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New Developments in Stress Reduction Has Positive Effects on Physical and Mental Health

A substantial body of research has accumulated in recent years which demonstrates that stress plays an important role in the development and maintenance of several health disorders.

In fact, recent estimates suggest that up to 60 percent of physical complaints seen by primary care physicians are stress related (American Journal of Medicine, 86, 1989). Some of these common health complaints include gastrointestinal disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease; cardiovascular disorders such as essential hypertension, angina and myocardial infarction; insomnia and other sleep disorders; migraine and tension headache; chronic pain syndromes; and mental health problems such as generalized anxiety, panic attacks and depression.

The mechanism by which stress impacts health is complex. However, research generally supports the view that stress can lead to repeated or chronic activation of the body's "fight or flight" response which results in elevated blood pressure, heart rate, metabolism and muscle tension, and decreased gastrointestinal and immune functioning. This stress response interacts with the individual's genetic predisposition for disease creating a serious health problem. Stress then contributes to the maintenance of the disease by keeping the body's physiology

at a level which prevents it from returning to a state of health.

Stress reduction techniques have been developed to help the patient "turn off" the fight or flight response thus allowing the body's physiology to return to a state of equilibrium. This relaxation response then allows the body, with the help of medical intervention, to return to a state of health.

Comprehensive stress reduction and relaxation programs have been developed specifically for patients with stress-related health disorders. These programs teach patients various methods for eliciting the relaxation response. Research has shown that not only do these techniques bring on a state of intense relaxation, but individuals who use the methods on a regular basis also lower their physiological reactivity to stress. In other words, patients build immunity to stress!

Several studies have established stress reduction and relaxation programs as effective adjuncts in the treatment of many health disorders. Generally, this research has shown that patients who participate in a stress reduction program in addition to medical treatment show a greater improvement in health than patients who receive medical treatment alone. For

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example, following participation in a stress reduction and relaxation program:

- Patients with chronic pain experienced a 33% reduction in pain, 30% reduction in disability, and 55% improvement in mood (*Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 8, 1982 pp 163-190). Most of the patients in this study maintained these gains when assessed during a four year follow up (*Clinical Journal of Pain*, 2, 1986, pp 159-173).

- Patients with essential hypertension experienced clinically significant reductions in systolic and diastolic blood pressure and required less medication over a 3 year measurement period (*Journal of Cardiovascular Nursing*, 1, 1987, pp 1-14).

- Seventy-five per cent of patients with sleep onset insomnia were completely free of symptoms by the end of a stress reduction program, and sleeping improved somewhat for the remaining 25 percent of participants (*Behavior Modification*, 7, 1993, pp 498-509).

- Patients with cardiac arrhythmias experienced a 25% reduction in symptoms (*Lancet*, 2, 1975, pp 380-382).

- Migraine and cluster headache sufferers experienced fewer and less severe headaches and required less medication by the end of a stress reduction program (*Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 9, 1986, pp 291-323).

As part of a comprehensive treatment package, a stress reduction and relaxation program has a demonstrated ability to help patients manage symptoms of several health related disorders. These programs help patients to become an active participant in improving their physical and psychological well-being. For these patients, a referral to a psychologist who specializes in the psychological treatment of stress-related health disorders would be beneficial.