

- *Run date:* Sunday, April 3, 2005

-*Title of article:* *Relax, Recover, Renew*

**Stress is More Than Just a Feeling:** For women of all ages, feeling stressed can impact diet, sleep and activity patterns, which in turn affects overall health and well-being. The body responds to stress in a variety of ways, including headaches, emotional irritability, insomnia, high blood pressure, depressed immune function and muscular tension. All of these things can zap energy and interfere with your ability to get it all done. As lives become more hectic — juggling family, friends and career — it is essential for women to find balance in their lives.

**Prioritize:** What can you do to decrease stress, increase your energy level and lead a fuller, healthier life? Decide which parts of your life are most important and which parts require less of your attention. **Learn to say no and, if necessary, let go of or cut back on some of your commitments.** Others will understand, we are all limited by the number of hours in a day! Volunteering once a week? Why not change your schedule to once a month? Just don't have time to be a homeroom mother this year? Be sure to contact the teacher and let her know you would be happy to volunteer in the classroom once each quarters.

**Simplify:** Don't be afraid to ask for and accept help. Many friends, family and coworkers are happy to help out. And, **learn to delegate** and share chores. The most obvious tasks to give up are laundry, dishes, garbage, shopping and pet care. Remember, once chores have been delegated, don't take them back! **Plan simple meals** and involve the whole family in preparation. Spend time discussing the day's events as you toss a salad or set the table together. **Look for convenient meal solutions in your local grocery store.** Many of these new products are delicious, low in fat and fit easily into a healthful diet. Plus, they provide home-style taste after just 10 minutes in the microwave.

**Be Active:** Regular movement is essential for physical and emotional health. It is believed that any type of physical activity can relieve stress, improve sleep and enhance overall health. **Simply aim for 30 minutes of activity each day.** Don't have 30 minutes? Don't worry – break it down into short bursts of activity. Just make sure it adds up to 30 at the end of the day. When you exercise, your body releases endorphins or “feel good” hormones. Endorphins are thought to reduce anxiety and improve mood. Engaging in physical activity during times of excessive stress not only helps you deal with the physical aspects of a stress reaction, but also redirects your attention, allowing you to regain positive energy and a better perspective.

**Eat a Balanced Diet:** Eating a balanced diet energizes you and boosts your immune system. Make sure to eat a combination of foods, such as whole grain breads, colorful fruits, leafy green vegetables, dairy products and lean meat, all of which are packed with nutrients.

**Share Your Feelings:** *Talking* with an understanding friend, coworker or family member allows you to vent and diminish stress. Time spent with loved ones often includes laughter, which provides additional health benefits. *Laughing* has been shown to reduce pain, strengthen immune function and decrease stress. So spend some time everyday giggling your way to better

health.

**Avoid Guilt:** Guilt is an emotional health and balance robber! Takes a positive attitude to believe in yourself, overcome everyday challenges and positively impact others. Don't let guilt affect your perspective. **Set realistic and attainable goals to help you feel good about your abilities.** Your new "guilt-free" attitude will make downtime more relaxing and enjoyable. The first step to finding the well-being you are looking for is to identify the stressors in your life.

One of the daily challenges and leading stressor for most is finding time to prepare a healthy dinner. What can you do to make dinner less stressful? When you do have time to cook, make a double batch and freeze the leftover. Use these "homemade" microwave dinners on the busiest weekday evening. Plan an "old fashioned Sunday dinner" for one day each week. Have the whole family help with preparation, and then sit down to share a relaxing meal. Make dinner time fun. Try making breakfast for dinner. Breakfast foods, like omelets, are quick to fix and by including meat, cheese and vegetables, with a side of fresh fruit and whole wheat toast you have a complete, balanced meal.

Many people struggle to find time for exercise. But there are a lot of ways to incorporate physical activity into the things you do every day. Get off the bus one stop early and enjoy a brisk walk to the store or your office. Instead of sitting in the stands at your children's sporting events, walk the sidelines as you cheer on your favorite athletes.

Everyone responds to stress differently, and consequently there is no single recipe for stress management. Small changes in your daily routine can make a big difference in your overall health. To better manage your stress every day, be sure to include laughter, physical activity, good nutrition and time for you!

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