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The Longevity Game

balance

Many people yearn for the day they no longer have to go to the office or factory and can move to a warm climate, but retirement and relocation are two of the lifestyle changes that can create stress.

In fact, losing one's workplace identity or moving away from familiar surroundings are types of losses, according to Dr. Edmund Duthie, professor and chief of geriatrics at the Medical College of Wisconsin and a practicing physician at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center and Froedtert Hospital.

"When you talk about stress in late life, most of us refer to losses," he explains. "Change is stress."

Losses fall into several major categories: loss of work, loss of health, loss of spouse and friends, loss of living situation and loss of independence.

According to Duthie, 85 percent of people 65 and older have at least one chronic illness, such as arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease, hearing or vision loss. "If you're used to going through life without a problem, now you have to manage," he says.

Cortisol and adrenaline are two hormones that are natural responses to stressful situations. But there have been no human studies to link excessive, prolonged exposure of those hormones with health problems, according to Dr. Shailendra B. Patel, chief of endocrinology, metabolism and clinical nutrition and a professor at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

"Anyone with a chronic medical illness will have some abnormal stress response, so we treat the condition that leads to the stress," adds Patel, who also practices at Froedtert and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"Genetics doesn't change much in 200 years, and in 200 years we've changed the whole planet in terms of technology, traffic and marriage, stress and so on."

Older adults may feel a loss as friends die or move away. Someone who is grieving may need to continue to express sorrow, according to Kari Klatt, geriatric care manager of the senior health program at Froedtert Hospital & the Medical College of Wisconsin.

At other times, a diversion such as a car ride or spending time with family can help, Klatt says. She also recommends senior centers, community programs, fitness programs, support groups and faith communities as possible sources of comfort for elders.

"Coping with stress can be challenging for older adults who are isolated and unable or unwilling to ask for help," adds Klatt.

Family members should watch for change in an older relative's behavior that may have its roots in stress, Duthie says. "In fact, personality change in late life is a major marker for us in medicine to look at — is the person depressed, or is there a cognitive problem?"

- Story by Cathy Breitenbucher



Trish Washburn does yoga daily.