

SOME THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT

*A program handout developed by
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The information in this program handout is offered for educational purposes only and should not be construed as medical advice of any kind. Many of the concepts outlined here require explanation, illustration, demonstration, or all three. This handout is provided as a reminder of key points presented in educational workshops experienced by program participants.

WHAT IS STRESS? SOME DEFINITIONS:

Stress has been defined as “that which occurs when changing from any state to any other state.” (Dr. Hans Selye, Montreal Institute, CANADA) Stress is natural, even necessary for life to be sustained. Too much stress for too long produces difficulties. Individuals differ with regard to what is too much stress or the length of time they can sustain elevated levels of stress.

Distress is the physical experience which occurs when the change from one state to another exceeds individual limits in the moment, is threatening and produces anxiety, is a state of dis-equilibrium, dis-ease.

Physical sustaining of too much stress for too long or an overload of distress intensely introduced can lead to ineffective performance, physical discomfort, physical symptoms, illness, accidents, and even cause death.

Stress itself is often not the problem; the problem is our attitude toward stress-producing situations. We can change our response to a situation from distress to neutrality or even to eu-stress by changing our attitude toward the situation even though the situation itself may not change at all.

Properly focused, stress is more than just necessary for life; it is healthy, good for us, and serves as stimulation for us to do our very best. Without stress, there is neither change nor life. Eliminating stress is not the point; that would be death. Managing stress, and keeping ourselves sufficiently fit to handle stress is the point.

When we are operating within our comfort zones and have everything pretty much under control, we are productive but not driven, aroused but not anxious, perhaps even physically and emotionally tired but not so exhausted that we can't recover in a reasonable time.

Stressors in the work place or home include physical conditions, activities, expectations, symbolic objects or personal relationships that exert an adverse influence, are threatening or have a tendency to require a person to strain in order to maintain balance and/or gain a feeling of being more in control of ones own experience. The stressors “out there” should be mitigated to the degree possible. The rest of stress management has to do with how to manage our own responses to what happens “out there” so those stress responses to threat don't harm us.

HOW STRESS WORKS

At any given moment, your perception of reality and your behavior is determined by three major factors:

1. Your genetic legacy as a human being with all of its strengths and weaknesses;
2. Your learned personal preferences, cumulative conditioning, education, and beliefs acquired up to the present moment through example, upbringing, schooling, etc.;
3. Your awareness of needs, threats, opportunities, and goals in the present.

Your tolerance for stress is unique to you and your life situation. Only you can manage yourself, with your unique capacities, values, and outlook, so that stress doesn't result in harming you.

Principles for Understanding and Managing Stress

Principle I. People are fully integrated beings and the healthy human system consistently and reliably works at keeping tension within manageable limits and the system in balance.

Principle II. All human behavior is goal oriented. The goals may or may not be in the awareness of the individual in a given moment.

Principle III. All energy follows thought. Our energy is directed by our concepts, ideas, beliefs, and conscious or unconscious choices.

Principle IV. All individual human experience is created within the individual. Other people, events, and things can influence an individual's experience in the degree to which the individual is identified with the person, event or thing. We are dominated by everything with which we become identified. We can manage our experience of everything from which we dis-identify ourselves.

SIGNS TO HELP YOU KNOW WHEN YOU ARE COPING SUCCESSFULLY WITH STRESS

- You can carry out jobs effectively
- You can handle responsibility
- You can work under authority, rules, difficulties and limits
- You can tolerate frustration
- You can adapt to changing situations
- You are reliable
- You have a sense of belonging
- You have a high tolerance of others who are different
- You can show friendliness and love
- You can take recreation, relax, and sleep
- You have a sense of humor
- You have a sense of self-direction
- You have a reasonable sense of independence and self-reliance

SIGNS OF MISMANAGING STRESS AND STRESSORS

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Heart thumping, pulse racing
- High blood pressure
- Frequent shortness of breath
- Chronic muscle tension
- Lower back problems
- Gastro-intestinal problems
- Stomach cramps or pain
- Skin inflammation; hives
- Prolonged diarrhea

PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS:

- Unreasonable negative-ness, negativity
- Excuses for everything
- Slacking off
- Muddled thinking, irrational
- Inability to sustain focus on an objective
- Bad attitude, surly
- Boredom, passiveness
- Angry outbursts
- Fights, yelling at others
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Non-cooperation
- Passive aggressiveness
- Hostile, paranoid, short-tempered
- Can't sleep or relax
- Low or no sense of humor

ORGANIZATIONAL SIGNS

- Elevated sick leave
- Absenteeism too high
- Accidents
- Theft
- Chronic complaining about rules
- Unable to act with initiative or without specific direction
- Overly dependent or counter-dependent
- Quitting in the face of frustration
- Rigid or resistant to reasonable changes
- Unable or unwilling to accept appropriate help
- Incomplete or sloppy work
- Blaming; shirking responsibility

STRESS AND CHANGE

You, and other people, can and do increase their awareness and choose to change their circumstances when they realize two things:

- The pain of NOT changing is greater than the pain of changing.
- The possibility of achieving a more desirable state through change is within your reach.

Change in a healthy person will consistently be in the direction of meeting significant needs; of gaining a sense of being more lovable, important, and safe in the world.

Change is facilitated by the desire to change or the lack of resistance to change which is often related to reducing the level of pain or tension being experienced. Change is also facilitated by the acquisition of appropriate tools and supports for accomplishing change.

Change itself will tend to elevate stress in most people. Part of dealing creatively with stress is to be in control of as much of the changes occurring in your life as possible. If there are changes going on in your life over which you have little or no control, taking charge of changes in some other aspects of your life situation may help create a feeling of being more in control overall. This feeling of being more in control will help to reduce distress.

Threatening change or the perception of danger is known to produce the “fight-flight” response in people, especially men. This response of the body to perceived threat prepares the body for immediate action – to fight or to flee from the danger. Hormones are released into the body to elevate physical performance; blood is redirected from the small muscles to the large muscles (you really do get “cold feet”); all the senses go to hyper-alert status (pitched baseballs appear to come at batters more slowly; basketball hoops seem so large they can’t be missed; etc.); one’s attitude appears more aggressive. Unless trained to counter these responses (e.g. as in police, pilots, etc.), they are largely involuntary and occur very fast. In a flash, you are under the influence of your chemistry.

Recent research from the late 1990’s has shown that women’s responses to threat appear to be “nurture and network” rather than, or as well as “fight-flight.” Women in high stress situations tend to look after their children, students, employees, and others in their charge (nurture), and then seek support from their families, friends, colleagues and others (network).

STRESS REDUCTION

A great deal of research has been done in associating reduction of the “fight-flight” response with improved communication, job performance, and relationships. Dr. Herbert Benson, author of the book, *The Relaxation Response*, has described a four-step process for overcoming the “fight-flight” response and reducing stress. On the following page is my version of his essential idea.

RAISING YOUR FEELING OF WELL-BEING THROUGH FOUR STEPS TO RELAXATION

STEP 1. SECURE COMFORTABLE SUPPORT FOR YOUR BODY

Arrange your body so that it is fully supported either by the carpeted floor, on a bed, or in a chair in a comfortable position. If in a chair, place your feet flat on the floor and allow your hands to fall limply into your lap without the fingers touching. Allow your weight to drop; release any muscular tension that may be holding up your legs, shoulders, etc.

STEP 2. FOCUS YOUR FULL ATTENTION ON BREATHING

Give your full attention to your breathing process by thinking about three aspects of breathing:

- a. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth
- b. Inhale deeply and exhale fully in comfortable cycles
- c. Concentrate on making your breath cycle a continuous process with no holding of breath between either the inhale or the exhale; make it as perfectly smooth a cycle as possible. Concentrate fully on your breathing.

STEP 3. REGARD ANY THOUGHTS THAT MAY COME INTO YOUR MIND WITH TOTAL PASSIVENESS

During the period of the exercise hold a totally passive attitude toward any thoughts that may enter your consciousness. Ignore them completely. If thoughts should persist and impose themselves on your awareness, substitute a focus on your breathing process and concentrate on breathing.

STEP 4. ALLOW ANY TENSION IN YOUR MUSCLES TO BE RELEASED AND RELAX YOUR BODY FULLY

As you focus part of your attention on your breathing, use another part to notice any tension that may exist in your muscles (e.g. neck, back, arms, legs, etc.) and release the tension. Try imagining you are breathing into the tension you have located during the inhale and then imagine the tension is being released as you fully exhale. Continue this process until all parts of your body are comfortably relaxed.

Maintain your comfortable position, focused breathing process, passive attitude, and relaxation for at least 10 minutes, longer if possible up to 30 minutes. Avoid setting an alarm clock. Instead, instruct your mind to finish at whatever length of time you choose. With practice, you will find you are able to become alarmingly accurate.

The effect you are seeking through this exercise is the heightened feeling of well-being and balance that comes from the release into your body of endorphins. Instead of the “fight-flight” response of distress; it’s the relaxation response you are seeking.

POSSIBLE USES OF THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

When might you want to apply the relaxation response exercise? Here are some ideas:

Sit and breathe for two minutes just before you...

- enter a room in which there are people that you know are unfriendly toward you
- make a formal presentation to a room full of people
- start the work day and create and prioritize your “To Do” list
- conduct a performance appraisal interview
- set the agenda for an important meeting
- make a decision that will affect the business and/or its people in important ways
- write a memo to an employee or colleague describing something that went wrong
- say anything that came into your mind when you were angry or upset
- walk around the plant to see what’s going on
- get out of your car after driving home through heavy traffic and go into the house where your two children and your spouse are waiting for you

Another time you may want to use the relaxation response is just after you have been upset by something and need to “get back onto your pins,” in balance, and start coping. After you have been stressed: 1st, breathe; 2nd, relax; 3rd, think; 4th, act.

Keep in mind the adage that “Knowledge, by itself, doesn’t help.” Knowing this technique won’t help you perform. You have to perform the techniques to raise your coping performance.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Managing yourself on an on-going basis is the process by which you keep the problems associated with distress within your personal limits. There are two basic effects that you want to achieve:

1. Manage your life situation such that you are required to perform out of your comfort zone as little and as seldom as possible without giving up challenging goals and other goals to high achievement and a full life. Avoid situations in which you have too much stress for too long such that you encounter “burnout.”
2. Manage your own body, mind, and spirit such that when life requires you to perform beyond your comfort zone and events may be out of your control to some degree (death of a family member, moving households, changing jobs, etc.), your capacity to flex and stretch can accommodate and contain elevated stress without doing any damage (getting sick, having an accident, etc.) and/or without adversely affecting your performance. Being in “good shape” means you can perform even when the pressure is on, you feel competent all the time (even out of your comfort zone), and you’ll probably live longer than you otherwise would.

Listed on the following pages are some methods for self management and dealing with stress that may help you perform and feel good all the time.

SOME PHYSICAL METHODS FOR SELF MANAGEMENT AND DEALING WITH STRESS

- Drinking ample water throughout the day.
- Focused breathing with relaxation.
- Progressive relaxation, autogenics, biofeedback.
- Regular exercise to near capacity (usually means doubling the resting heart rate).
- Purposeful physical exertion (e.g. Waxing car, mowing lawn, vacuuming carpet, etc.).
- Nutrition, diet, and food combinations.
- Creative pursuits (e.g. Painting, music playing/listening, woodworking, dancing, writing poetry, crafts, etc.).
- Providing community service in a volunteer capacity.
- Physical expression of otherwise unexpressed emotions (e.g. Crying/weeping for sadness from sense of loss; safely striking, shouting, pounding for anger sense of frustration; sharing with another for anxiety and fear from sense of injury or threat of injury, etc.).
- Playing with a pet.
- Laughing, making others laugh.
- Hugging, holding, patting, touching.
- Body massage, posture correction.
- Change environmental circumstances, get away from intensity of stressors.
- Medicines, drugs, alcohol, psychoactive substances (may serve as a symptom blocker until basic adjustment is made; may become a problem itself such as drug addiction and/or alcoholism).

Add your own favorite Physical methods for managing stress here.

SOME MENTAL METHODS FOR SELF MANAGEMENT AND DEALING WITH STRESS

- Create and maintain a positive mental attitude.
- Using healthy cognitive processes, appropriate thinking.
- Dis-identification from symbols that evoke distress.
- Meditation, concentration, inner exploration of the self.
- Receptivity to higher conscious experience, creativity, and intuition.
- Clarity of goals and objectives, wants, needs.
- Affirmations and visualizations of desired outcomes.
- Creating plans and schedules for dealing with pressures.
- Fulfilling stroking needs (give self strokes when needed; give others strokes; accept strokes from others; reject inappropriate strokes and discounts).
- Forgive self and others for transgressions, mistakes (cancel negative conditions preventing the natural flow of caring and positive regard).
- Working through emotional and mental blocks (frequently legacies from the past creating excessive tension; may require the assistance of a counselor or therapist).
- Talking through problems with a priest, minister, counselor, or friend; gathering fresh perspectives.
- Attending seminars, workshops, classes, and other educational or personal development experiences.
- Having a sense of humor about life's problems, especially the absurd ones.

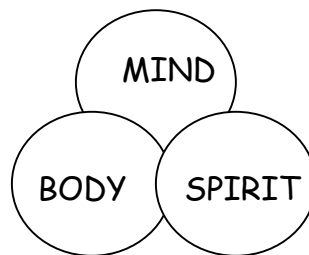
Add your own favorite Mental methods for managing stress here.

[For virtually (www-based) unlimited resources in stress management, do a Google search on the key words “stress management” and/or “women’s stress management” and see 10 to 20 pages each of resources, centers, publications, etc.]

SOME SPIRITUAL METHODS FOR SELF MANAGEMENT AND DEALING WITH STRESS

- Regular worship, prayer.
- Listening to sacred music.
- Reading sacred books and materials.
- Reading inspirational books, biographies.
- Listening to inspirational audio tapes and video tapes.
- Transcendental meditation, yoga.
- Engaging in philosophical/theological/values-oriented discussion (not argument) with friends.
- Writing in journal, diary.
- Fasting, giving something up as a sacrificial experience.
- Attending theatrical, musical performance.
- Attending a museum.
- Experiencing mirth, joy, laughter.
- Spending time in a quiet, beautiful, safe and natural place.
- Talking of your feelings and affections with those you love.
- Being joyfully enthusiastic about a sporting event or some athletic competition; being a fan of the home team or the company

Add your own favorite Spiritual methods for managing stress here or on the reverse side.



**ACHIEVING AND MAINTAINING BALANCE
IN ALL ASPECTS OF LIFE
IS YOUR BEST BET
FOR EXPERIENCING
A FULL, HEALTHY, AND SATISFYING LIFE.**