

**HEALTHY MINDS**  
**A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS**  
**Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC**

**Stress**



According to a recent study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, taken from data collected over eleven years from over 1.2 million people, Kentuckians are the most stressed residents in the entire United States. (At the other end – the least stressed – are Hawaiians). The low income, the poor economy including job loss, a large amount of disease and disabilities (particularly diabetes), a high incarceration rate, and other stressful life events are behind these disturbing trends, which generally affect Appalachia and the Mississippi Valley.

Frequent mental distress means having 14 days or more in the previous month where one has experienced stress, depression or other emotional problems. These studies, compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) showed that 14.4% of the people of Kentucky had frequent mental distress, compared to the national average of 9.4% or the low of 6.6% in Hawaii.

The main causes of stress usually happen on a daily basis, including difficulties in family and personal relationships, problems with children, having too many responsibilities on your plate, problems at work, or general financial woes. Sometimes you will feel calm one moment and then suddenly become quickly agitated and anxious. Several ways to calm yourself area:

Go for a walk, for it will not only calm you down by producing natural endorphins in your body (stress relievers), but provide the helpful benefit of exercise.

Take a deep breath, or a series of deep breaths. You will fill your body with oxygen, slow down your heart rate and release physical tension. Try it right now. It really works.

Take a mental break. Close your eyes and think about your favorite peaceful location: the beach, the woods, a field full of flowers, a flowing creek, or a sky full of stars, to mention just a few. Imagine you are there. You may even combine this with some deep breathing.

Another way is to reexamine your situation and try to put a more positive spin on the tasks or events that you have to face. Turn lemons into lemonade. Find the positive lesson within the unpleasant situation. Sometimes we sabotage ourselves by looking at the worst instead of at the best. These are not just words, but they work better than medications, drugs, or alcohol; furthermore they are free, don't have harmful side-effects, and won't land you in the pokey.

Another practice is called Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR); it is easy to learn and can relieve tension and stress in short order. It just takes a few minutes. Here's how: (1) Find a quiet place and sit or lie down in a comfortable position; (2) Tense up all of your face muscles – scrunch them up into a firm grimace. Keep your eyes tightly shut, your teeth clenched together and hold it as you inhale slowly for about ten seconds; (3) Now exhale slowly as you let your facial muscles relax completely and feel the tension leave those muscles; (4) Do the same thing with your neck and shoulders, inhaling slowly and counting to ten, then exhaling slowly and relaxing; (5) Do the same thing with your chest; (6) Abdomen; (7) Right arm, then left arm; (8) Right then left forearm and hand (make a fist); (9) Buttocks; (10) Entire right, then left leg and foot.

Using these techniques you will lower your stress and help yourselves and our Commonwealth to stop stressing out so much.

**TIP OF THE WEEK:** The old Reader's Digest has a section in every issue called "Laughter Is the Best Medicine". Research has shown that energetic laughter every day could help diabetics improve their cholesterol level and lower their risk of heart attack. Serious laughter actually reduces some of our "bad" chemicals (like "bad" cholesterol), and increases our good ones. Setting aside time each day for some good, hearty laughter could help diabetics as well.