Is stress just part of living? It sure seems that way at times, all the more so when you’re providing care at home for a loved one who’s undergone a serious heart event or procedure. “Living in the United States today means one is living in a constant state of change, adjustment and stress,” said David Wakefield, PhD, a licensed psychologist and licensed marital and family therapist at Southwestern Regional Medical Center in Tulsa, Okla., and an adjunct professor at Oral Roberts University. “Controlling stress is so important because it is a part of everyday living in our culture today.”

Stress can have a very deleterious effect on one’s health. “Stress can be disruptive to everyday living. It is not uncommon to feel confused, overwhelmed or helpless by challenges that one experiences,” Dr. Wakefield said. “Stress also has a negative impact on our immune system. If one’s immune system is not strong, one is susceptible to many kinds of physical problems or health challenges. Having creative ways to manage stress is important to staying healthy.”

Carolyn Dean, MD, ND, sees specific physiological problems that stress can cause. “Prolonged stress can cause many health issues so controlling stress is very important. For example, prolonged stress triggers the loss of magnesium and sodium as adrenaline is pumped into the body by the fight-or-flight response,” said Dr. Dean, who is a member of the Advisory Board of the Nutritional Magnesium Association. “The highest amount of magnesium in the body is found in the heart. If the heart muscle is low in magnesium, that muscle goes into contraction, causing heart palpitations and angina, high blood pressure and potential heart attack or stroke.”

Minimizing Stress

But there are very effective ways for keeping stress at bay, even while caregiving. As Dr. Wakefield noted, there’s an easy way to remember how to do it: the ABCs of stress management:

“Acknowledge that life presents many challenges,” Dr.
Wakefield said. “Acknowledge also that being a caregiver brings even greater challenges.

*Be* proactive in making a plan to deal with the new stressors one is facing. Start by building on the strengths you already have,” Dr. Wakefield continued. “Then make a list of deficiencies or areas where you will need help from others. In my experience, when people go through a crisis in life, the number one predictor in how well one will survive a crisis is directly related to how much social support one has. Dedicate a point person to communicate the patient needs to everyone who is involved in helping. Humble yourself and ask for others to help. Find out what is needed for the patient and coordinate with those who are willing to help. Delegate tasks to others.”

Finally, “*Care* for the caregiver: The most important thing a caregiver can do is to take care of themselves first,” Dr. Wakefield concluded. “When you fly you receive preflight instructions like, ‘If the cabin should become depressurized, oxygen masks will fall from the ceiling. If you are traveling with a child or elderly person be sure to put your oxygen mask on yourself first and then help the person you are traveling with!’ This advice is very important for caregivers. If you become exhausted in your efforts to love someone back to health, then who will help the patient? If one isn’t careful there will be two patients instead of just one. This advice is especially difficult for female caregivers. Women tend to help everyone else first and themselves last. When one is a caregiver you have to renew your energy daily so you will have the strength to help the patient for one more day.”

**Ask for Help**

One key to being an effective caregiver is realizing you can’t go it alone. Dr. Dean said that it’s important to ask for help when you need it — “Anytime you feel the quality of your work and your own well-being will suffer if you don’t get help,” she said.

“Many people don’t offer to help because they don’t know if their offer will be accepted, so many caregivers are surprised at the outpouring of help when they ask. It should always be OK to ask for help from a colleague or boss at work or look for answers in books or classes as applicable,” she added.

**Home for the Holidays**

The holiday season is nigh upon us, and this can be an especially stressful time of year for many people. For caregivers, it can add an additional element of stress. “Most people feel they need to see their family during the holidays and taking time off work, traveling and interacting with family members they don’t get along with adds tremendous stress,” said Dr. Dean.

Dr. Wakefield offers some helpful tips for handling holiday stress. “Take a step back and let others help during the holidays,” he said. “Make a plan to turn caregiving over to someone else over Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Year’s so you can enjoy at least one of the holidays with your family and get some rest.

“Reduce the traditions to a reasonable amount. Set reasonable expectations for the holidays that are achievable.

“Set boundaries for family members: what they are expected to do to help this year and what kind of behaviors are off limits this year. This year is different.

“Learn to enjoy the gift of life and the gift of fellowship without spending money. It can still be special. This could be a great time for reflection and sharing great memories.”

**Mended Hearts Caregiver Thrives in Her Role**

Helen Ledoux never asked to be a caregiver. But when her husband Arthur had a major coronary heart attack at the age of 56, she found herself in exactly that role. “It was just all overwhelming, a whole new ball game — a new normal,” said Ledoux. “Really, we didn’t know if we were doing everything right when we first came home.”

To combat the stress of caregiving, Helen took control of the situation. “Right off the bat, I made a binder and just kept everything together for his prescriptions, a checklist of what he had to take and when, and things like that,” she said.

It wasn’t easy, but Helen found a way to be a very effective caregiver for Arthur, thanks in no small part to Chapter 149. “After three months receiving a total of seven stents, we attended cardiac rehab where we learned about Ron Manriquez at Mended Hearts Chapter 149,” said Helen. “Ron and Mended Hearts have been a great support for me and Arthur for the last three years.” Helen also praised Angela Manriquez, current president of Chapter 149, for her ongoing support of the couple.
The conference rooms were packed and full of great energy, with 300 engaged Mended Hearts and Mended Little Hearts members during the annual national Education and Training Conference held at the Westin in downtown Indianapolis. This year’s conference program was rated as one of the best ever! There were outstanding presentations from members, healthcare professionals and motivational talks from the many general sessions and member-led workshops!

Highlights included cardiovascular medical trends updates from several nationally recognized speakers: Patrick O’Gara, MD, FACC, Brigham and Women’s Hospital, Boston, Mass., President of the American College of Cardiology; Charles Chambers, MD, FSCAI, Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, Hershey, Pa., President of the Society for Cardiovascular Angiography and Interventions; David Sabgir, MD, Walk with a Doc Founder, Mount Carmel Clinical Cardiovascular Specialists, Westerville, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus; and Sam Sears, PhD, Director of Health Psychology, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

The final conference day, included an inspiring and commanding presentation by the Singing Motivator, Gary Griesser of Burlington, Ky. All who attended can attest to how emotionally touched and thankful they were to have experienced Gary’s mastery of blended story, song and humor! It was truly a journey we’ll never forget (outside his heart experience, that is).

There were so many Mended Hearts members who planned the Conference and made it a success! A special thank you goes to the Program Committee who planned the educational sessions’ content, workshop topics and identified presenters: Lynn Frierson, Program Chair, with members Cathy Byington, Randy Gay, Jim Oldfield, Jana Stewart and LaRue Tart.

Dedication and countless hours were also given by the local Indianapolis chapter members for various logistical arrangements and helping with conference registration on site: Linda Mason, Central Region ARD, Hal Hatch, Joy Diamond, and Benny and Cynthia Stepp. Special thanks to the members of the following chapters who assisted with the registration: Indianapolis/Circle City Chapter 78...
In her presentation, Mended Hearts Executive Director Michele Packard-Milam, CAE, addressed the changing nature of the mission of Mended Hearts and Mended Little Hearts, how the new reality of independence will impact the organization, and what all members can help with and benefit from the new direction the organization is taking.

“A lot has changed. For decades, we were under the wings of larger, more dominant organizations, but that all changed this year,” said Packard-Milam. “We are no longer receiving any guaranteed revenue from anyone. Our infrastructure must now be funded by allocating a portion of every dollar we raise.”

That means challenges lie ahead, but Mended Hearts and Mended Little Hearts are strong and focused enough to manage those changes. “These changes also mean that we are now independent, and in my opinion, that’s a good thing,” said Packard-Milam. “We can now take our brand out into the open and grow awareness of Mended Hearts as a separate, strong and independent organization.”

Growing even stronger will be part of the formula for success. “For this to work, however, we have to pull together — the chapters and the National Office. Our infrastructure needs to be stronger,” she said. “We need to grow our financial assets so that we’re not living from one project to another and so we can afford to do the things we need to do to reach the maximum number of patients and families.”

There is a plan for doing just that. “To get us to the next level, we need more of a lot of things. We need more sponsors, and we need to grow beyond pharma and medical equipment,” she explained. “We need to get Mended Little Hearts on the large sponsorship map. We need to think on a bigger scale, and go in through the top of the hospital systems instead of the individual hospitals. We need to broaden our models to include all CV diseases. More than anything, we need to reverse the trend of our shrinking membership by appealing to more age groups, more ethnicities and different types of patients. We are not just about surgical patients anymore.”

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National Awards

Mended Hearts award winners from the 62nd Annual Education & Training Conference

Mended Heart of the Year

Each year, Mended Hearts honors one volunteer who has demonstrated outstanding service in support of the Mended Hearts mission over the course of that person’s membership. The criteria for the Mended Heart of the Year include length of service participation on national boards, committees and task forces; and other achievements that advance the MH mission. This year’s winner is:

Lynn Frierson, Johnson City, Tenn. — Chapter 259

Lynn Frierson was on the receiving end of a Mended Hearts visit some 19 years ago, after her own heart surgery. Now a 19-year veteran of Mended Hearts’ Johnson City chapter, Lynn became involved with Mended Hearts at the request of her cardiac rehab staff following her own procedure. She received training, became accredited as a visitor and has never looked back.

For the past 9 years, Lynn has served on the hospital auxiliary board at Johnson City Medical Center and has developed a wonderful relationship with the hospital and its staff. Two years ago, she received the highest volunteer award from the auxiliary thanks to her volunteering and leadership with Mended Hearts. Nationally, Lynn served as the Southern Region’s ARD for Tennessee and Arkansas for many years. In that role, she has developed several new chapters and satellites in her region. For the past three years, Lynn has served Mended Hearts as the Conference Program Subcommittee Chair, where she recruited an annual group of members to oversee the development of program and speakers for the annual national conference.

Today Lynn continues her visiting activities and serves as president of the Johnson City chapter, in addition to her other areas of service to our organization.

President’s Cup Award

Winners of the President’s Cup Award demonstrate strong qualities of engagement and involvement. Criteria include growth in the number of visits and visitors trained over the previous year; attendance at chapter meetings and other chapter-sponsored events; increase in membership and/or activities in the chapter; and local public recognition, among other criteria. Winning chapters cannot receive the same award again for three years.

This year’s winners are:

President’s Cup Award — 1-39 members
Chapter 11, Kentuckiana, Louisville, Ky.
Sandy Larimore, President

Being so close in proximity to Indianapolis, the chapter sent 10 members to the Conference. For more on Chapter 11, see the Regional Update article on page 18 of the Summer 2014 issue of Heartbeat and on page 17 of this issue.

President’s Cup Award — 40-99 members
Chapter 115, The Bluegrass, Lexington, Ky.
Francis Carpenter, President

This busy chapter sent six members to the National Conference in 2014 along with another four to the Regional Cluster Meeting. Thanks to the heavy involvement of its 21 accredited visitors who make rounds at three area hospitals, Chapter 115 increased their face-to-face hospital visits and expanded their reach with follow-up phone calls to patients. For more information on chapter 115, see the Regional Update article on page 17.
President’s Cup Award — 100 or more members  
Chapter 127, Cookeville, Tenn.  
Pharoah Smithers, President

For more on Chapter 127, see the Regional Update article on page 16 of this issue of Heartbeat.

Mended Little Hearts Group Excellence Award

Criteria for the MLH Group Excellence Award include an active visiting program, annual report completed and annual group fee paid on time; at least five educational meetings per year; increasing membership; local public recognition; financial support for one coordinator to attend the annual conference, in addition to the lead coordinator; demonstrated work with community and local partners; conducting at least one congenital heart disease (CHD) awareness event; and providing care packages to families.

This year's winners are:

Mended Little Hearts Group Excellence Award
Mended Little Hearts of Phoenix
Vanessa Blutrich, Lead Coordinator

Mended Little Hearts Group Excellence Runner-Up
Mended Little Hearts of West Michigan
Jenna Wood, Lead Coordinator

For more about Mended Little Hearts of Phoenix, see the story on page 18. For information about Mended Little Hearts of West Michigan, see the story on page 8 of the Summer 2014 issue of Heartbeat.

Hospital of the Year

In this competitive category, choosing the Hospital of the Year is always very difficult for the Mended Hearts Executive Committee because there are always such deserving candidates. Nevertheless, a decision must be made.

To be considered, a hospital must provide Mended Hearts visitors reasonable access to patients, as well as access to the cath lab and to family visiting; meeting space for Mended Hearts; and space for literature, supplies and Mended Hearts volunteers’ personal items. The hospital must also provide consistent contact persons for visitors and tangible recognition of Mended Hearts contributions to their patient care program. Speakers and other personnel must be provided for meeting and other chapter needs, as well as other in-kind support. Past winners of the award are ineligible.

This year’s Hospital of the Year winner is:

Cookeville Regional Medical Center
Cookeville, Tenn.

This year’s winner clearly showed their support of Mended Hearts through their generous in-kind support and contributions given to Chapter 127 from Cookeville, Tenn. In addition to printing and mailing monthly newsletters, they also provided needed meeting rooms for fund-raising events, monthly meetings and special programs. The hospital purchased 15th anniversary pins to give to 15-year members and donated a birthday cake for the chapter’s 15 year anniversary celebration. Many special perks are provided for chapter accredited visitors: a 20% discount on hospital bills, free TB and flu shots, and free meals to Accredited Visitors on days they work. This year, Cookeville Regional Medical Center provided all-expense paid support for four members to attend the conference.

Internet Visitor of the Year

A nominee for this award must give a personal account of how they handled their heart event without giving medical advice. The nominee must be reaccredited every year and provide brief, yet supportive information that is timely and accurate. This year’s winner is:

Rick Fisher, Newport News, Va. — Chapter 119
A First-Time Attendee Relates Her Experiences

Michele Coleman was very excited about attending her first Mended Little Hearts Leadership Training and CHD Symposium. “As a new coordinator for the Washington, D.C., group I felt like it was important to get engaged right away,” she explained. “I was inspired by the other group leaders I met through the various Facebook sites — they really felt passionate about it, and I wanted to learn from them what I could to help my group really thrive.”

Of course, she had another reason to attend, as well. “My son Dylan (now almost 2) was born with multiple CHDs and I was inspired by him to go and be as close to others who were engaged in CHD awareness, research and advocacy as I could,” she said. “I feel that I owe it to him and his future.”

And is she ever glad she did. There were many highlights for Michele, but several stood out. “Being able to have in-person contact with people you ‘know’ through social and electronic media is really valuable and important for forging long lasting bonds,” she said. “As a volunteer (who has a full time job and is a full-time mom of two boys), it makes it easier to give your time and energy when you meet other people whom you respect and are in the same position you are doing the same thing and doing so much good in their communities. We know that we are not alone in the fight against CHDs, but knowing that you are not alone in leading the local fight is tremendously reassuring.”

The CHD Symposium, which was open to the public, made a particularly strong impression with Michele. “The symposium alone is worth the effort just to hear from all these doctors and CHD advocates who are on the leading edge of research and treatment was amazing. Being able to make a medical connection with high-caliber medical professionals while I was there was great for me and my son,” she said. “It’s really empowering to learn how we can take charge in taking care of our children’s health.”

National Newsletter Awards

Newsletters are the lifeblood of Mended Hearts chapters, keeping fellow chapter members abreast of local and national activities, while providing important health and lifestyle information to improve patients’ lives. There are three divisions for the Newsletter Award: monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly. This year’s winners are:

MONTHLY NEWSLETTERS

Award of Excellence
*The Pacer*
Alice Slucher, Editor
Lexington, Ky., Chapter 115

Honorable Mention
*Cardioactivities*
Merlin Loch, Editor
San Diego, Calif., Chapter 62

BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTERS

Award of Excellence
*The Mended Heartbeat*
Debbie Pollock, Editor
Woodlands, Texas, Chapter 341

Honorable Mention
*Heart to Heart*
Ron Michaud, Editor
Salisbury, Md., Chapter 221

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTERS

Award of Excellence
*Heart Notes*
Kristin Castiglione, Editor
Dayton, Ohio, Chapter 61

Honorable Mention
*Granite City Beaters*
Bridget Klein, Editor
St. Cloud, Minn., Chapter 10

For a complete list of awards from the 62nd Mended Hearts National Education & Training Conference, see the Mended Hearts website at www.mendedhearts.org.