Clearly, universal coping prescriptions which define the best or most effective coping techniques are likely to be of limited value when they do not consider the effects of differences in both the individual and the environment in determining what will be effective coping options. (Newton & Keenan, 1985, p. 124).

When people think of leisure they generally think of their free time, time away from the demands of work and the chores of home life. Leisure is time during which we can rest and recuperate from the more demanding aspects of daily life. Leisure can involve many diverse activities, including sports and exercise programs, outdoor pursuits such as camping or fishing, cultural pursuits such as attending theatre and visiting museums, and social, hobby and recreational activities such as gardening, photography, reading, and visiting friends. All of these activities, to varying degrees, can help us to relax and rejuvenate so that we can better cope with the stresses encountered in our daily lives.

This view of leisure is found not only in popular imagination but in the professional literature on stress management. Research shows that people value their recreation and leisure pursuits precisely because of their recuperative role. This kind of result reinforces the commonly held view that play and leisure activities of all kinds are an important means of coping with stressful circumstances.

This is not to say that all leisure activity is equally beneficial for all people. There are no universal stress management techniques that apply equally well to all people in all situations. In considering how best to manage stress one must take into account the circumstances that create the stress as well as the characteristics of the person experiencing the stress. We will discuss circumstances of employment (e.g., manager, professional, clerical) that lead to different kinds of stress and different preferences for leisure time activities as well as a prominent personality characteristic (Type A behavior pattern) that predisposes one to greater risk for coronary heart problems and suggests a particular kind of leisure prescription. But first, a definition of stress and stress management.

WHAT IS STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT?

Stress itself is an amorphous term. Often it is defined in terms of its source, the pressures and demands in our environment or in ourselves that lead to feelings of discomfort, anxiety and depression. From this view anything of an aversive nature, or that we dislike or find unpleasant is a stressor for us. For example, our home stressors such as unpleasant family commitments, financial problems, marital problems, problems with children, sickness in the family can lead to major stress reactions.

Sometimes stress is defined in terms of its consequences, i.e., our physical, emotional, intellectual and behavioral reactions to a stressor. Physical problems such as low energy, frequent headaches, inability to shake a cold, tenseness, high blood pressure, ulcers and coronary heart disease; emotional problems such as feelings of frustration, irritability, negativism, anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and low self-esteem; intellectual symptoms like rigid and inflexible thinking, poor concentration, forgetting, negative self-evaluations; and behavioral symptoms such as reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, social withdrawal, inability to to get along with people and increased use of drugs and alcohol are all signs of excessive stress.

Like stress, the term stress management is ill-defined.
The term has been applied to a wide variety of techniques most of which have little in common and which counteract stress in very different ways. In general, stress management implies addressing the causes or consequences of stressors in one way or another. One school of thought is that individual coping occurs in two major phases: (i) an active coping phase, and (ii) a rest phase. These phases are said to parallel a number of physiological responses occurring in the body. The active phase is associated with waking, muscle contraction, sympathetic nervous system arousal and increased activity of stress hormones. It is characterized by a sense of excitement, focused attention, and mental effort. In contrast, the rest phase is associated with sleeping, muscle relaxation, parasympathetic nervous system relaxation and non activation of stress hormones. It is characterized by the experience of tranquility, the absence of striving, and the experience of drowsiness as people shift toward sleep. Typically we move back and forth between the phases sometimes using active strategies to confront and deal with stressors and sometimes using rest type strategies to deal with the consequences of stress. The active phase of coping appears primarily when we seek to directly influence or change the sources of stress in ourselves or in the environment. These strategies may involve directly confronting the stressor, through problem solving and planning in order to decrease the demands and pressures we experience. The rest phase endeavors to reduce the cognitive, physiological and emotional arousal.

As such, it is focusing primarily on the consequences of stress by attempting to regulate these reactions.

In addition to dealing with stressors and regulating arousal, stress management strategies can be aimed at improving overall mental and/or physical health in an effort to make us more resistant to the deleterious effects of stressors. Leisure activities do this. They operate both as a buffer against stress and as a way of improving physical and mental health so that we can better withstand future stress. Having a network of friends and colleagues with whom one can share problems, and from whom one can obtain needed emotional support and advice reduces the impact of stressors on our health without changing either the stressor or the level of fitness of the individual.

Leisure activities serve to take us away from the stressful environments at work and at home. Coping in this sense is facilitated by distancing ourselves from the stressful circumstances, by diverting attention to more pleasant matters, and by releasing tension through alternative activities such as physical exercise.

Researchers have identified three ways in which exercise impacts positively on our ability to withstand stress. First, long-term aerobic exercise increases cardiovascular fitness, which in turn, decreases the level of physiological arousal that normally occurs during stressful situations. Aerobic exercise affects many of the same systems that are implicated in the physiological response to stress. By exercising these systems regularly and improving endurance, we are less likely to re-
spond excessively when stressful situations are encountered and the systems are more likely to return to baseline levels more quickly when they do respond. Second, exercise can bring about a state of relaxation, a dissipation of the pent-up frustration, hostility and tension. The person who uses his/her lunch break to jog, swim or play racquet sports, for example, will be dissipating the morning's tension as well as improving his/ her cardiovascular fitness so that the afternoon stressors will have less negative impact than otherwise would be the case. A third positive impact of exercise is the positive feeling about oneself that often occurs as a concomitant of exercise. This occurs regardless of one's level of fitness or any physiological changes produced by the exercise.

HOW DOES THE KIND OF STRESS WE EXPERIENCE ON THE JOB INFLUENCE OUR CHOICE OF LEISURE ACTIVITIES?

Researchers suggest three hypotheses concerning how stress may influence preferences in leisure activities. The first hypothesis, called the spill-over-generalization hypothesis, states that people who perform constrained repetitive jobs are likely to choose leisure activities that are passive and undemanding. The theory states that undemanding jobs are stressful; this creates frustration, depression, and fatigue. People who feel this way are not likely to seek demanding active leisure activities but will instead seek more solitary, passive activities outside the job. In contrast to this view is the supplementary compensation hypothesis which states that people in constrained routine jobs will seek challenging, stimulating leisure to compensate for the frustrations of work. Stress at work energizes people's nonwork choices and directs the expression of their choices. A variant of this hypothesis, the reactive-compensation hypothesis, states that where stress is caused by too much stimulation, or overload (high level jobs) people will seek passive, recuperative activities that provide a contrast to the excess work demands.

Although there is a paucity of research, what is available suggests that these hypotheses are not unequivocally supported. There is evidence that people in over-stimulating jobs (e.g., managers) do prefer leisure activities that are passive and recuperative (e.g., escape from routine, relaxation, less sociability) when they are under stress. For managers, higher stress was associated with fewer hobby and organizational activities, fewer leisure activities that provided the opportunity for influence or control over the environment or people, and fewer leisure activities that provided a variety or mixture of behaviors or interests. And there is evidence that people (e.g., clerics) in under-stimulating jobs prefer activities that are inactive and recuperative. For clerics, high stress is associated with less involvement in leisure activities leading to influence or control over the environment or people, less variety of activities, behaviors or interests, less pressure (mental or physical strain on one's capacities), less skill utilization and less interac-
tion with other people. There is also evidence that persons in over-stimulating jobs prefer leisure activities that are challenging and stimulating. Professionals, for example, who like managers, are usually exposed to over-stimulation on the job do not tend to withdraw from social contact or further stimulation when under high stress, although they do prefer the opportunity to engage in leisure activities that allow escape from routine. And for tradesmen, there is no difference in their preference for, or engagement in different leisure activities as a function of stress. Thus, it appears persons in both over-stimulating and under-stimulating jobs engage in both stimulating and non-stimulating leisure activities.

The lack of stronger support for these hypotheses suggests that other variables have considerable importance in determining one's choice of leisure activities. These are individual differences, or personality variables, to which we now turn.

PERSONALITY, STRESS AND CHOICE OF LEISURE ACTIVITIES?

There is little discussion in the literature about how personality variables influence the kind and extent of stress we experience, and how this relates to the kind of leisure activities we choose. The one notable exception is the type A behavior pattern. Type A persons live in a highly stressful world they create for themselves. Type A behavior was first discovered in the late 1950's when a secretary for two California cardiologists, Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, remarked to them that their waiting room chairs were becoming worn down, although only in the front of the seats. Friedman and Rosenman had already noticed that many of their cardiac patients were 'impatient,' people who arrived exactly on time for their appointments and appeared to be in a great hurry to leave. This was the most visible symptom of something the Drs' first called 'the hurry sickness' and subsequently named the Type A behavior pattern.'

This pattern was an 'action-emotion complex' characterized by 'ambitiousness, aggressiveness, competitiveness and impatience;' by forms of behavior 'such as muscle tenseness, alertness, rapid and emphatic speech stylistics, and an accelerated pace' of living; and by emotional responses of irritation, increased hostility and anger. Type A behavior was a way some people had of looking at their lives and trying to control their world. (Fischman, 1987, p. 26).

It was first thought that type B was the opposite of type A, but later type B was viewed as a different coping style. Type B's were 'more relaxed, easygoing, readily satisfied, and less often bothered by any habitual need for achievement and acquisition.'

Early research showed that type A men had twice as many heart attacks or other forms of heart disease as did anyone else. And this was true regardless of other variables known to be related to heart disease such as diet and age. In 1978, type A behavior was officially recognized as risk factor for heart disease by a National Institute of Health panel. Later research, however, showed that many type A persons do not have an increased probability of heart disease. Only those with a hostile, bitter, suspicious, resentful component showed increased risk of heart disease. Regardless of the precise nature, it seems clear that there is something about
the type A behavior pattern that predisposes one to greater risk of coronary heart disease, the ultimate consequence of a stressful lifestyle.

A number of programs have been devised to reduce type A behavior and recurrent heart attacks. One program, supervised by Friedman, focuses on four aspects of type A behavior, anger, impatience, aggravation and irritation using a therapy group format. This is accompanied by exercises such as 'not wearing a watch for a week' or 'standing in front of a mirror and smiling,' or 'making a meal last a specified length of time,' designed to modify type A behavior. Evaluation of these programs is in progress; preliminary anecdotal evidence suggests that they are succeeding in changing type A behavior patterns and reducing the number of potential heart attacks.

Although we could find no research studies bearing on the topic, it is not difficult to imagine that type A’s seek out active, challenging, competitive, potentially stressful leisure activities, leading to irritability, hostility and anger, the exact opposite of that intended. They may be attracted to competitive activities, physical or mental which they can’t always win or control. When this happens they feel a sense of failure, a sense of not being in control; they become frustrated, irritable and angry and experience a full-blown stress reaction. The leisure activity itself then, becomes a source of stress rather than an opportunity for diversion, relaxation and for the recuperation of depleted energy. What is needed are leisure programs that offer type A’s an opportunity to participate in activities that counteract their usual behavior patterns, or at least not exacerbate them. Individual activities, for example such as swimming, yoga, weight lifting, gardening, reading come to mind, or even team activities which do not put a premium on winning would seem appropriate. Leisure activity could provide type A’s with an opportunity for social support (people with whom they can interact on a more informal basis), something they tend to lack. Research shows that type A’s who have a greater number of friends and acquaintances suffer less from their stressful behavior pattern than type A’s who have fewer number of friends.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, stress reactions are composed of at least three components, physical, cognitive/emotional and behavioral. Coping with, or managing these reactions can take many forms, of which leisure is only one. Leisure itself, involves many different activities that do not all address the sources of stress, or the components of stress reactions in the same way. People will use different leisure activities depending on the nature of the stress they experience (i.e., whether they are over or under stimulated) and on their characteristic behavior patterns (i.e., whether they are Type A or Type B). Managing stress in whatever form, is both an active and a passive (restive) process serving to change people's characteristics ways of feeling and relating to the world. Leisure and recreation plays an important role in this regard.

Researchers suggest three hypotheses concerning how work stress may influence preferences in leisure activities. The first hypothesis, (1) called the spill over-generalization hypothesis, suggesting that people who perform constrained repetitive jobs are likely to choose leisure activities that are passive and undemanding; (2) the supplementary compensation hypothesis which states that people in constrained routine jobs will seek challenging, stimulating leisure to compensate for the frustrations of work; and (3) the reactive-compensation hypothesis, which states that when stress is caused by too much stimulation, or overload (high level jobs) people will seek passive, recuperative activities that provide a contrast to the excess work demands. Available research suggests that these hypotheses are not unequivocally supported.

It is speculated that for persons with a type A behavior pattern there is danger that leisure activities themselves can become a source of stress rather than an opportunity for diversion, relaxation and recuperation of depleted energy and that what is needed are leisure programs that offer type A’s an opportunity to participate in activities that counteract their usual behavior patterns, or at least not exacerbate them. Leisure activities for type A’s could also provide them with an opportunity for social support (people with whom they can interact on a more informal basis), something they tend to lack.

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