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**Stress Management Center**

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## Stress Management

Expert Opinion: Family Supports

### Human Contact and Affection are Powerful Stress Reducers

An interview with psychiatrist Charles Nemeroff, M.D., Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

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Psychiatrist Charles Nemeroff, M.D.

#### Q: Is human contact itself a kind of stress reliever?

A: Intimacy can very much retard the stress response, and we know from the clinical psychological literature that intimacy, closeness, friendship, can prevent one from feeling the effects of stress, and in fact there's lots of evidence that such partnerships can actually prevent not only the acute feelings that occur after a stressful response, but actually can prevent chronic stress. So this is a highly desirable phenomenon. In fact we know that widow, widowers and widows do much more poorly when exposed to stress than those who still have a lifelong partner.

#### Q: Why are affection and physical contact able to reduce stress?

A: Well, first, we know that contact between individuals can actually reduce stress-hormone responsiveness, so that in animals we know that animals that have tactile stimulation, that are stroked, petted, and cared for have much lower stress responses, in terms of their endocrine response, than do animals that aren't treated that way. And I suspect this is true for humans. In terms of sexual contact, it's a much more complicated story, certainly not my area of expertise, but I suspect that, the whole area of sexual intimacy would be viewed as extraordinarily anti-stress in some individuals, and contrarily might be viewed as quite stressful to others.

#### Q: How important is regular exercise in reducing stress?

A: Well exercise is certainly associated with euphoria in some individuals, thought to be due to releasing an endogenous opiate hormone called beta-endorphin. Whether that's true or not is certainly arguable, at least if that's why there's

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such a phenomenon as runner's high. But I've always looked at exercise as good for you medically, and sort of like chicken soup—it might help and it certainly won't hurt, so you might as well encourage it.

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