



Michele Wood, manager of the Spirit of Women program, displays the special glasses fitted with gentle light pulses that her clients wear during the Creative Visualization and Relaxation. - Frank Espich / The Star

November 18, 2008

Cope with chaos

Experts suggest ways to keep life's pressures from overwhelming you

By Barb Berggoetz
barb.berggoetz@indystar.com

Opening your 401(k) statement is a rude awakening these days. Reading about stock market dives, layoffs, rising bankruptcies and home foreclosures is chilling. And experiencing any of them firsthand can be life-altering.

The stress could lead to serious health issues, such as high blood pressure, but mental-health experts say you can learn coping skills to fight anything that may be tying your stomach in knots.

"We tell people to pause, but don't panic," said Dr. Nancy Molitor, a practicing clinical psychologist near Chicago. "You're going to have to get adjusted to a potentially new lifestyle. This is going to be a marathon, not a sprint."

People can learn to relax physically and mentally. They can avoid immersing themselves in the 24-hour news cycle. They can be proactive, adjusting budgets and seeing credit counselors. And they can focus on positives.

Locally and nationally, counselors and helplines report more calls and clients, and more intense stress due to the economy.

"Almost everybody we see has a concern about finances now," said Kimble Richardson, a mental-health counselor at St. Vincent Stress Center.

While a healthful diet and plenty of exercise and sleep are key stress-relievers, sometimes they're not enough. One innovative method, offered by St. Francis Hospital's Spirit of Women program, engages the brain to relax the body, using sight and sound together.

Lying back in an easy chair, patients wear glasses that relay gentle strobe-light pulses that penetrate your closed eyelids and cause the pituitary gland to release more mood-elevating serotonin. Through earphones, meanwhile, patients hear calming tones, lilting music and an instructor's voice.

This behavioral modification method uses guided imagery, positive thoughts and verbal cues to put a person into a deep state of relaxation. Modules can help reduce stress, lose weight, stop smoking, soothe pain or deal with other issues.

"You're in your own world," said Joanne Benedict, a nurse manager from Bargersville, before a recent session at St. Francis. "You're focusing on yourself, and the craziness outside is shut out."

She uses Creative Visualization and Relaxation, developed by California-based New Reality, periodically when feeling stressed. Last December, as she awaited a hysterectomy, she used a pre-operative module to relieve anxiety caused by a previous painful surgery.

The module "had this calming effect on me," Benedict said, adding she didn't need pain medication after the hysterectomy. "It has a lingering effect, too, as you remember what it tells you."

Michele Wood, manager of Women's Health at St. Francis, said the 20-minute sessions can help to slow heart rates, improve sleep and healing, and reduce the need for pain medication. The hospital uses it for cardiac and pain-clinic patients, and offers it to the public for a fee.

"With all the stress here with unemployment, we felt this was important to do," Wood said.

High stress levels don't hit only those who've already gone bankrupt or lost jobs.

"We are hearing more from people under the threat of losing homes or jobs," said Elizabeth Boyle, crisis line director of Mental Health America of Greater Indianapolis.

Rather than just worrying about the future, she says, it's best to prepare for the unexpected. If your company faces layoffs, Boyle suggests networking and sending out resumes.

"Surround yourself with supportive people and those who won't drag you down," she said.

Part of the problem, experts say, is that inner dialog focusing on what could go awry.

"You can learn to escape those negative, anxiety-provoking thoughts," said Thomas Lamb, a retired licensed therapist and former assistant professor with the Indiana University School of Medicine.

His theory: If we think the economic world is collapsing and it will ruin us, that thought becomes reality. But if we recognize that we'll survive, the body and psyche benefit, and we become empowered to find solutions.

Based on techniques developed by a Harvard University cardiologist, Lamb created a "Relax Deeply" CD (www.relaxwiththomas.com), available at local hospitals. The CD uses progressive relaxation, body imagery and ego-strengthening methods.

Dr. Michael Finkelstein, a New York internist and director of the holistic healing and living center SunRaven, espouses a step-by-step approach to making life changes. Break down what you want to accomplish, pick one thing and do it well, so you'll feel energized, he says.

One technique? Take a 10-minute walk each morning, identify five beautiful things, write them down, and think of them during the day.

"It doesn't change the problem, but you can learn to shift your attention away from something painful to something beautiful."

People who cope best are those who stay optimistic while taking steps to deal with finances, says Geoffrey Fortner, psychiatry department chairman at Community Health Network.

Additional Facts

How stressed are Americans?

Here are the results of the national Stress in America 2008 survey, conducted by the American Psychological Association and released in October.

Eight out of 10 say the economy is a significant cause of stress, up from 66 percent in April.

Boomer women, ages 44 to 62, and those 63 and older are most likely to report the economy as a major stressor.

Women more often than men report unhealthy behaviors to manage stress: eating poorly (56 percent vs. 40 percent), napping (43 percent vs. 32 percent), or shopping (25 percent vs. 11 percent).

More people report physical and emotional symptoms due to stress: irritability or anger (60 percent vs. 50 percent in 2007), lying awake at night (52 percent vs. 48 percent in 2007) and fatigue (53 percent vs. 51 percent in 2007).

Nuts and bolts on stress relief

What: Creative Visualization and Relaxation, a behavioral modification program designed to produce deep relaxation, reduce stress, improve concentration, stop negative habits.

Where: Created by California-based New Reality and offered by St. Francis Hospital Spirit of Women program, 8111 S. Emerson Ave., Room 4002, and other medical sites nationally.

How: Increases blood flow to the brain, serotonin levels that calm you and endorphins that make you feel good.

Cost: Monthly memberships to Visualization Station (unlimited 20-minute sessions) at St. Francis are \$35 for public; St. Francis offers Personal Achievement Device home unit for \$350 (\$600 online at www.newreality.com).

Information: Call (317) 865-5865.
