

Understanding and Managing Stress – A discussion with Dr. Michael Baker

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The volatility in the stock markets and the uncertainty in the job markets have caused many Canadians to worry, in some cases to a point where it may be affecting their health. The fear of being out of work and not being able to sustain a certain lifestyle is having a dramatic impact on the personal lives of many Canadians. These growing concerns can translate into increased levels of stress among the Canadian population. The BMO Wealth Institute spoke to Dr. Michael Baker about helping Canadians understand and manage stress. Dr. Michael Baker is a professor of Medicine at the University of Toronto. Stress is defined as a mental/emotional tension or a strain characterized by abnormal feelings of anxiety and fear. Dr. Baker considers stress as a human reaction to external influences that affect an individual mentally and/or physically. Although stress can be a predictor of future health concerns that could be permanently damaging, it is primarily seen as a negative side effect of life in society today.

BMO: What are the main signs and symptoms of stress? How does one know if they are feeling stressed?

Dr. MB: People who are feeling a great deal of stress are usually well aware of it, but this is not always true. Someone who understands their emotions may say that they are feeling stressed, anxious, and upset; but many patients come to doctors with “somatic” or physical symptoms that are really stress induced without necessarily realizing that these are caused by stress. Stomach pains or bowel disorders are very commonly related to stress, and the patient who feels that they are getting an ulcer or another gastrointestinal disorder may in fact discover that it is a stress related symptom. There are other types of personal issues. Sexual relationships are often impacted by worries and feeling of stress. A physical examination may reveal that patients who are already on high blood pressure medication suddenly no longer seem to be controlling their blood pressure. Stress affects our entire system as it interacts with both our emotional and physical health (i.e. depression, inability to sleep may be related to anxiety, weight loss or gain is led by a change in eating habits, people with dependents to support may increase smoking/ drinking as an attempt to control this feeling). Other physical ailments may be stress induced or worsened by stress, such as arthritis and heart disease. It is a little harder to make the connection but it can manifest that way.

BMO: Why is it so important to treat stress and are there lasting effects?

Dr. MB: Stress can cause a great deal of damage, some of which can be permanent. We need to prevent and control physical ailments such as heart attack and strokes by recognizing symptoms such as increased blood pressure, stomach pains, and sleeplessness as they can be harmful to our well being and should be controlled.

BMO: How does our stress at work affect our families and our personal lives?

Dr. MB: The stress that people feel at work that leads to so much anxiety and tension can cause disruptions at home. A common problem is our need to keep constantly in touch via a blackberry or laptop computer. A high level of stress in business may pressure the affected person to try to be more in touch, which can lead to family isolation and feelings of resentment. I suggest sitting down with family members and negotiating time together so that relationships with friends and family are maintained. Having “compartmentalized” time to deal with business issues can be a successful way to maintain relationships. It is hard to maintain personal interests and activities outside of work if you are worried about losing your job or whether you will have enough money to meet your needs over the next few weeks or months.

BMO: How can we cope with stress ourselves and how can we help a family member or friend currently coping with stress?

Dr. MB: A very important aid to managing stress is the plain old fashioned technique of talking about a problem and sharing it with someone such as a mentor, family member, trusted friend, clergyman, counsellor. It may be necessary to do this away from work. Taking time off is an excellent stress management tool. You can help others by offering to talk about it with them. Ask them if there is something proactive that you could do to improve their situation. Take the person out for a coffee or lunch to discuss. Help them separate the external stress inducing perception of failure from the objectivity of how the person actually performs.

BMO: There are many lifestyle changes we can adopt to help manage our stress, but what other options are there if the lifestyle changes aren't helpful?

Dr. MB: In some very specific cases, medication may be helpful, when administered under a medical doctor's supervision. Many medical issues such as stomach ulcer, blood pressure control, chest pains, heart disease, bowel disorders or skin condition can be stress related and have medical treatments that are highly effective even if they are used only temporarily during the period of stress. It is important to consult a doctor with respect to any individual circumstances and to avoid self-diagnosis or self-medication.

BMO: If a person chooses to use medication on their doctor's advice, would this be used as a temporary measure or would it lead to longer term use?

Dr. MB: I would assume that most people, particularly in the current economic environment, that have run into major stress-inducing conditions will sooner or later stop taking the medication. I do believe that this stressful period, as with most stressful periods, will be time limited and will come to an end. Therefore, the medication whether it is the non-specific medication for anxiety, depression and sleeplessness or the specific medication for ulcers, blood pressure and heart disease and so on, may in some cases be used temporarily.

BMO: Do you have any final concluding remarks on understanding and managing stress?

Dr. MB: To the person who feels that stress has overtaken their lives and is feeling alone: stress is common – everyone experiences some level of stress on a daily basis. There are no stress-free environments. These are challenging times in which stress levels have increased. There are ways to manage stress, and people you can talk to about your feelings. Consult with a physician if you have physical symptoms. Take comfort that stress can be managed and things will get better.

Stress is simply a fact of nature; our daily lives are full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. Too much stress can cause serious health concerns. Stress can be managed; you can protect yourself by learning how to recognize the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

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