Stress is the way of life—a condition that is only compounded by an individual being a physician. One solution to the dilemma of managing stress lies in prevention. Some proponents of this method have suggested prescreening medical school applicants for ability to handle stress and teaching values clarification during medical school (Spears). Others have suggested making support groups, stress management techniques and methods for early identification of problems during medical training a part of every medical school (Hoferik, Gerber).

Dealing with the problems and stresses of being a physician is not easy. There continues to be a macho attitude underlying the commonly held view that internships and residencies should be trials by ordeal. Until this basic underlying attitude changes, it will be difficult to address the stresses of medical training. In the meantime, courses or workshops in primary prevention techniques such as stress recognition, stress management and interpersonal skills could be highly beneficial for medical students, residents, and, in the long run, physicians.

The literature is long on identifying the problems of physician stress and impairment, but short on adequate solutions (Spears). Although about one in five Fortune 500 companies has developed some sort of stress management program for their top-level executives (Walis), this would appear impractical for the individual physician or the under-funded medical school.

There is no single approach to stress management that is right for everyone—as the response to stress varies widely, so does the treatment. However, the same advice that physicians give patients for identifying stress and learning to respond adaptively is applicable to physicians themselves (Spears): one person may need a prescription for exercise and time off, while another may need psychotherapy.

The first step to stress management in any situation, however, is recognition of stress, coupled with knowledge of one's own positive and negative coping mechanisms. There are several specific basic stress reduction techniques, but physicians in particular need to address time management, relaxation techniques, social support, support groups,
professional counseling, and the choice of the best practice alternative. Prevention of stress through incorporating stress management techniques into everyday life is of ultimate importance.

Recognition of Stress

It seems to be very difficult for professionals to recognize and especially to admit that stress may be affecting them and their health. But by watching for the effects of stress, it is possible to take early corrective action to prevent impairment. The signs of stress are classic, but vary from person to person. Thus, each individual needs to know her/his own stress 'cues'. The person affected may develop headaches, a stiff neck or nagging backache. The person may be irritable and intolerant of even minor disturbances by other people. The temper seems to flair and yelling at others without cause becomes a problem. The heart rate usually increases with stress and a feeling of exhaustion even after a good night's sleep is common. Recognizing these as signs of stress is the first step in combating it (Jasmine).

Using a stress scale is another method for recognition of stresses. A popular one is that of psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahle called the "Holmes-Rahle Scale of Social Readjustment" (see Table 13-1) which rates the impact of life events as stressors. The psychiatrists' research (Holmes) showed that in a sample of 88 young physicians, the young physician with a score of 300 or more on the scale, had a 70% chance of suffering from ulcers, psychiatric disturbances, broken bones or other health problems within the ensuing two years. Those who scored under 200 had only a 37% chance of such illness. The Holmes-Rahle Scale of Social Readjustment has proven to be an effective prognosticator of stress-related illnesses (Walis). Reviewing this scale and its indicators of stress can be useful for the physician.

Another method for stress recognition is identification of one's own personality characteristics that have been associated with a likelihood of increased stress. The scale, "Personality Risk Factors for Stress," provides an assessment of the aspects of one's personality that could lead to stress. Factors indicating a high likelihood should give one pause for thought as to their importance in one's life (Table 13-2).

Recognition of Positive and Negative Coping Mechanisms

The next step in stress management is consideration of one's personal coping mechanisms. Consider whether or not they are positive or negative: do they reduce the cause or response to the stress or do they only reduce the short-term stress at the expense of long-term problems? Are they