Coping with Epilepsy: Managing Stress and Promoting Mindfulness

Linda Manning, PhD
Vanderbilt Center for Integrative Health
linda.g.manning@vanderbilt.edu
Stress and Epilepsy

- Stress is one of the most commonly reported seizure triggers
- Worry or fear activates the limbic system
- Even “happy” stress can be a trigger
- Stress can cause hormonal changes that trigger seizures
- Stress may cause missed medication
- Stress may interfere with sleep
Stressors Are Everywhere

- Major Stressors:
  - Serious Illness
  - Death of a Loved One
  - Divorce
  - Job Loss
Stressors Are Everywhere

• Daily Stressors:
  ✓ Traffic
  ✓ Long Commutes
  ✓ Packed Schedules
  ✓ Work and Family Responsibilities
The Body’s Response

• Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the demands of life.

• Your body is hard-wired to react in a way originally meant to protect you against perceived threats from predators and aggressors.
The Body’s Response

• When you encounter perceived threats your hypothalamus sets off an alarm system in your body

• This system prompts your adrenal glands to release a surge of hormones, including adrenaline and cortisol
The Body’s Response

• The body's stress-response system is usually self-regulating. It enables your body to return to normal once a perceived threat has passed.

• Your heart rate and blood pressure return to baseline levels, and other systems resume their regular activities.
The Body’s Response

• When the stressors of your life are always present, you constantly feel stressed, tense, nervous or on edge

• The long-term activation of the stress-response system puts you at increased risk of numerous health problems
Coping With Stress: Change the Stressor

- Avoid Stressors
- Learn to say NO
- Change your environment
- Turn off the news
- Communicate needs and limits
- Manage your time: Prioritize the TO DO List
Coping with Stress: Change Yourself

- Avoid Catastrophizing
- Learn from Your Mistakes
- Reframe the Situation
- Look at the Big Picture
- Use Humor
- Stop Trying to Control the Uncontrollable
Coping with Stress

- Practice Prevention
- Practice Self-Care
- Focus on Wellness
For most individuals, the pursuit of “health and happiness” requires a lifestyle change.
Mind-Body Connection

✓ Slowing down

✓ Living in this moment

✓ Developing the kind witness

✓ Practicing Embodied Breathing
Practicing Mindfulness

- Paying Attention - Right Here, Right Now

- Five minutes of diaphramatic breathing a day could change your life!
Practicing Mindfulness

• **Attend**  Mindful listening to the heart and body

• **Befriend**  Breathe through it and be with it

• **Surrender**  An active spiritual process that takes great courage – letting be – the art of not arguing with reality
  • Miriam Greenspan
Practicing Mindfulness

- “When the Going Gets Tough, Turn to Wonder”

- Be On the Lookout for Small Miracles

- We Are All Connected
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is
I do know how to pay attention,
How to fall down into the grass,
How to kneel down in the grass,
How to be idle and blessed,
How to stroll through the fields
Which is what I have been doing all day
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?
Mary Oliver