

Healthy Minds Series



**According to the Canadian Mental Health Association....**

# **Stress**

Stress can be defined as one of the body's natural responses to our ever-

changing environment. We use stressful situations such as physical, mental or emotional pressures to motivate and challenge ourselves. We all respond to stressful situations in different ways.



What may seem like a challenge to one individual may seem overwhelming to another. As there are varying degrees of stress, it is your reaction to the situation which determines whether it is good or bad stress. As increased stress over a period of time can be harmful to your health, it is important that you understand what creates the stress in your life, and how to deal with various situations which make you feel stressed.



We all experience stress on a daily basis, however, certain situations trigger more stress than others (i.e., death of a loved one, birth of a child, divorce, marriage, new job or unemployment). Long term worries may include: concern about the future/security, children's care or illness.

Understanding what causes stress you are well on your way to managing your own reaction to stress.



**M**ost of us experience a certain amount of stress in our daily lives. Stress is our body's response to demands made upon it. It is the way we react; physically and emotionally, to change. Stress can be positive or negative. We can make positive stress work for us. We can manage negative stress so that it does not work against us.

### **Positive Stress**

Stress is often perceived as bad, however at healthy levels it is a normal, necessary part of life. In its positive aspects, stress helps us deal with the normal stressors (things that cause stress) of everyday life. Stress can enhance concentration, performance, motivation, and efficiency. It can enable us to "rise to the occasion". Positive stress is short term. Once the challenge has been met, we begin to unwind and relax. Our body returns to normal. The relaxation response allows us to build-up our physical and emotional reserves to meet the next challenge, and is one of the key elements of positive stress.



### **Negative Stress**

Stress becomes negative when there are numerous sources of stress, when a situation is perceived to be more than what we can handle, or the stressor is ongoing. Stress can also be negative when you stay "geared up" and do not, or cannot, relax after meeting the challenge.

In today's world, where many situations can "push your buttons", it's no wonder some people think of stress as a way of life. Unfortunately when stress becomes a constant, ongoing cycle, your health and well-being can suffer. Negative stress has been linked with many physical ailments - from tension headaches to heart attacks. The good news is that stress needn't be hazardous to your health. You can learn to manage the stress in your life, and you'll be happy that you did.





# Types of Stressors

## Major Life Event

- new relationship/marriage
- changing jobs/promotion
- moving
- end of a relationship
- death of a loved one
- accident
- birth of a child

## Long Term Worries

- financial problems
- chronic illness
- concern regarding children's future
- unemployment
- relationship problems
- caring for someone who is severely ill or impaired

## Daily Hassles

(minor annoyances that are part of day-to-day life)

- traffic jams
- rude people
- lost keys
- spilled coffee
- missed bus
- late for appointments
- petty disagreements

## Time Limited/Acute

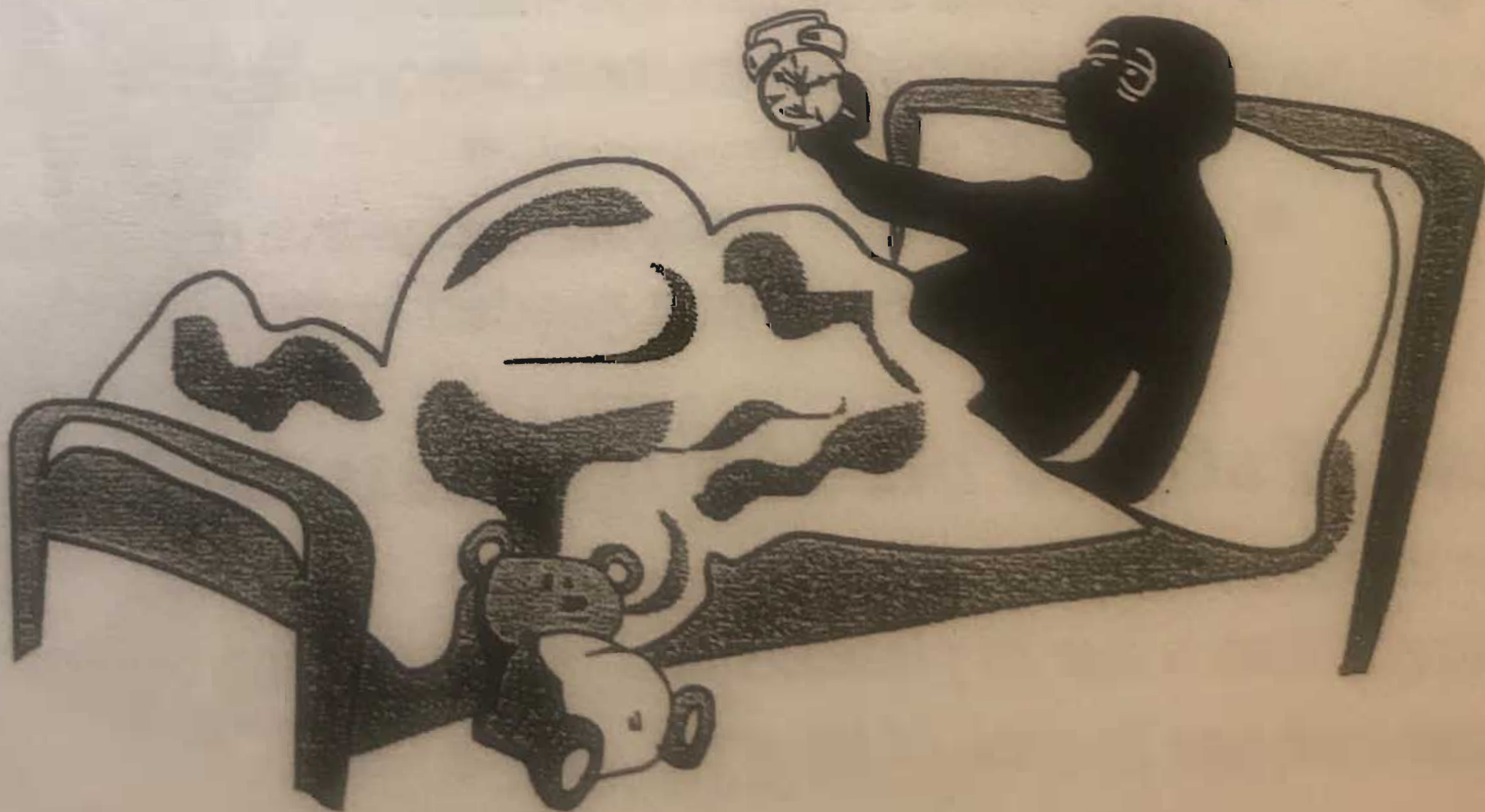
- flu/cold
- exams/academic demands
- relatives visiting





## Common Physiological Indicators of Stress

- Muscle tension - neck, back, legs, etc.
  - Headaches
  - Digestive problems (e.g., nausea, indigestion, ulcers, diarrhea)
  - Eating changes (e.g., compulsive eating, loss of taste, loss of appetite)
  - Sleep disorders (e.g., insomnia, restless sleep, nightmares, excessive sleep)
  - Teeth grinding - may lead to aching jaws
  - Increased perspiration - palms of hands, body
  - Heart problems (e.g., palpitations, rapid or changing heart beat, chest pain)
  - Breathing (e.g., problems catching breath, deep sighs)
  - Skin problems (e.g., rash, hives, acne, eczema)
  - Sexual difficulties (e.g., impotence, decreased desire)
- High blood pressure





# The Physical Response to Acute Stress

## Introduction of stressful event

(or an individual's perception of stress).

**Release of adrenalin** (a stimulant hormone) into the bloodstream. This, with other stress hormones, produces a number of changes in the body which are intended to be protective.

## Fight or Flight Response

Results from the release of adrenalin  
Provides the strength and energy to  
either fight or run away from danger.

The physical changes include:

- increased heart rates and blood pressure
- faster breathing (to take in more oxygen)
- tensing of muscles (preparation for action)
- increased mental alertness (to assess the situation and act quickly)
- increased blood flow to the brain, heart, and muscles (the organs that are most important in dealing with danger)
- less blood flow to the skin, digestive tract, kidneys, and liver (where it is least needed in times of crisis).



## Release of stored blood sugar, fats & cholesterol

- for extra energy.
- there is also a rise in platelets and blood clotting factors to prevent haemorrhage in case of injury.



# Common Psychological Indicators of Stress

## Mental or Emotional

- Anger/irritability, hyperactivity (e.g., pacing, impatience, restlessness)
- Depressed mood, pessimism, lack of caring
- Nervousness
- Decreased concentration and disorganization
- Loss of memory and confusion
- Difficulty making decisions
- Self-consciousness (e.g., decreased confidence)
- Decreased ability to be flexible
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Impaired performance (e.g., decreased problem-solving skills)



## Behavioural

- Pacing
- Fidgeting
- Nervous habits (nail-biting, foot-tapping)
- Increased eating
- Smoking
- Drinking
- Crying
- Yelling
- Swearing
- Blaming
- Throwing things





# Checklist of Cognitive Distortions

*It is important for each of us to recognize which distortions of thinking we are in a habit or pattern of using. Then we can work at changing them and thus decrease our level of stress.*

- 1. All-or-nothing thinking: You look at things in absolute, black and white categories.
- 2. Over-generalization: You view a negative event as a never ending pattern of defeat.
- 3. Mental filter: You dwell on the negatives and ignore the positives.
- 4. Discounting the positives: You insist that your accomplishments or positive qualities don't count.
- 5. Jumping to conclusions:
  - a) Mind-reading - you arbitrarily assume that people are reacting negatively to you;
  - b) Fortune-telling - you arbitrarily predict that things will turn out badly.
- 6. Magnification or minimization: You blow things way out of proportion or you shrink their importance.
- 7. Emotional reasoning: You reason from how you feel: "I feel like an idiot, so I must be one."
- 8. Should statements: You criticize yourself or other people with "should's", "shouldn't's", "musts", "oughts", and "have to's"
- 9. Labelling: Instead of saying "I made a mistake", you tell yourself, "I'm a jerk" or "a loser".
- 10. Personalization and blame:
  - a) You blame yourself for something you weren't entirely responsible for;
  - b) You blame other people and overlook ways that you contributed to a problem.





# STRESS....

is our response to demands made upon us. We need to build and maintain resources in order to deal with such demands.

## EXAMPLES:

Supportive relationships  
(family, friend, co-worker, partner)  
Good health habits,  
Spiritual beliefs  
Good work habits  
Involvement in social activities  
Positive attitude  
Self-esteem  
Communication skills

**RESOURCES**

## EXAMPLES:

Workload  
Parenting  
Finances  
Relationships  
Illness  
Self-defeating habits  
(lifestyle or self-talk)

**DEMANDS**



# Your Situation

What are your resources?

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What are your demands?

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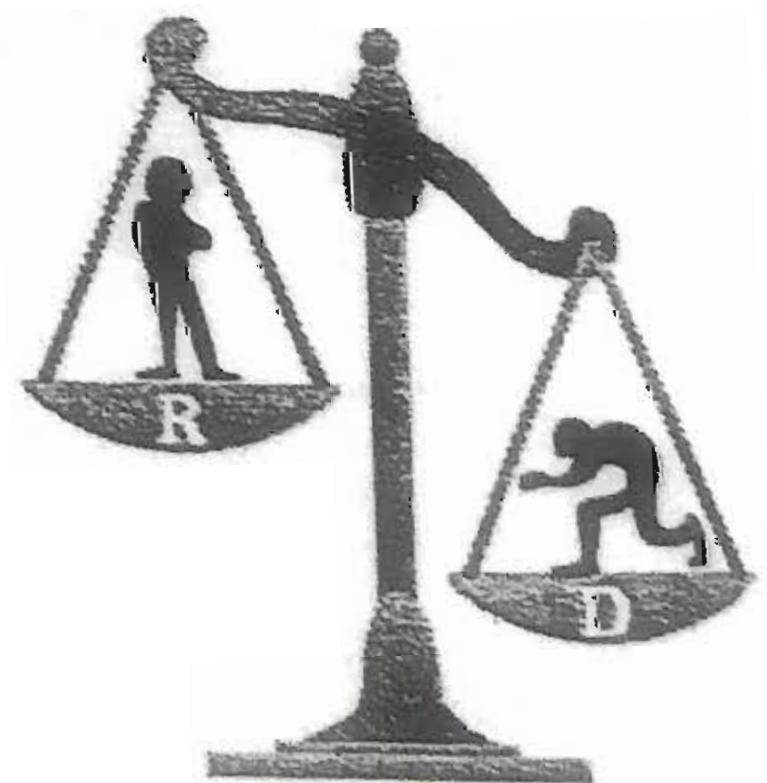
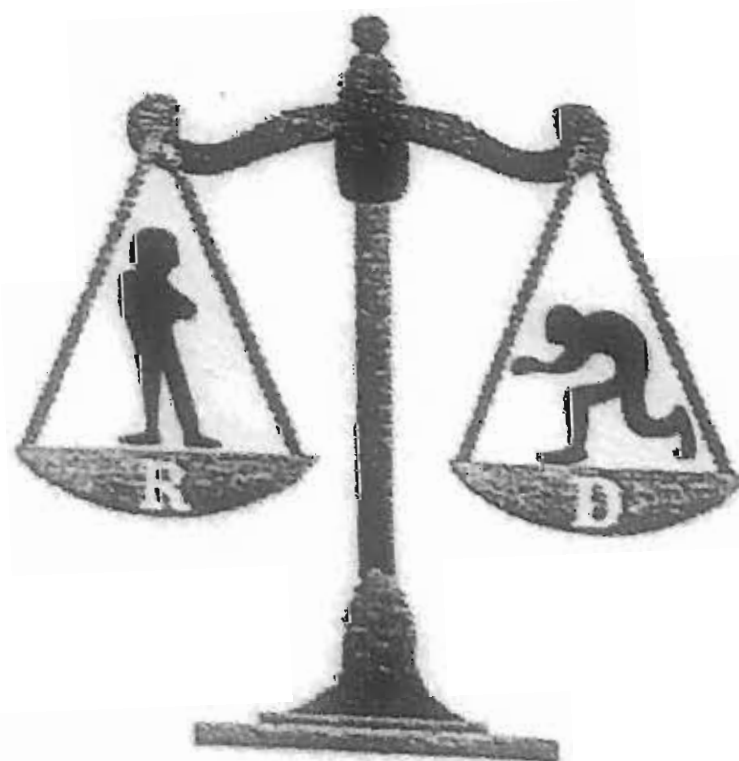
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Are they balanced?

Draw a scale that represents your resources and demands





# STRATEGIES



*There are four basic strategies you can use to manage stress:*

- I.** Build up general health through proper nutrition, rest, exercise, and other positive health practices.
- II.** Change the situation; that is, the sources of stress.
- III.** Change your mind; that is, your perceptions of, or thoughts about, stressors.
- IV.** Change your body; that is, learn to substitute relaxation responses for stress responses.



## Basic Stress Management Strategies

### I. Build General Health

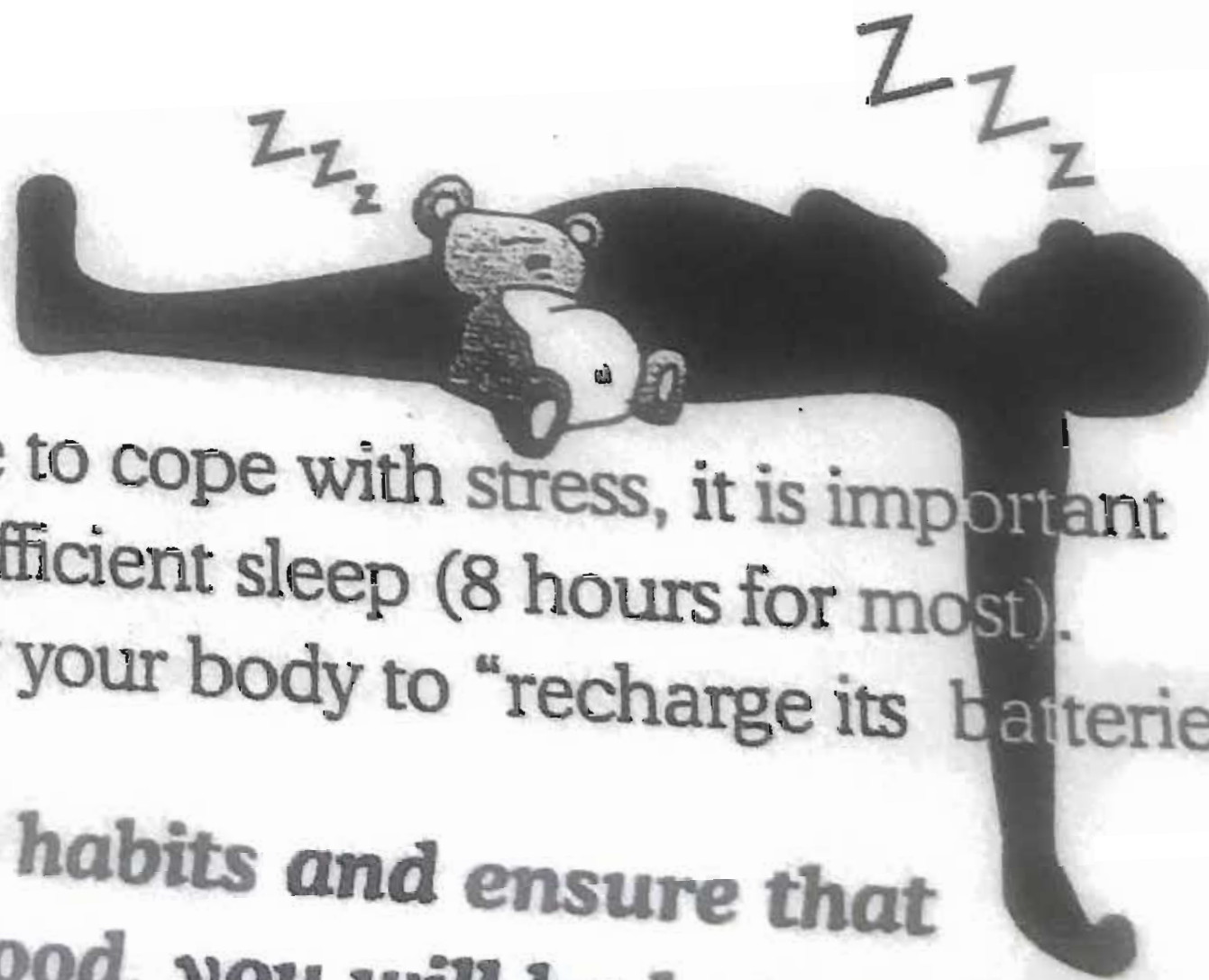
#### Exercise

- Regular exercise provides more energy and a healthier body with which to deal with stress.
- Each of us needs a "safety valve" activity or outlet for pent up emotions.
- Exercise relieves tension and reduces stress by drawing attention away from mental/physical anxiety and is a release for emotions.



#### Nutrition

- Develop a nutritionally balanced diet. Attention to proper nutrition is a form of insurance against illness and enables you to more effectively deal with stress.
- Quit smoking and limit alcohol and caffeine intake. These are passive ways to blot out stress symptoms which later cause more stress. These make you dependent on a means outside yourself to deal with stress.
- Limit sugary snacks.



#### Sleep and Rest

- In order to be alert and able to cope with stress, it is important to allow your body to get sufficient sleep (8 hours for most).
- Take regular breaks to allow your body to "recharge its batteries".

*If you learn these habits and ensure that your general health is good, you will be better able to effectively deal with stress when it arises.*



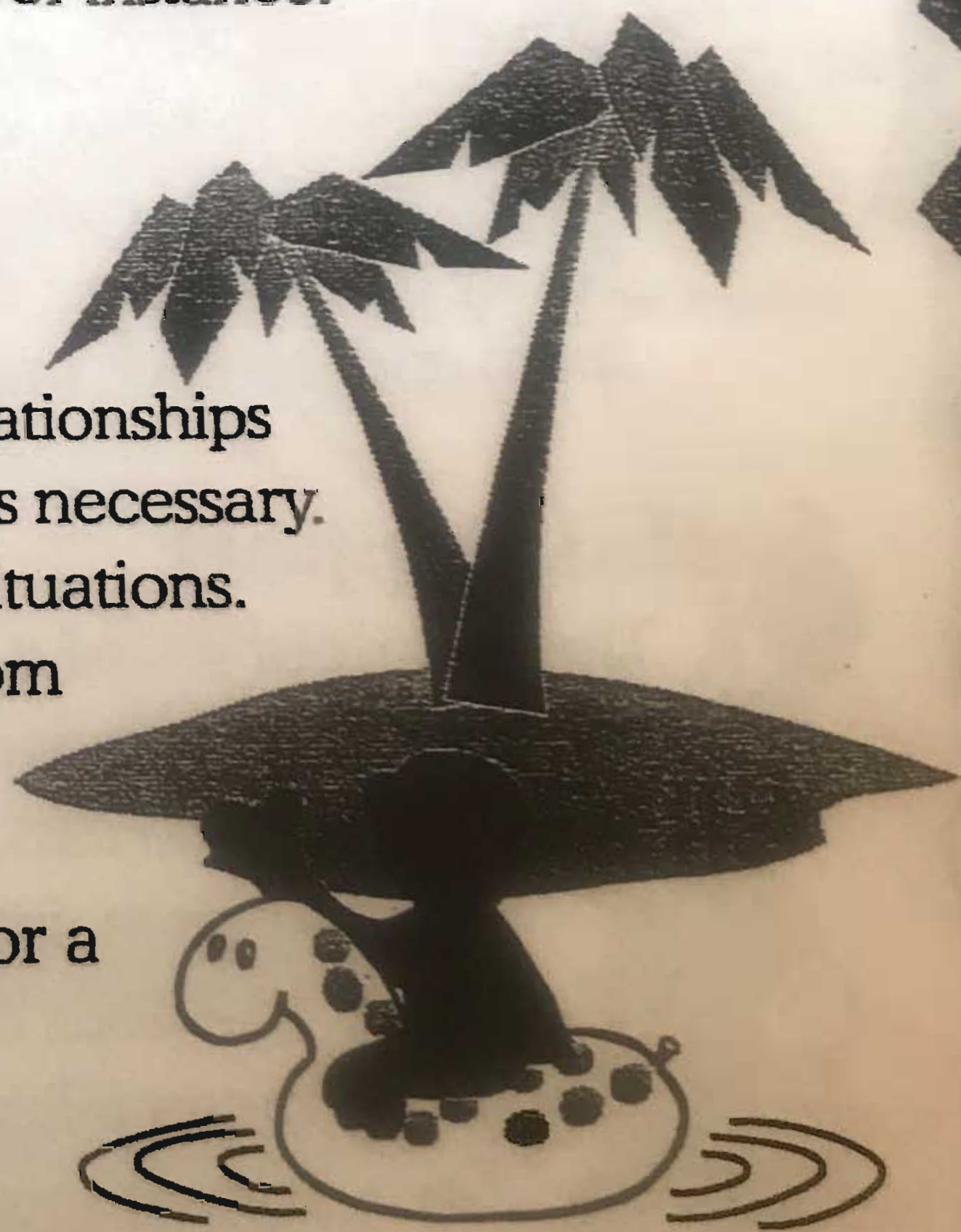
## Basic Stress Management Strategies

# II. Change the Situation: *that is, the Source of Stress*

External sources of stress can include jobs, families, relationships, or living arrangements. If one of these or some other external factor becomes a stressor, the situation should not be tolerated indefinitely. **Stressors are seldom inescapable.** Often there are easy ways to alter or relieve them. For instance:

### Take Time Out

- A vacation helps renew your energy.
- Changing jobs, homes, or relationships is more drastic but sometimes necessary.
- Don't stew in high pressure situations. When possible, leave the room until you (and they) calm down.
- Leaving the situation, even for a few minutes, can help.



### Time Management

- Stress can be reduced by setting clear goals with realistic time lines. Effective time planning is a key ingredient. It is important to budget time for work AND play.

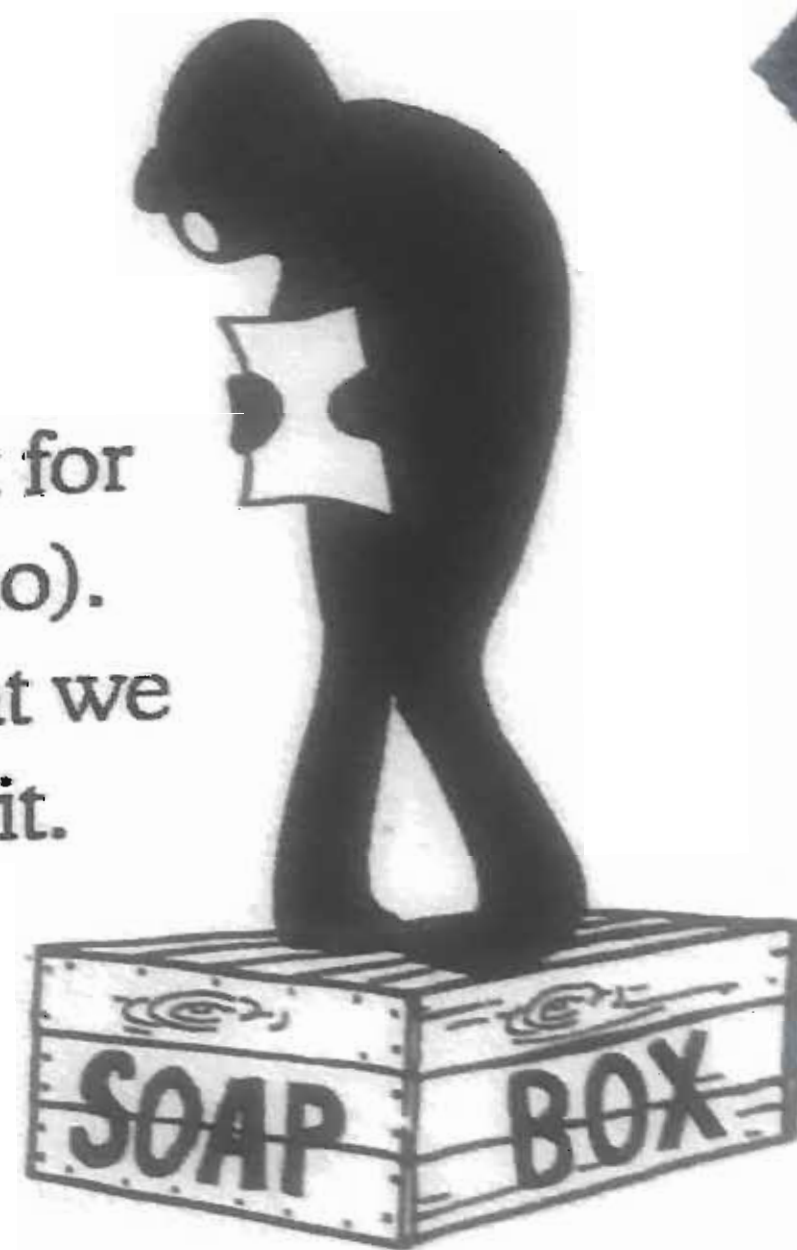


## Basic Stress Management Strategies

### II. Change the Situation: continued

#### Assertive Communication

- Ask yourself: "What do I really want from life, and how can I express myself as fully as possible?"
- Stress can be the result of not speaking out for our legitimate rights (e.g., learning to say no).
- If we cannot, or do not, ask clearly for what we are entitled to have, we are unlikely to get it.
- Develop lines of communication with family members, i.e., take time to really listen and tell each other your feelings.



#### Social Support

- The impact of stressful circumstances can be influenced by our social support systems.
  - People who can turn to trusted, supportive individuals in times of stress suffer far less from stress reactions than those who feel isolated. This can mean talking to a friend, relative or other formal supports.
  - Often, availability of support is a question of choice rather than resource (i.e., whether you recognize and choose to access your supports).



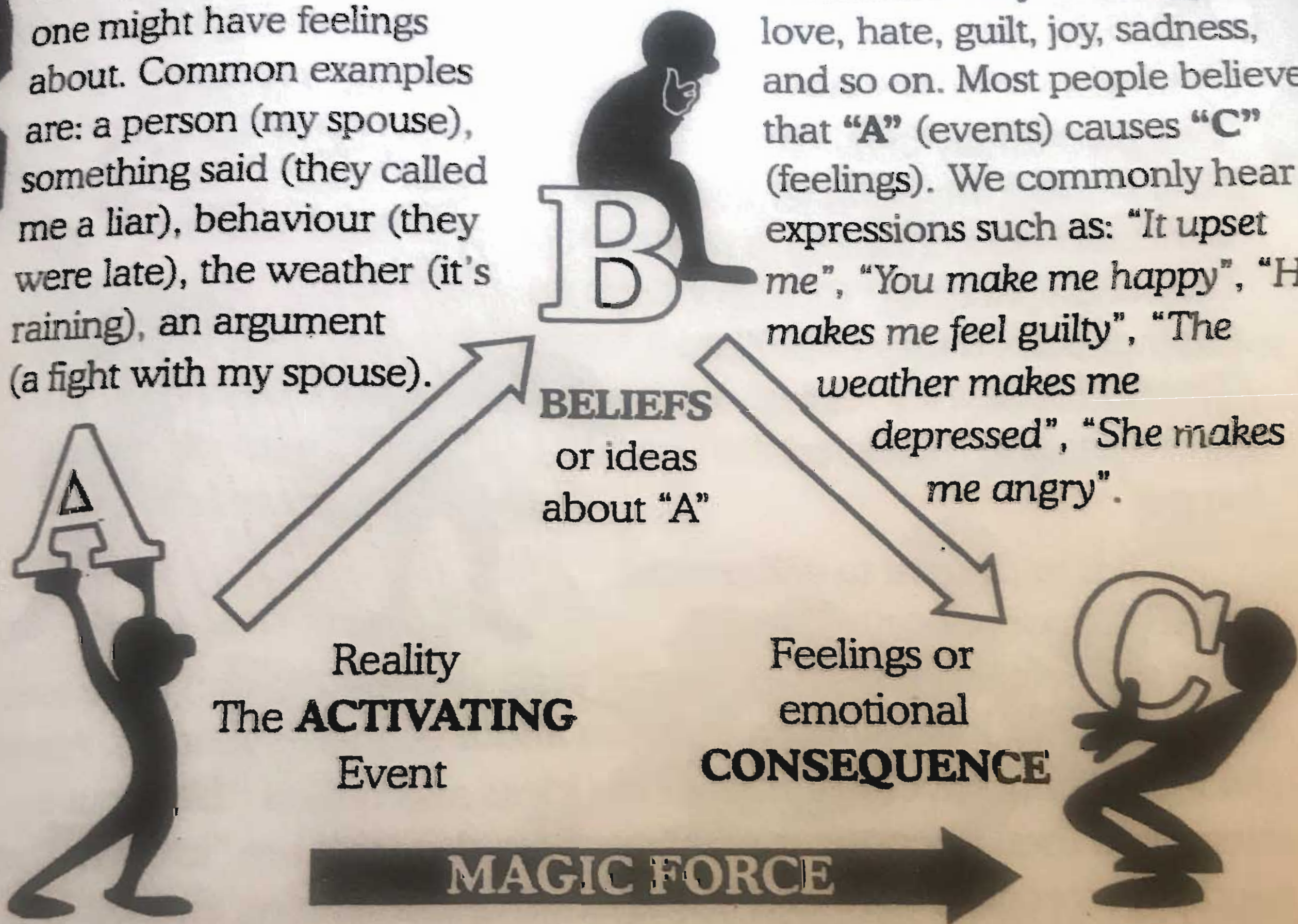


# Strategy III: Changing Our Minds

## The A-B-C Theory

“A” represents any sort of event, usually in reality, that one might have feelings about. Common examples are: a person (my spouse), something said (they called me a liar), behaviour (they were late), the weather (it’s raining), an argument (a fight with my spouse).

“C” represents feelings or emotions of any kind: anger, love, hate, guilt, joy, sadness, and so on. Most people believe that “A” (events) causes “C” (feelings). We commonly hear expressions such as: “It upset me”, “You make me happy”, “He makes me feel guilty”, “The weather makes me depressed”, “She makes me angry”.



Although people have been viewing the world in this “A-C” manner for centuries, no one can explain how things outside of us can make us feel a specific way inside. No magic force coming from external events has been discovered that radiates into us and cause feelings. Furthermore, we know that two individuals will attribute very different feelings to an identical event.



## Strategy III: Changing Our Minds continued

The reason two people can feel so differently about the same event, is that it is each person's **IDEAS OR BELIEFS** about that event that most **AFFECTS HOW THEY FEEL**. If we think of a situation as awful or terrible, we will feel bad; if we evaluate a situation as tremendous or fantastic, we will feel happy, and so on for each emotion.

**As an example:** the event or situation "**A**" is that it is raining

One person may think "**B**" "*I have planned this picnic for three weeks and darn, it's going to rain!*"

They end up feeling "**C**" angry.

Another person may think "**B**" "*Thank goodness it's raining, my garden needs it!*" They feel "**C**" happy.



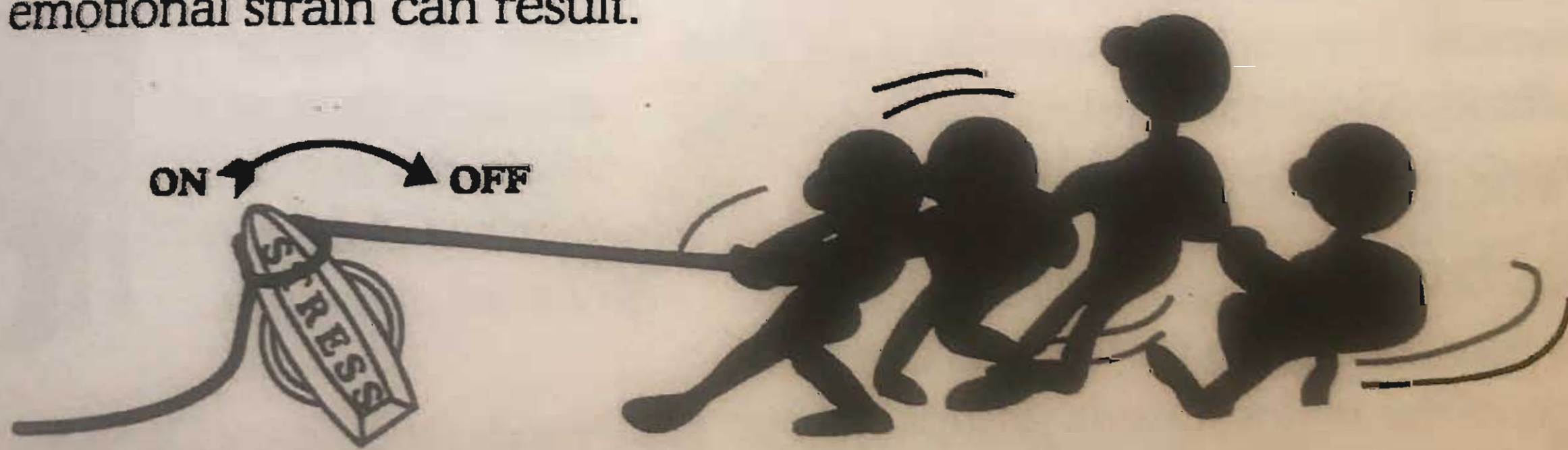
It is important to understand the ABC theory because behind many self-defeating emotions (anger, guilt, depression, etc) there are often irrational ideas and assumptions about events in your life. A person can teach themselves to identify their ideas and beliefs "**B**" about an event, and then to consider whether these thoughts are "irrational" and need to be reconsidered and changed. This challenging and self-examination results in a new, more realistic appraisal of the event (not necessarily a positive one, however); and thus different and more self-fulfilling feelings (ie. sadness rather than depression; concern rather than over concern and anxiety; annoyance rather than anger). With these less intense and immobilizing feelings, one is better able to solve a given problem, to possibly change reality "**A**", or to make the best of an unfortunate situation.



## Strategy IV - Change Your Body

### Learn to Substitute Relaxation Responses for Stress Responses

Your automatic physical reaction to a stressful situation is the same whether you are experiencing positive or negative stress - your muscles tense, your heart rate and blood pressure increase. In short, positive and negative stress share the same response mechanism, but in negative stress your response stays stuck in the "on" position. Positive stress is short term, for as soon as the challenge or threat has been dealt with, our body relaxes and returns to a normal pre-stressed state. With negative stress, there is no true relaxation between one stress "crisis" and the next. When your body remains "geared up" and doesn't relax, physical and emotional strain can result.



Fortunately, you can stop the cycle of negative stress by becoming aware of your stress and practising relaxation techniques. By learning and using simple relaxation techniques you can balance the stress in your life with periods of relaxation. By taking the time to practice simple relaxation techniques on a regular basis, you can give yourself a chance to unwind and get ready for life's next challenge.



# Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Some people may not know how to concentrate on relaxing. What if you are so "geared up" that you're not even sure how it feels to relax? Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that can help you actually feel the difference between relaxation and tension.

## The Basic Technique

Progressive muscular relaxation is a three-step technique. First, you tense a muscle and notice how it feels; then, you release the tension and pay attention to that feeling; and finally, you concentrate on the difference between the two sensations. This exercise can be done while sitting or lying down, and only takes about fifteen minutes. It helps if you can practice the technique in a quiet, relaxing atmosphere.

## Progression of the Technique

It is most helpful to try this exercise on each of the major muscle groups of your body. The basic technique remains the same for each group: tighten the muscle, release the tension, then notice the difference. You can start with your hands, then progress to other muscles, or you can begin the exercise moving from "head-to-toe", tightening and relaxing the muscles in your face, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, back, stomach, legs, and feet.

Tighten your hand muscle and make a fist; then, notice how it feels. Your muscles are taut and strained and your hand may even be trembling slightly. You may feel tension in your hand, wrists and lower arm. Hold the tension for a few seconds before relaxing.



Release your hand, relax your fist, and let the tension slip away. You may notice that your hand feels lighter than it did while your muscle was tensed and that your wrist and forearms also feel relieved of pressure.



Notice the difference between how your hand felt when tense and how it felt when you released the tension. Does your hand tingle or feel warm when relaxed? Did the throbbing you felt when tense disappear when you relaxed?





# Clearing Your Mind....

Another relaxation technique is clearing your mind. Since your stress response is a physical and emotional interaction, giving yourself a mental "break" can help relax your body as well. When you clear your mind, you try to concentrate on one pleasant thought, word, or image and let the rest of your worries slip away.

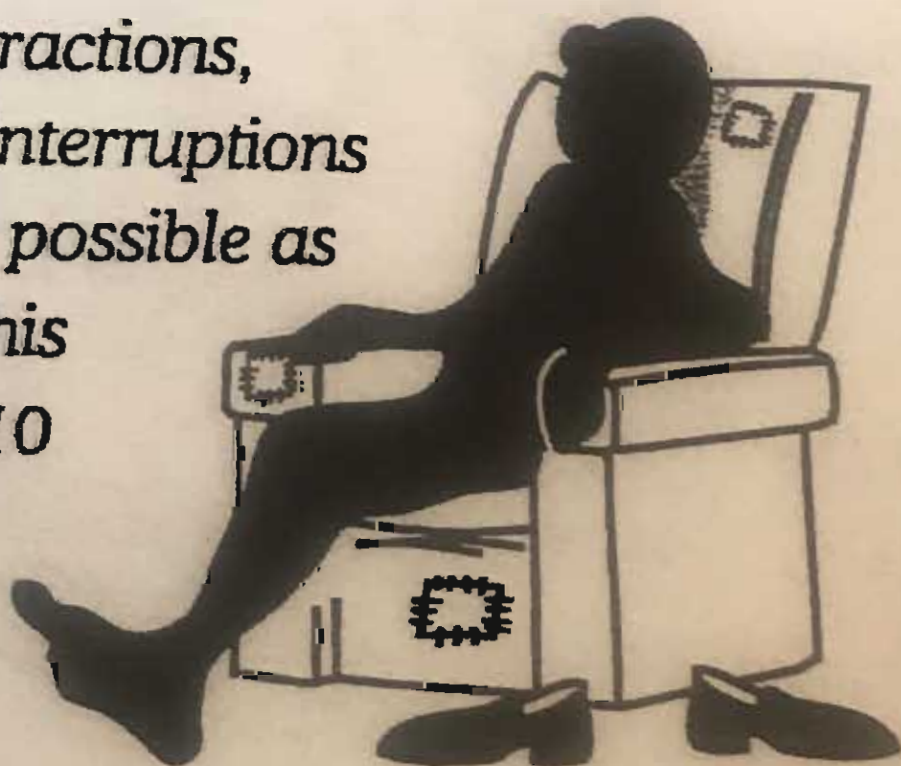
## The Basic Technique:

Clearing your mind forms the basis for other relaxation techniques such as meditation. The principle of clearing your mind is really quite simple - by allowing yourself to mentally focus on a single, peaceful word, thought, or image, you can create a feeling of deep relaxation. Clearing your mind helps you take a mental and physical retreat from the "outside world", and helps balance the stress of everyday life.



*Reduce distractions, noise, and interruptions as much as possible as you begin this*

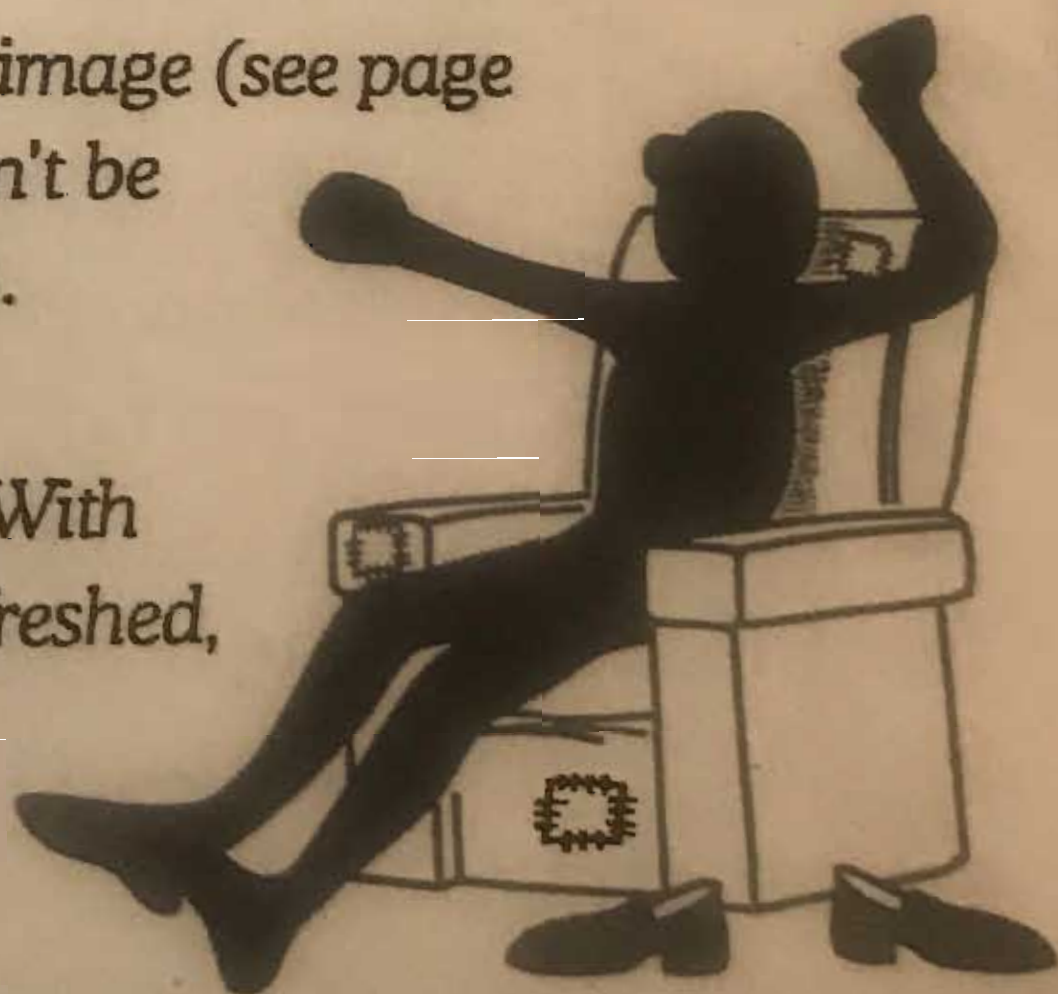
*exercise. Try to set aside 5-10 minutes daily to practice clearing your mind.*



*Sit comfortably, loosen any tight clothing, kick off your shoes, and relax yourself. Then, close your eyes and begin to breathe slowly and deeply.*

*Mentally focus on one peaceful word, thought or image (see page 21). If other thoughts should enter your mind, don't be discouraged - relax breathe deeply, and try again.*

*Stretch and exhale as you complete the exercise. With practice, clearing your mind can help you feel refreshed, energetic, and ready to tackle the next challenge.*





# Visualization

Visualization can be thought of as a "mental vacation" - a license to daydream. You can produce feelings of relaxation by simply using your imagination.

## The Basic Technique

Imagine a beautiful natural scene that you would like to be part of:

It could be a beach;

the ocean;

a pine woods;

a mountain view;

a river at sunrise;

a moonlit field....

whatever images arise....

Take a moment and feel this place....

Notice the smells -

the salt from the ocean;

the scent of flowers;

the pine forest....

hear the sounds -

waves lapping the shore;

the call of a loon;

the wind in the trees; birds chirping....

Feel the sand between your toes;

the warmth of the sun on your face;

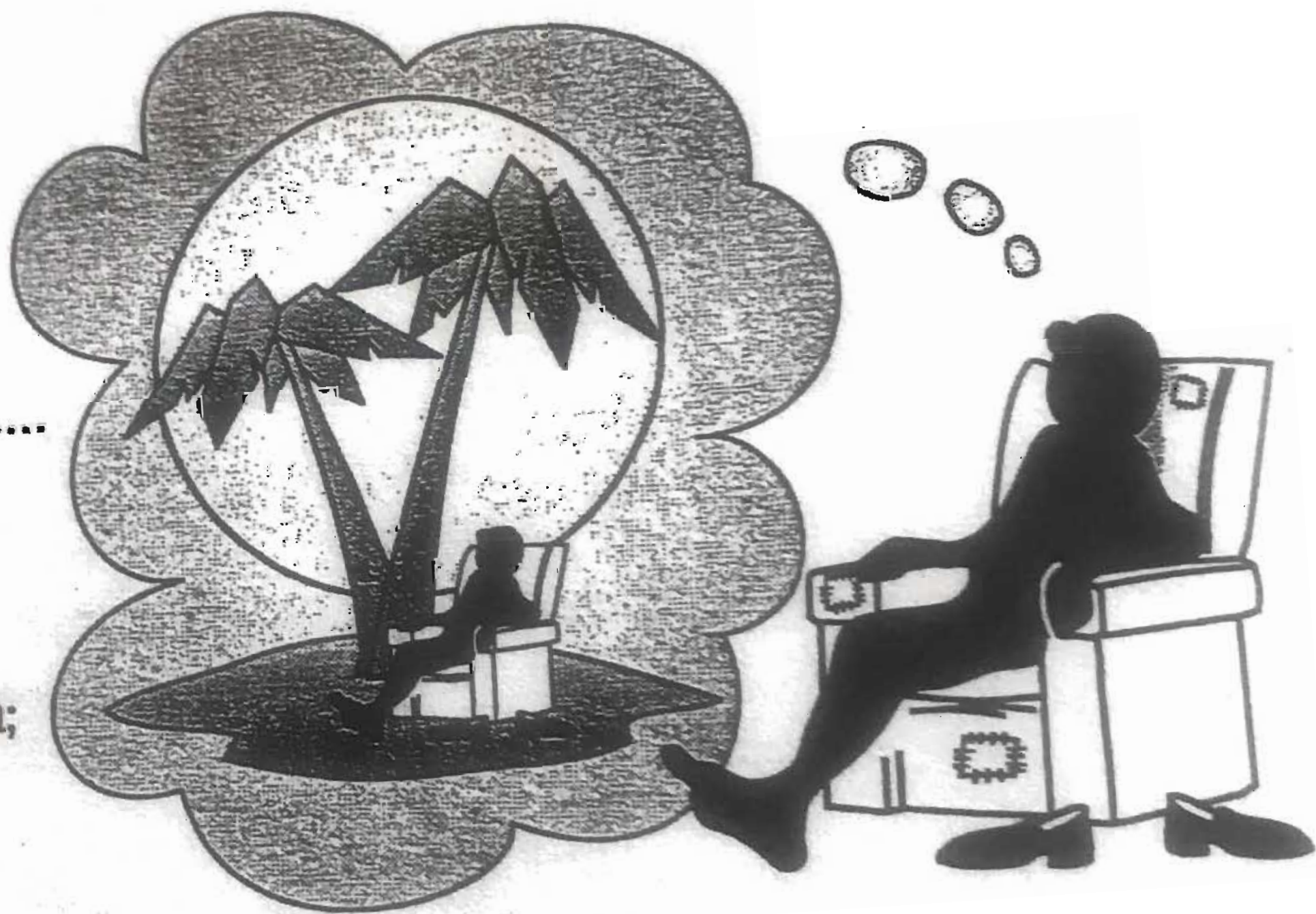
the light touch of a gentle breeze....

See the colours - the bright yellow sun;

the blue shimmering water;

the lush green forest....

Whatever comes to you....  
Stay in this place for a few minutes.



Your Imagination can give you a mental vacation. Choose one specific scene or a variety of scenes. Scenes may be familiar or unfamiliar to you. Notice as much detail as possible.

Practice regularly (2-4 times a day) until you feel good. Use whenever anxious or tense.



# Stretching

One of your automatic physical responses to stress is muscle tension. A simple, easy way to loosen up tight muscles and combat stress is to do stretching exercises. The following exercises take only a few minutes and can be done at home or at work during "coffee" or lunch breaks. You might wish to check with a health professional before starting these exercises.



**Back Stretch** While sitting, stretch forward, rest your body on your lap, and relax your head and neck. Hold for about a minute, then press on your thighs to help yourself sit back up.

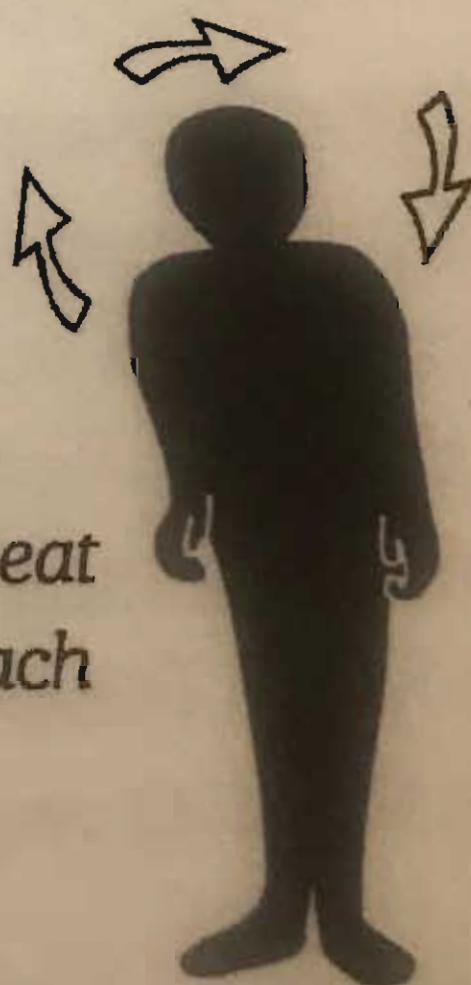
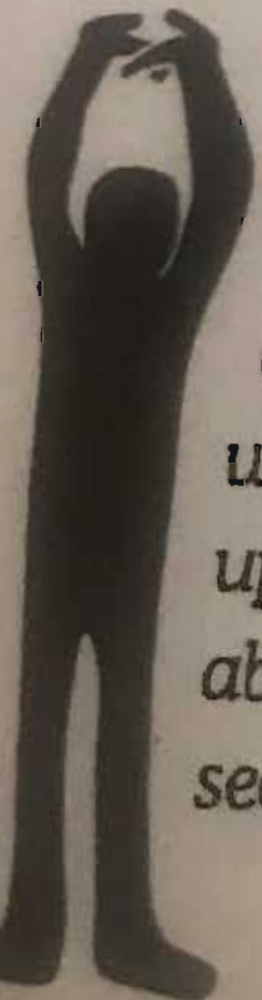
**Passive Back Stretch** Lie on the floor with your legs on a chair as shown. Relax, pressing your lower back onto the floor. Rest in this position for several minutes.

**Leg Stretch** With one foot on a support, slowly lean forward. Bend from your hips, and keep your back straight. Repeat the stretch 5 times on each leg.

**Shoulder & Arm Stretch** Hold your hands together with fingers interlaced and stretch overhead with palms upward. Hold about 30 seconds.

**Neck Stretch** While standing or sitting, slowly rotate your head in a circle to the right without moving your shoulders. Then, rotate to the left and repeat five times on each side.

**Upper Body Stretch** With your feet comfortably apart, reach overhead and stretch to the side. (Try not to move your hips.) Hold for 30 seconds, then switch sides.





## Improving Our “Internal Environment”



**Develop a positive attitude toward life.** Put stressors in a favourable context. If you can convince yourself that some of the stress is useful or necessary, you will reduce the aftereffects of stress. Use the power of positive thinking; your attitude determines to what degree you perceive any experience as positive or negative. People have some control over how they choose to see things.

**Put things in perspective.** When we identify what is controllable in life and what is not, we can more easily accept what we cannot change. Anticipate change and crisis and plan how you will deal with stresses and disappointment. Remember, the ability to handle stress comes from within. Ask ourselves, “How important is this really - in the scheme of things.” Then save up your energy for the BIG issues in life. By accepting our limits and choosing beliefs that help us deal with life, we can feel a sense of purpose and inner peace.

**Positive Self-Talk.** Self talk means telling yourself what you can or can't do. Shut off negative messages about what you should do and where you should be versus what you are able to do and where you are. Positive self-talk is saying “I can” and setting your mind to meet the challenge at hand. Positive thoughts about ourselves are just as realistic as negative ones.





# Attitude

by Charles Swindoll



*"The longer I live, the more  
I realize the impact of **attitude** on life.*

**Attitude**, to me, is more important than facts.

*It is more important than the past, than education, than money,  
than circumstances, than failures, than successes,  
than what other people think or say or do.*

*It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill.*

*It will make or break a company.... a church.... a home.*

*The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the  
**attitude** we will embrace for that day.*

*We cannot change our past....*

*we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way.*

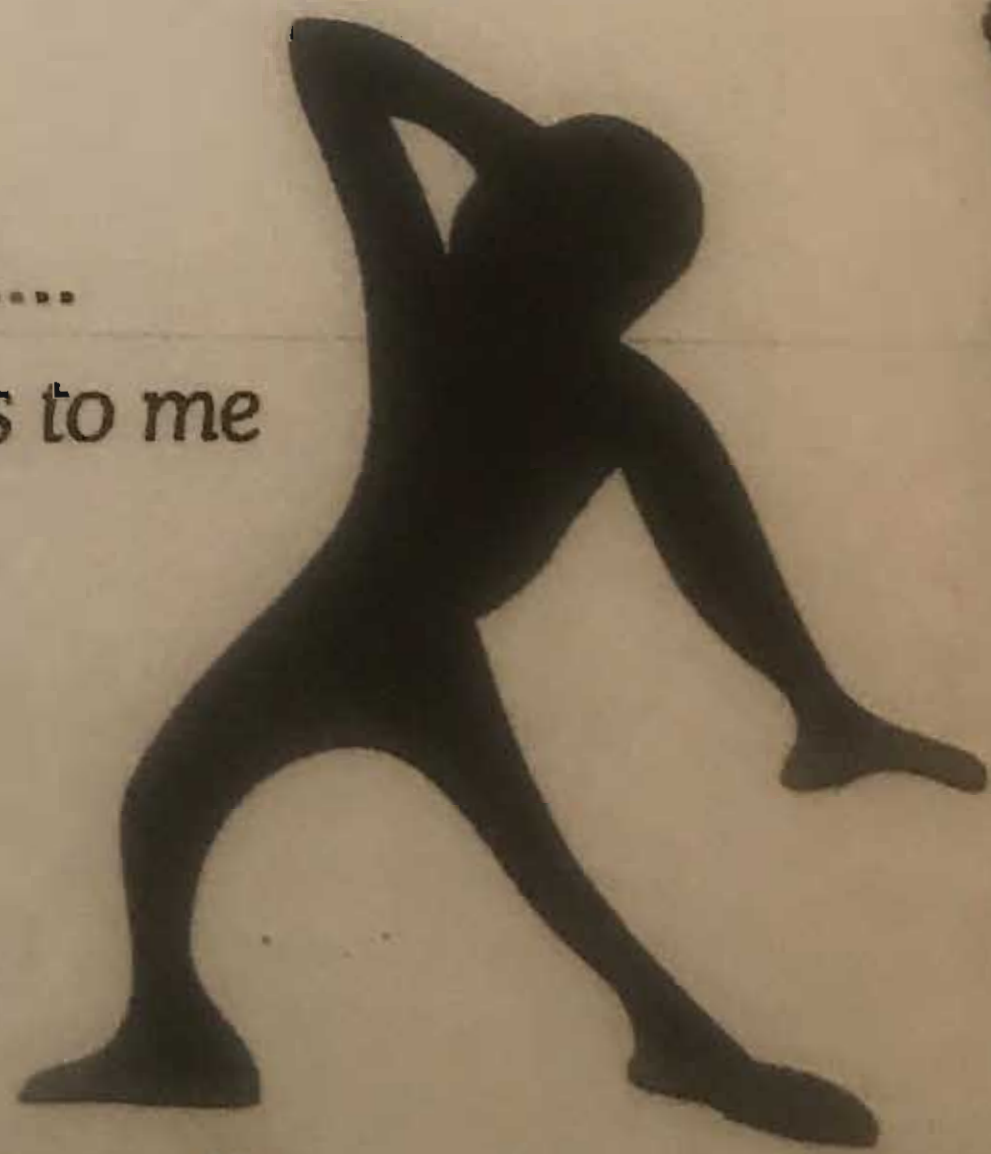
*We cannot change the inevitable.*

*The only thing we can do is play on the  
one string we have, and that is our **attitude**....*

*I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me  
and 90% how I react to it.*

*And so it is with you....*

*we are in charge of our **Attitudes**."*







Developed by  
Cole Harbour / Eastern H.R.M. Community Mental Health