations, Dr. Gruchow says.

Between the Rocks

As both a physician and a licensed acupuncturist, Dr. Isaac Eliaz travels around the world to teach and learn medicine. When he visits hospitals outside the U.S., he says that he feels a great sense of freedom to practice the way medicine is meant to be practiced.

"I paid a visit to a [medical] center in China where doctors discussed cancer patients," says Dr. Eliaz, of Sebastopol, Calif. "In the U.S., everybody looks at a chart. There each doctor examines the patient thoroughly. An oncologist was there, a radiation oncologist was there, an acupuncturist was there. Each was allowed to give his own ideas, and a very creative protocol was created. This could never happen in the U.S."

In other countries like China, he says, there's no stress, pressure or frustrations over insurance companies or patients who threaten to sue. He believes that Western medicine has created a very unhealthy practice environment where physicians are not allowed to make honest or legitimate mistakes. Worse yet, he says, all of this pressure and stress leads to mediocre medicine.

"How you manage your own time, how you live your own life, is really where Western medicine is highly flawed, especially if you work in a hospital," he says. "Many doctors don't take the time to eat decently, walk or exercise. Many of them smoke, consume sugar, chocolate and candies. It's like eating poison. Would you like your patients to live the same life? You would say, 'No.' You're recommending things to other people that you're not doing yourself."

The way to relieve your stress depends upon how you're wired. For one doctor, it may be running. For another it may be listening to music or sitting in a quiet place, observing nature. It's very individualized, Dr. Eliaz says.

But there are many small things physicians can do to relieve stress, such as Shamata, a calming meditation. When waking in the morning, before you jump out of bed, relax and take a deep breath. Look at something that doesn't have a lot of meaning like a picture on the wall. Observe it for a few minutes and focus yourself, your breathing and your vision into this object.

Dr. Eliaz says that this is referred to as the three doors of consciousness: the door of the eyes, the door of the breath and the door of the mind. Whether you practice this for two minutes or 10 minutes, you feel a certain level of calmness. Then during your crazy day, repeat the meditation, even if it's for 30 seconds.

Then at bedtime, do something different. Remember your day. Were you kind to everybody? Did you help anybody? If so, rejoice. But if you had a conflict with someone, if something went wrong, regret it but don't feel guilty about it. Let it go. You'll do better tomorrow. This helps calm your mind, and you'll have a sense of becoming lighter.

It's very important to do this on a daily basis, Dr. Eliaz says, comparing meditation to learning to play an instrument—you'll be further ahead if you practice 10 minutes of meditation every day rather than eight hours once every two weeks.

"Find what makes you calmer," says Dr. Eliaz. "The reason we have all of this stimulation, why do we need it? We can't be quiet. We can't deal with ourselves. It's sad but we cannot. It's a profound point."

Now picture 10 rocks in front of you that are one foot apart. Rays of light are shining between them, or maybe beautiful flowers appear in the openings. Now imagine the same rocks, but this time, they're touching one another, preventing you from seeing between them. This is how many physicians function, he says. Your mind and thoughts are racing all the time, touching or running into each other. You're afraid to slow down. But through meditation, calmness occurs, and you start to have insight about what's between the rocks or what else is out there. If you start functioning like this, you can become more receptive to fresh thoughts and ideas even when you're busy.

At the end of his busy day, Dr. Eliaz says he's completely relaxed. Every patient he sees makes him more relaxed and happier. He explains that it's important to identify patients

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that you connect with early on or, as Buddhists ask, “Do we have karma together?” If there’s a click, then he knows he can affect this patient in a positive way—even his or her thinking process, philosophy and belief system. Otherwise, he says, patients you don’t click with will completely drain you and increase your stress.

“I’m at a place now where the right people come to me,” he says, adding that he turns down up to two patients each month. “About 80 percent have cancer. I get better at what I do when we click—good things happen. They come out of the [exam] room, they’re glowing and happy.”

So is his staff. He teaches his employees relaxation techniques and emphasizes every day how lucky they are to contribute to the health and lives of so many individuals. That also affects the energy of his clinic—it changes, gets progressively better as the day goes on, he says.

Dr. Eliaz, who has been meditating for more than 30 years, says he uses this connection with his patients as part of his meditation. So when he sees patients at his clinic, his medical advice comes from a state of relaxation, instead of tight or rigid analysis. This deep intuition is much more powerful because it pene-

One-Minute Yoga

The next time you’re stressed out at work, feel totally drained or notice that your muscles have tensed up, do these simple yoga exercises in your office before calling in your next patient or making that important phone call. Take these one- to two-minute breaks as often as time permits, says Vijai Sharma, a psychologist in Cleveland, Tenn.

■ **Squeeze and release.** In a sitting or standing position, take a deep breath. While holding your breath, tense your body starting from your toes to your legs, abdomen, then all the way up to your neck and head. While exhaling, start relaxing your head, neck and face all the way down to your toes.

■ **Activate the diaphragm.** In a sitting or standing position, purse your lips as if you are whistling or kissing a baby. While exhaling progressively, contract the muscles of the pelvis, lower abdomen and upper abdomen until you have completely exhaled. Then start inhaling from your nose, filling in the chest, upper abdomen, lower abdomen, all the

trates the patient and creates a more profound change. This is how wisdom enters—between the rocks, he says.

Healing Through Exercise

Dr. Al Yurvati made changes to his life and health through exercise. He was feeling a lot of muscle, back and neck discomfort, which he attributed to the stress of juggling multiple jobs and standing hunched over patients for hours during surgery. Dr. Yurvati holds four different positions and works an estimated 70 hours each week. Besides being a cardiovascular thoracic surgeon at the University of North Texas Health Science Center in Fort Worth, he also teaches medical students and residents, chairs the department of surgery at the university and is a faculty member in the department of integrated physiology in the school of biomedical sciences.

At the age of 49, Dr. Yurvati started working out one day each week at the local gym, concentrating on strengthening his back. He began seeing some interesting results. One day quickly turned into three, then sometimes four days a week.

He wakes at 4:30 a.m. and is at the gym one hour later. His routine is to perform 30 minutes of cardio exercise, then one hour

way down to your pelvis. Each time you repeat this exercise, work on lengthening the exhalation and deepening the inhalation.

■ **Push problems away.** Stand about three feet away from a wall or your desk, then bend at the waist and press your palms against the wall or desk, keeping the back, neck and head in a straight line. Slowly inhale and fill your lungs. While exhaling, push against the wall or the desk and visualize pushing away your problems.

■ **Loosen tension.** Bring your arms close to your body. Roll your shoulders in a clockwise motion 10 times, then counterclockwise 10 times. Gently tilt your head backwards, squeezing the neck muscles, then bring your chin towards your chest. Repeat 10 times.

■ **Breathe deeply.** Close your hands in a fist and bring them to the middle of your chest. Breathe in deeply while extending your arms out to your side. As you slowly exhale, bring your hands back to the middle of your chest. Repeat this a few times.

of weight training. He says his posture has improved, his back discomfort has disappeared and he doesn't catch as many colds in the winter as he did in the past. What's more, he says he's able to "better rebound" from stressful situations at work.

Some of his colleagues often wonder how he squeezes exercising into his busy schedule. His standard response is if you don't take time out for yourself, no one will give it to you. It requires some discipline, but once you get started and realize the benefits of exercise and how good it makes you feel, you're going to think you should have started exercising a long time ago.

In addition to exercise Dr. Yurvati uses other stress-reducing techniques. For example, in stressful situations, he walks into his office, closes the door and lies down for several minutes on a big leather couch in his office. He closes his eyes, shuts out everything and recharges. And when he vacations with his wife, it's real time off, not a vacation that's associated with a conference or seminar.

"We're supposed to be the examples for our patients," Dr. Yurvati says. "So how can you stand there being stressed out, overweight, not taking care of yourself and getting on your patients to do what you tell them to do when you're not doing it yourself?"

Vijai P. Sharma, Ph.D., an advanced yoga instructor and clinical psychologist in Cleveland, Tenn., believes there are many misconceptions about stress and relaxation. His Website (www.mindpub.com) contains hundreds of articles on self-help topics ranging from stress management to parenting, along with a message board and links to other health-related Websites.

In one article, he says that many people have been habitually tense for most of their lives. They are unaware of it and carry tension or stress with them day and night. But if asked, "Are you tense?" they would shake their head no. He explains that a tense state is all they know—they have nothing to compare it with. Still, many people refuse even to try relaxation techniques, saying they have no time.

Others don't want to be labeled as weak, believing they should be able to handle whatever is thrown their way. As Dr. Sharma states in another article, "Let's promote the idea that stress management is a skill, a complex skill, like the juggling skill. Now, if you could juggle 10 balls at a time, would you be embarrassed

about your juggling?”

Relaxation techniques can take many forms—exercise, deep breathing, hot baths, reading Scriptures or “mental trips” to a favorite beach or mountain retreat. There isn’t one right way for everyone. Dr. Sharma, for instance, takes 20- to 30-minute walks three times a week and performs at least 30 minutes of yoga each day. Between patients, he also keeps his door closed, inhales, takes a deep breath and then exhales to squeeze out the tension from his body and mind. He compares it to squeezing out the water in a wet towel. Other times, he’ll remain in one position, stretching the muscles on different parts of his body.

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Whatever yoga stretch you do, you must bring your mind into your body. Dr. Sharma says that yoga is not like any other exercise where you can jump up and down and let your mind run someplace else.

“All emotions affect breathing,” he says. “You are getting mental control over breathing and directing the flow of the breath in a specific direction. It’s great for concentration and censoring your mind, which can be scattered with all different kinds of medical calls and patient work that you can be doing.”

Dr. Sharma believes that most stress is self-manufactured. “It is estimated that only 5 percent of our worries have a realistic basis and the remaining 95 percent are unfounded fears, self-created monsters as we overestimate the possible negative consequences of events in our lives and underestimate our capacities to deal with them,” he says.

Dr. Sharma advises physicians to remember three important principles. The first is that they are entitled to take breaks or time off for their own personal care. The last two involve the rules of stress management that were created by another stress expert. “Rule number one: Do not sweat the small stuff,” he says. “Rule number two: 99.99 percent is small stuff.”

All Work and No Play

Here's a true story about a man who worked long hours in a high-stress, demanding job. While he was flying from a client to a conference, he said to himself, "If this plane crashed, I wouldn't have to go to this conference." Then the light bulb went on. He was amazed that he was entertaining the thought of a plane crash so he could get some relief from his hectic schedule.

The man then began to examine his life, says Jim Bird, president at WorkLifeBalance.com, a training and development firm in Norcross, Ga. Suddenly, Mr. Bird says, he realized he was becoming less and less effective in his performance and wanted

Sing a Song

If music helps you de-stress, try rapping this tune, written by Mark Gorkin, a licensed clinical social worker in Kensington, Md., who is also known as the "Stress Doc" (www.stressdoc.com).

When it comes to feelings do you stuff them inside?
Is tough John Wayne your emotional guide?
And it's not just men so proud and tight-lipped.
For every Rambo there seems to be a Rambette.

So you give up sleep, become wired and spent
Escape lonely frustration as a mall-content.
It's time to look at your style of stress.
You just can't dress or undress for success.

Are you grouchy with colleagues or quietly mean?
Hell, you'd rather talk to your computer machine.
When the telephone rings, you're under the gun.
Now you could reach out and really crush someone.

The boss demands yet gives little control.
So you prey on chocolate and wish life were dull, but
Office desk's a mess, often skipping meals.
Inside your car looks like a pocketbook on wheels.

Those patients, patients...all that aggravation
Whew, you only have time for procrastination.
Now I made you feel guilty, you want to confess
Better you should practice the art of "Safe Stress."

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to gain more value out of life.

“The big choice for folks and physicians is are they going to be around to give maximum value for their patients and themselves over a lifetime, or are they going to deliver maybe a slightly higher percentage short term but not be able to deliver over the long term because they either quit or because the stress made them less effective,” he says.

Although Mr. Bird’s story may hit home with some physicians, he says, others respond to the following question that he often poses to people in live audiences: What happens to you if you don’t play enough in life?

He says the answers come very quickly. You get stressed out. You get tense. You get burned out.

Then he asks if it has an impact on anyone around you. Once again, the answers flow. Your kids don’t want to be around you anymore. Others start avoiding you because you’re always tense. Communication breaks down. Trust breaks down.

When communication and trust deteriorate, he says, physicians begin losing a lot of value that they deliver to their patients.

One of the solutions for stress and work-life balance that he addresses is play, which some people confuse with “action time.” He says that the distinction between the two can be compared to the difference between a meeting and a date.

For example, if you and your spouse enjoy a candlelight dinner one evening and discuss plumbing problems or how you’re going to pay off your high credit-card balance, is that play? Or maybe you’re playing golf with your colleague on a beautiful golf course surrounded by pine-tree-covered mountains and talk about important work-related topics. Is that play?

Absolutely not, says Mr. Bird. Instead of play, he says, you’ve turned a relaxed fun time into a meeting because you brought up topics that require action or decisions. Often, he says, people believe they’re having fun or play time, when in fact they’re having meetings and are getting none of the stress relief that play offers.

But don’t confuse play with achievement. Taking pride in one’s work or accomplishing a big task is very important, but it’s still not play, Mr. Bird says. “Achievement and enjoyment are on opposite sides of the coin of value of life,” he says, explaining that physicians need both. “If you try to go through life with only

a one-sided coin, poof, the value disappears. Some folks assume that if they get professional success, the enjoyment will come. They're wrong. It doesn't happen automatically. You consciously have to make that a value in your life."

Physicians need to adopt the goal of achieving and enjoying something every day, Mr. Bird says. If they do that, they'll have a pretty good day. If they do that every day for the rest of their lives, chances are they're going to have a pretty good life, he says, explaining that getting a little enjoyment every day is a tremendous stress reliever.

In addition to play, Mr. Bird advises physicians to adopt good habits in order to control stress. Although every human being is born with an almost identical set of genes, he says that stress levels are determined by which genes are turned on or off. What turns genes on or off is your exposure to things, either physical or mental. Physical exposure is what you expose your body to, such as the types of food you eat or the amount of hours you sleep each night. Mental exposure is basically your thoughts. So devel-

Control Stress With Positive Thinking

While stress is part of everyday living, do you know how to manage it? Jim Bird, president of WorkLifeBalance.com, offers some tips:

- **Train your brain to focus on what can go right, not what can go wrong.** This is a great habit that you can develop with practice. As soon as you catch yourself thinking why you can't do something, why it won't work or why it's going to be so hard, stop yourself. Then force yourself to first think about why you can do it, why it will work and why it should be fairly easy to do. Physiologically, you are using and training a different part of your brain to produce more positive results.
- **Mentally celebrate your little and big successes when they happen.** Also dwell a little on the pleasant events, people or objects that are part of your day. It could be someone's beautiful smile or a great cup of coffee. Life is wonderful. Focus on the wonder.
- **Learn from negatives but do not dwell on them.** When they occur, think about why they occurred and how to avoid them in the future. But once done, that's it. Move on. Do not train your brain to activate the wrong switches by wallowing in negatives.
- **Notice things to smile about.** When you feel stressed, pause and think about something that makes you smile.

oping simple habits like getting enough sleep, thinking positive or relaxing thoughts, or avoiding heavy meals several hours before you go to sleep and limiting the amount of alcohol you consume can turn on stress-controlling genes.

Whichever stress-reduction method you practice, it must have meaning for you, adds Kathy Lingle, director of Alliance for Work-Life Progress in Scottsdale, Ariz. She says everyone—whether you're a physician or not—must have some type of daily ritual he or she can rely on to decompress.

Friends and relationships can also help. But sometimes, when you're stressed and busy, she says, people tend to give up or ignore their friends and family, which is a big mistake. "We're human," Ms.

Lingle says. "Our people networks are really of primary importance. At some point, our company may let us go, other things happen in our lives, but your friends [and family] are constant. You need to stay with what keeps you grounded."

Another cause of stress is assuming too many tasks. She says physicians need to become realistic about what they can handle.

She tells the story of her husband's friend who owned a very small but highly successful restaurant. When asked why he doesn't expand, he replied, "I've only got so big a kitchen. What other restaurants do and then they kind of fall apart is trying to cook twice as many meals, get twice as many people in. Their food isn't so good and people stop coming."

Do you know of any patients who have stopped coming to your practice? Decide how much is enough and stick to it, she says. Then as you go through different phases of your life and career, re-establish your priorities. Don't expect to tackle everything put in front of you. Do what's important for you, which will help reduce your stress.

But some physicians wait until it's too late. Their performance begins to suffer. Their marriage is on the rocks. Their relationship with their children and other family members is strained.

Physicians need to adopt the goal of achieving and enjoying something every day, says Jim Bird, president at WorkLifeBalance.com. If they do that every day for the rest of their lives, chances are they're going to have a pretty good life, he says, explaining that getting a little enjoyment every day is a tremendous stress reliever.

“Doctors are supposed to fix everybody and have all the answers,” says Ms. Lingle. “That’s what the world expects of them, but it’s an unattainable role. They’re probably people who don’t ask for help early enough. It’s very hard if you’re the caregiver to ask for care.”

Consider the Committee for Physician Health, which is part of the Medical Society of the State of New York. Every year, it adds 60 to 100 physicians who are in need of help to its caseload of 500 to 600 active doctors, says Pamela A. Granda, senior associate director and licensed social worker at the medical society.

She says that physicians often feel that they’re not entitled to own or express negative or uncomfortable emotions, such as anger, sadness or fear. So when physicians enter therapy, she and others help them to identify and express these emotions, then learn how to cope with them.

About two years ago, a female obstetrician-gynecologist entered the program because of her disruptive behavior, recalls Ms. Granda, whose caseload consists of 80 physicians. She was acting out in the operating room and in other places at the hospital. She would become angry with staff, lose her temper and be abrupt or disrespectful in the way she communicated with them.

Laugh a Little

Ever poke fun at yourself? Ever do something silly at work? Humor is good medicine and a powerful remedy for stress, says Mark Gorkin, a licensed clinical social worker in Kensington, Md. “Seek the higher power of humor,” says Mr. Gorkin. “May the farce be with you.”

Here are several ways you can invite humor into your office:

- Arm your employees who are attending a meeting with a squeeze doll or animal that makes a whining, bleating or growling sound as a way of raising an objection or point of disagreement.
- Try your hand at writing or telling stories about your most embarrassing moments.
- Learn to reframe reality. For example, upon turning 75, Edmund Rosstand, the French dramatist and poet, gazed into a mirror and opined: “Mirrors just aren’t what they used to be.”
- Take humor breaks. Mr. Gorkin, for instance, enjoys reading Calvin and Hobbes and The Far Side comic collections.

The hospital asked the medical society to contact the physician. The first step was for her to get evaluated, which is usually performed by a psychiatrist with an outpatient practice. However, the doctor was already receiving psychotherapy because she was struggling with many situational stressors and was also diagnosed with depression. Still, Ms. Granda says, the physician needed to be aware that her problems outside of work were overflowing into her professional life and that she was acting inappropriately.

As the story goes, the physician was completely responsible for her mother, who was very ill. After her mother died, she and her brother began arguing about their mother's assets. Meanwhile, her adopted teenage daughter was exhibiting some behavioral problems. Several years before, her other brother had suddenly died in a car accident. So within a short period of time, she had many stressors.

"She was a very private person and was a real hero type," says Ms. Granda. "She was a typical physician—she thought she could take care of everything herself, but she wasn't taking care of herself."

Ms. Granda believed that the doctor needed more therapy than she was receiving and suspected she was not taking any of the medicine that was prescribed for her. After talking with her psychiatrist, they worked out a treatment plan requiring the physician to attend more therapy sessions and take her medicine on a routine basis. Since then, says Ms. Granda, the doctor appears more positive, less stressed. So far, there haven't been any more hospital reports about her behavioral problems.

Other times, she says, physicians wind up in trouble because they sleep, eat and talk medicine and leave little room for anything or anyone else. Those who enter some type of rehabilitation and recovery program are strongly encouraged to create time for themselves, family and friends, Ms. Granda says. When doctors retire, she says, the ones who handle the transition best are those with hobbies or other interests outside of medicine.

Doctors need to learn how to ask for help and engage the support of those around them, Ms. Granda says. "They aren't expected to solve all of their own life's problems," she says. "I would like to say to doctors, 'Heal thyself first.' You have to take care of yourself if you're going to help others."