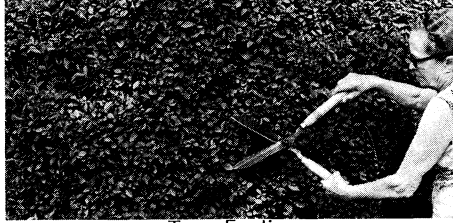
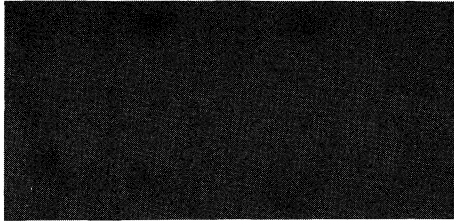
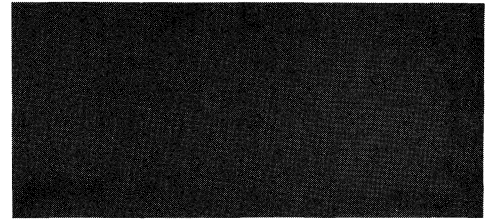


Combatting Stress: Mental and Physical Health

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Lutte contre le stress: santé physique et mentale

Au moyen de conditionnement physique, de bonne nutrition, de thérapie de relaxation et de changements d'attitudes les auteurs suggèrent des façons de réduire les effets débilissants du stress.

This article discusses the necessary tools required by women to combat the many stresses that they experience in day to day living. It suggests a physical plan of fitness training and nutritious eating and also discusses relaxation techniques which most people could teach themselves to do by setting aside a small period of time each day to practise the technique. It also discusses a plan for examining our thoughts or cognitions in anxiety situations and offers a different way of thinking which we can use to prevent or allay stressful feelings. The increase of assertive behaviours is also discussed.

What is the definition of stress?

A psychiatrist discusses stress in terms of ego boundaries; a chiropractor talks of tension on joints and tendons; lay people speak of feelings of discomfort, feeling rushed and pressured for time, developing headaches and various symptoms that they experience personally. With my nursing background and training in behaviour modification I would define stress in fairly concrete terms. Stress itself is a natural phenomenon. Everyone experiences a rise and fall in moods and tensions which occur every day. So-called stress can be a positive as well as a negative influence.

In psychiatry we speak of an arousal level. This is the way that our body reacts to the various stresses that occur. It is possible to measure these physical reactions on a polygraph. People who are experiencing excessive amounts of stress and not coping with it very well very often have higher than normal levels of muscle tension, heart rate, breathing rate and may be the types of people who develop physical symptoms if this high level of arousal is not checked. Some common symptoms of stress are migraine or tension headaches, gastro-intestinal disturbances, muscle cramps, excessive blushing and many types of chest illnesses. Many of these symptoms are made worse by stress, even if not actually caused by it. When a person is suffering from stress-induced conditions of any kind it is important that she/he look at her/his life-style and coping mechanisms to find out what is happening in stressful situations and what to do about it. In North America people tend to be very goal oriented and tend to work very hard at business and life-styles. Often they become so wrapped-up in what they are doing they do not pay attention to their body cues. When a symptom begins to develop they ignore it until it has become acutely painful. For example, a busy mother may have a very hectic day at the end of which she finds that she has a headache. A tension headache develops when a person is concentrating very actively on her or his intellectual functioning and ignoring, perhaps, an increase of muscle tension in facial or neck muscles. Typically, people who suffer tension headaches consider meeting deadlines very important and consequently devote their

thinking rather negatively to getting things done on time. Relaxation becomes extremely difficult for them and hours of unrelieved and unnoticed muscle tension give rise to severe tension headaches.

Treatment of excessive stress

In order to develop an awareness of our physical and emotional stress, we must pay attention to our bodies' messages. There are a number of ways of doing this. We may roughly divide treatments into physical and mental awareness of excessive stress.

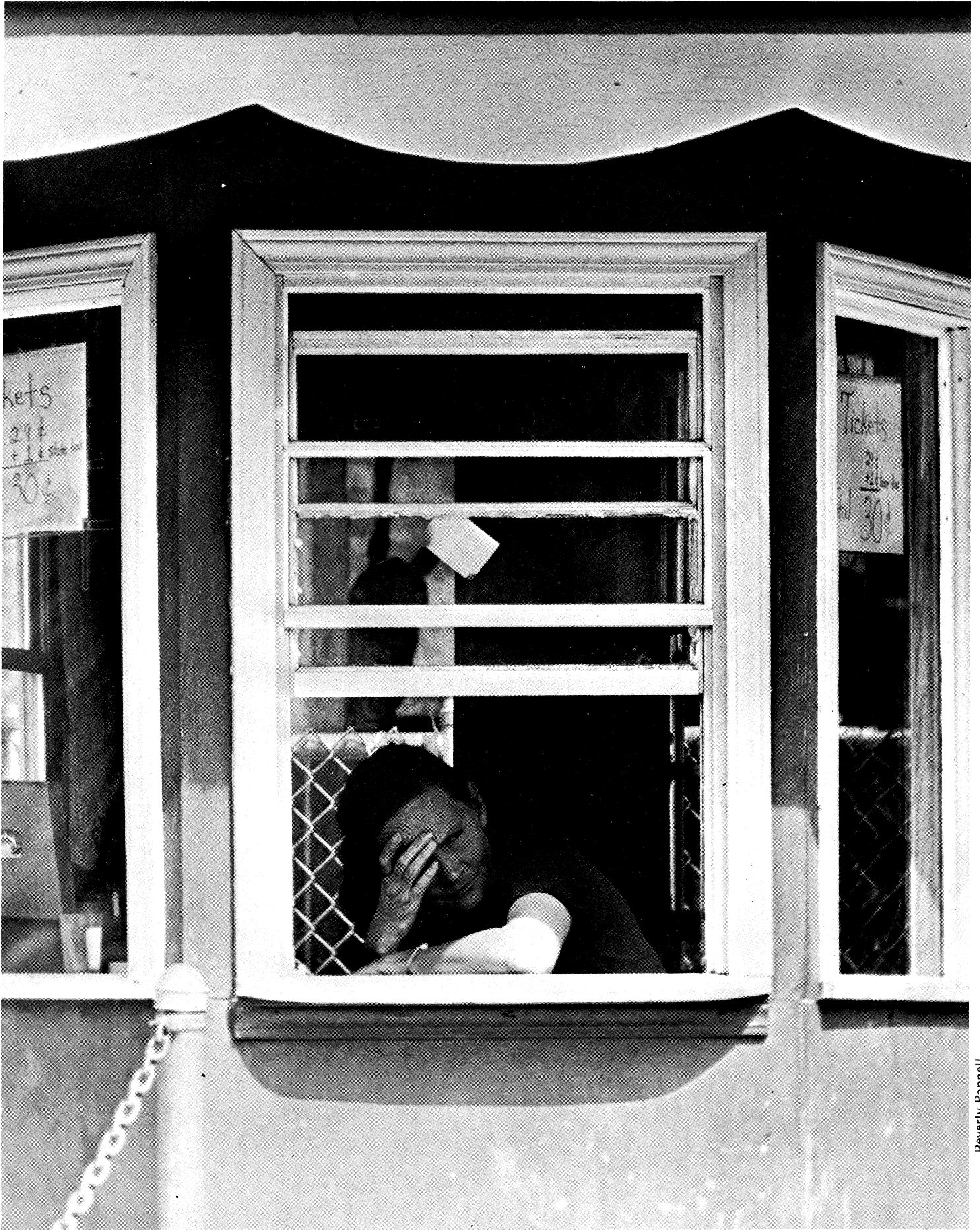
1. Attention to exercise — it is virtually impossible for a person who is doing a very minimal amount of physical exercise not to suffer some physical discomfort. Lethargy works in an almost vicious cycle. If a person is doing a very sedentary job and not getting any exercise, she begins to feel quite tired and depressed. The fatigue often leads to more inertia and even less physical activity.

Our bodies were designed for hard strenuous labour, but our industrial economy and our culture have made our daily lives increasingly inactive. To counteract this pattern, we must include physical activity regularly in our lifestyles. It is important, having assessed our level of physical activity and discovered that it really is not sufficient, to concentrate on increasing the amount of exercise we get. Fitness groups where calisthenics and jogging programmes are conducted, are a very practical means of doing this: they provide not only the regular exercise we need, but group participation which encourages us to keep going. It is possible to begin exercise programmes at home by concentrating on increasing the amount of exercise we do. (For example, running upstairs and walking to the corner store instead of taking the car.) This kind of activity is well documented in *Total Fitness in 30 Minutes a Week*. (See bibliography.)

2. Nutritious eating — it is important to eat three regular meals a day and to pay attention to the *Canada Food Guide*. Energy needs vary with age, sex and activity. Therefore, the number of calories we should take depends on the type of life-style we have. However, the four basic food groups must be included, preferably all of them at each meal, in order for our bodies to utilize the nutrition. Check your nutrition by writing down now all the food that you ate yesterday and compare it with the *Canada Food Guide*. Then assess whether your average day supplied you with enough nutrition for your body's needs.

3. Relaxation techniques — there are a number of different methods of relaxation training currently in use. Popular methods lately have included Transcendental Meditation (TM); yoga; bio-feedback; visual imagery and two methods I will briefly describe here: Jacobsons Progressive Relaxation: and Autogenic Relaxation.

(i) Progressive Relaxation: It has been found through research that there is a close correlation between muscle relaxation and mental relaxation. When we can attend to and relax our various muscle groups, the mind becomes calm. Specific relaxation



Carney Lady

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methods (used by Joseph Wolpe and discussed in *Relaxation Response*) enable the participant to relax deeply all muscle groups and to achieve a deep state of mental relaxation. When practised on a regular basis, relaxation training can help bring about an over-all feeling of peace and calm.

(ii) Autogenic Relaxation: Wolfgang Luthe devised this method in the 1940s working in hospitals with patients awaiting operations. He found that people who could learn to relax had less anxiety before the operation, needed less analgesia post-operatively and recovered more quickly from their operations than people who were not taught this method. Unlike active concentration which includes all the planning and problem solving thoughts we use constantly, the Autogenic method involves passive concentration: learning to concentrate on various areas of the body and relax those areas by visions of warmth, comfort and changes in weight. With practice, participants can actually feel deep relaxation in the areas of the body on which they are concentrating and a resultant calm rather similar to self-hypnosis.

Thinking in stress situations

The stressful feelings that we experience stem from the thinking patterns that we use in conflict situations. In order to become aware of these thoughts it is important to keep a log or journal of the kind of situations and patterns of thought that are associated with these situations.

Example of a 'log'

Date & Time	Situation	Amount of Discomfort	Cognitions or Thoughts	Results
		(1-5) 1. O.K. 2. Slight 3. More Discomfort 4. Severe 5. Very severe (panic-pain)		

This log should be carried about at all times if possible, so that an analysis of the conflict situations can be kept. It should record the time, what was happening, how much discomfort was felt (at a level from one to five as shown in the chart), and what the thinking was. This log serves a double function. First, it makes us more aware of the occurrence of a conflict: how often, what time of day, what type of conflict is the most stressful for each person and so on. It also provides us with an objective view of what is happening at the end of a day or week. It is then possible to look back on the log to see whether a pattern is emerging. When examining the 'thought' column in the log, be aware of negative thinking patterns such as: 'I really should do this even though I don't want to'; 'the other person may be hurt if I don't do it'; 'how can I get out of this—there really isn't a way so I'll have to do it'. Such thoughts lead to a great deal of stress in the person who is, perhaps, sitting there and saying nothing. Conversely, the thinking patterns may be very angry and aggressive—'how dare this person make a demand on me'; 'I always get blamed for this'; 'It's not my fault'. The angry and aggressive reactor will also probably cause a good deal of stress by this behaviour and handling of the interpersonal situation. It is well worth while keeping a log for a number of days and examining the negative thoughts that have been recorded. Look at whether the basis for the negative thinking is rational or not.

Albert Ellis talks about a number of very irrational belief systems that people carry about in their heads. Such beliefs include the idea that 'one should be loved by absolutely everyone and it's terrible if everyone doesn't like you' or

'one should perform perfectly at every task and be super-mothers, super-workers, etc.' If these are the bases for negative thoughts then the person is causing her/himself a great deal of stress by trying to live up to expectations which are quite unreal. The more positive our thinking becomes, the more we are able to speak out in difficult situations and to express our feelings to other people. Gradually we handle the stress in more positive ways. This can be a long and difficult process for individuals who have thought of themselves in terms of being put down a great deal. However, every conflict that is resolved assertively increases feelings of self-esteem.

Assertiveness is the ability to express feelings directly and honestly—with little resultant stress—rather than the too passive or over-aggressive behaviour that many people learn. When conflict logs are examined, they show that non-assertive behaviour often leads to tension. An increase in assertive behaviour will help to reduce this. A word of warning: small situations should be dealt with first and situations where the thinking is extremely negative and self-derogatory should be left until practice has been gained in dealing successfully with the smaller pressures. Each time we deal with a situation by thinking positively and acting assertively, we are more likely to elicit a positive response. This, in turn, encourages us to proceed to slightly more difficult situations.

It is very useful in practising assertive behaviour to use role-playing with a friend and have the friend behave like the person with whom you are trying to assert yourself. Practise what you are going to say, write scripts for yourself if you wish until you get the wording just right, and have the friend give you feed-back as to your performance. When the feed-back becomes very positive and encouraging you will find the real life situation much easier to handle.

All in all coping with stress requires a great deal of self-awareness. One's thinking patterns in stressful situations should be examined and the negative thoughts dealt with. A gradual attempt to increase feelings of self-worth by thinking more positively is necessary. Physical health must be given due consideration, for it is impossible to be a completely relaxed person if one is not getting enough sleep, exercise or nutritious food. As women, we have strong tendencies to nurture others at the expense of ourselves. Our own feelings of anxiety, tension and stress will diminish as we begin to increase our ability to nurture ourselves as well.

Combatting Stress—Suggested Reading

Relaxation:

Relaxation Response, Herbert Benson, Morrow.
Visceral Learning, Gerald Jones, Cornerstore Library.

Nutrition:

Diet for a Small Planet, Frances Moore Lappe, Bantam Press.
Realities of Nutrition, Ronald Deutsch, Le Larke Ewin.
The Family Guide to Better Food and Health, Ronald Deutsch, Le Larke Ewin.

Fitness:

Aerobics for Women, Mildred Cooper, Bantam Press.
Total Fitness in 30 Minutes, Morehouse and Gross, Simon and Schuster.

Health/Sensory Awareness:

Our Bodies/Ourselves, Boston Women's Collective, Simon and Schuster.
Women's Work, Women's Health, Jean Mager Stellmann, Pantheon Books.
Women's Body, Owners Manual, Bantam Press.
To Your Health, Sobel and Hornbacher, Grossman.

Assertiveness:

Assert Yourself, Sharon & Antony Bower, Signet.
When I Say No I Feel Guilty, Manual Smith, Dell.
Creative Aggression, Back and Goldberg, Avon.

Miscellaneous:

A New Guide to Rational Living, Albert Ellis, Prentice-Hall.
Stress Without Distress, Hans Selye, Signet.