Managing stress and its negative impact on your health

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Many of us are over programmed and over extended. The drive for self-fulfillment, productivity and financial freedom may sometimes lead to a temporary or sustained imbalance of our physical and emotional well-being. While the short-term sacrifice may allow us to reap great rewards, the longterm impact may prove damaging when our work and home lives remain stressful for extended periods of time.

Sustained levels of increased performance can lead to mental stress, which can be a significant risk factor for heart disease and adverse impact on the body.

Dr. Rachel Harris, MD, MPH, at AdventHealth Medical Group Cardiology at Rome, encourages people to talk about their stress level with their primary care provider and care team. She suggests that patients and their provider should partner together to create a plan to help manage their stress and improve their overall health.

Research indicates that stressful situations cause the body to release adrenaline, a hormone that increases your breathing, heart rate and blood pressure. While this fight or flight response is necessary to deal with stressful situations, chronically elevated blood pressures, heart rates and breathing rates can lead to an increased risk of hypertension, heart attack and stroke. Stress may also lead to increased inflammation in blood vessels around areas of fatty deposits and lead to new or worsening heart disease.

Additionally, stress can also contribute to poor health behaviors, such as overeating, smoking, decreased physical activity and unhealthy diet, being overweight and not taking medications as prescribed. These behaviors are linked to increased risk for heart disease and stroke.

During emotional and mental stress, the smaller blood vessels — known as the body's microcirculation — are also affected and can play a role in heart disease. This difference is particularly important in women who have more of an exaggerated response, with worse outcomes versus men, particularly young and middle-aged women. In studies, women aged 50 or younger had twice the amount of decreased blood flow to heart muscle during emotional and mental stress compared to men.

Even among those with chronic stable coronary artery disease, during mental stress, changes in the smaller blood vessels can be seen with adverse health outcomes. Researchers are developing a Cardiovascular Reactivity Score (CRS) with data from the Mental Stress Ischemia Prognosis Study (MIPS) to identify those at increased risk so this risk can be addressed and possibly prevented.

Addressing our overall mental health is an important step toward preventing the unwanted physiological effects of stress on our bodies.

Members of the Forbes Coaches Council reflected on how emotional intelligence plays a role in managing our emotions during stressful situations. They recommend strategies that can help including learning triggers and taming them, creating distance, confiding in someone you trust, responding and not reacting, building resilience, and focusing on your

passion. Mental health professionals can also help provide ongoing support and tools for managing workrelated stress and anxiety.

AdventHealth prescribes a whole-person approach to wellness and acknowledges the role health plays in preventing disease — it is a balance of mind, body, spirit and relationships. Dr. Rachel Harris, MD, MPH, is a cardiologist with a focus in cardiac imaging at AdventHealth Medical Group Cardiology at Rome. She is passionate about heart health, disease prevention, women's heart care and helping build a healthier community. In her spare time, Dr. Harris enjoys biking, reading and singing. To learn more or schedule an appointment, call 706-368-8500 or visit GeorgiaHeartExperts.com.