Stress Management: A MindBody Approach

by Ann Marie Blanco, MS, OTR, Reflexologist, Reiki Volunteer

As part of a continuing series, the Dept. of Integrative Medicine will provide ongoing updates on various complementary therapies and program expansion.

The stress response, also called the flight-or-flight response, is a profound set of involuntary physiological changes that occur whenever we are faced with a stressful or threatening situation. Those physiological changes include increases in heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and muscle tension. It has been found that long-term effects of the stress response may lead to permanent, harmful changes in our physiology. It is important to find ways to control these harmful effects and to neutralize the negative effects of stress on our health and well being.

Through research conducted at the Mind/Body Medical Institute, Herbert Benson, MD, and his colleagues have found that mind/body medicine offers methods that counteract the stress response. By quieting the mind, we quiet our physiology, thus returning to a state of balance or homeostasis. There are many methods through which we can use our minds to change our physiology in order to promote health. Dr. Benson has coined the term "relaxation response" (RR) to describe the positive physiological changes that occur by practicing relaxation techniques. When our mind is focused, our body becomes quieter, resulting in a decrease in heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate and muscle tension (the opposite of the stress response).

The most frequently used technique to elicit the RR is focused breathing. When performed daily for 15-20 minutes, and often, when combined with other mind/body interventions, not only is there an immediate positive physiological response, there are also long-term health benefits. These include:

- decrease in stress-related physical symptoms (headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, etc.);
- improved sleep;
- increase in concentration;
- decrease in the symptoms of PMS and menopause;
- and much more.

When performed for shorter intervals, a "mini" RR can instantaneously break the vicious cycle of tension and anxiety. We can then face our stresses with a clearer and calmer mind, making more effective decisions.

There are numerous techniques to elicit the RR. They include: meditation, diaphragmatic breathing, guided imagery, Yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, and progressive muscle relaxation. The departments of Integrative Medicine and Pastoral Services offer guided imagery for patients who are interested in utilizing a mind/body technique during their hospitalization for stress management. Contact the Pastoral Services at 5452251 for further information.

A Mind/Body Health Program is also offered at The Hartford Medical Group locations in Avon, Wethersfield and Windsor. For information, call 545-7188 extension 77051.

Given the stresses, strains and incessant changes of our modern world, mind/body medicine is more important now than ever. By tapping into the mind/body connection, we can once again learn to seize control of our health and well being. To Elicit the Relaxation Response: O sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed and your muscles relaxed; O breathe slowly and naturally, bringing your focus to the rise and fall of your abdomen as you inhale and exhale; O when thoughts, sounds or sensations distract you, simply note that your mind has wandered; O passively ignore the distraction and gently bring your focus back to your breath.

Reference Benson, Herbert, M.D. *The Relaxation Response.* New York: William Morrow, 1975.