

Module 7: Stress Management

- 5 Aspects of Mental Processing
- Early Warning Signs of Stress
- Stress In Your Life (map exercise)
- Problem Map (map exercise)

STRESS MANAGEMENT

(OPTIONAL)

It's two in the morning and you're lying in bed. You have something immensely important and challenging to do the next day – an important meeting, a presentation, an exam, a doctor's appointment, whatever. You have to get a decent night's rest, but you're wide awake. You try different things to relax – deep breathing, slow breathing, imagery – but you keep thinking that unless you fall asleep in the next minute, your career, opportunity, etc. is finished. So you lie there, more tense by the second.

If you do this on a regular basis, somewhere around 2:30am, when you're really getting clammy, a brand new, disruptive chain of thoughts will no doubt come into your mind. Suddenly, amid all of your worries, you begin to think about that nonspecific pain you've been having in your side, that sense of exhaustion lately, that frequent headache. The realization hits you—I'm sick, fatally sick! Oh why didn't I recognize the symptoms, why did I have to deny it, why didn't I go to the doctor?

When it's 2:30 on those mornings, I always have a brain tumor. They're very useful for that sort of terror, because you can attribute every conceivable nonspecific symptom to a brain tumor and justify your panic.

And, if I do manage to fall asleep, I wake the next morning with a burning in the pit of my stomach, muscles so tense they feel like 10 pound sausages in 5 pound wrappers, my head pounding, eyes swollen..., already dreading the day ahead.

This is just one of millions of examples of unmanaged stress. The world of medicine/psychiatry (and society in general) have come to recognize the huge complex intertwining of our biology and our emotions, the endless ways in which our personalities, feelings, and thoughts both reflect and influence the events in our bodies. And what we have come to understand is “unmanaged stress can make us sick” – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually unhealthy.

Often, when a person finds their way to this clinic – enters therapy – they're feeling overwhelmed by the stressors in their life. This crisis presents an opportunity for cognitive-behavioral changes, which are beneficial to their overall ability to cope effectively. During a period of crisis our normal defenses are down and emotional distress high. We feel an urgency to decrease the level of emotional distress. Because we are motivated toward alleviating emotional distress we are open to new ways of thinking and behaving.

Change is stressful, even when it's good for us because it requires effort and conscious awareness. So, when we decided to begin the process of change it's important that we have an understanding of how we normally interact in our environment. We need

to look at those events over the past year or so that brought us here, our personality characteristics, and at significant historical life stressors, which we have not resolved and/or that have contributed to how we currently cope.

Responses to stress are numerous. What works for one person (or situation) may not work for another. Therefore, it's necessary to be prepared with several strategies for handling stress.

Our mind plays a powerful role in illness and in health. Because our cognitions (thoughts) or mental processes have a strong influence, negative or positive, on our physical and emotional reactions to stress we need to explore our cognitive structures – explore how we think about things in general.

FIVE ASPECTS OF MENTAL PROCESSING that play a significant role in stress include:

1. EXPECTATIONS/SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

What we believe will happen or expect to happen sometimes influences our behavior in a way that makes that outcome more likely to happen. Negative expectations increase anxiety and stress. We need to learn to identify goals for change and face these challenges with optimism and a positive attitude. This helps to increase coping and management of stress. If we believe we will fail, we probably will – but, if we believe we can succeed, we have a much better chance at doing so.

2. MENTAL IMAGERY/VISUAL IMAGERY

Along with expectations for situations we many times will develop an accompanying mental picture and internal dialogue. This mental imagery can itself elicit emotional and physiological responses. Negative mental imagery increases anxiety and stress reactions; whereas positive mental imagery minimizes the effects of life stressors and increase effective coping.

3. SELF-TALK

This is internal dialogue we carry on with ourselves all day long. Most of us don't have a conscious awareness for self-talk or the influence it has on anxiety, stress, and self-esteem. Self-talk has a similar influence to that of mental imagery. Negative mental images and negative self-talk can result in anxiety and psychosomatic symptoms, whereas positive mental images and positive self-talk encourages self-confidence, helps us cope, and gives us a general feeling of well being.

4. CONTROLLING AND PERFECTIONISTIC BEHAVIOR

Perfectionism and unrealistic expectations often go together. Controlling and perfectionistic behaviors are frequently an effort to avoid abuse, conflict, the unknown, or a feeling of uneasiness or some perceived inadequacy. When we place unrealistic expectations on others, it's a form of controlling behavior. It

takes enough energy to manage ourselves. When we try to control the behavior of others it leads to stress, anxiety, frustration, and anger. Our goal in this area is simply to develop realistic expectations for ourselves and accept that we have no control over the behavior of anyone else.

5. ANGER

Anger is a normal, healthy emotion when expressed appropriately. But, it can be very damaging to the self and others when not expressed properly because of the internal stress and tension it causes as well as predisposing the person to “blow-ups” with others. This behavior results in low self-esteem and poor interpersonal relationships. Chronic anger and hostility are related to the development or worsening of a number of physical symptoms, illnesses, and diseases. We all have a choice in how we evaluate situations and manage our anger. Proper management of anger will decrease our stress levels.

Attempt to have the clients identify their own experiences of expectations, imagery, self-talk, controlling, and anger. Have them give examples and attempt to have them connect how these have influenced their behaviors and thus stress.

For a person to effectively manage stress we must

1. understand what we need and want emotionally
2. take responsibility for our own thoughts and behaviors
3. release ourselves from the self-imposed responsibility of and efforts to control others
4. develop realistic expectations and limitations
5. have appropriate boundaries in relationships
6. express ourselves honestly
7. take care of ourselves (adequate sleep, proper nutrition, regular exercise, and learning to relax our bodies).

Because it is physiologically impossible to be stressed and relaxed at the same time developing techniques for alleviating distress (negative stress) is an important step in coping effectively with life stressors. Excellent results have been found in the treatment of many physiological, emotional, and psychological problems through the regular use of relaxation techniques. It's shown to prevent the development of cumulative stress, which is generally associated with high levels of anxiety, which have become unmanageable. The effective discharge of stress and tension associated with relaxation creates an opportunity for the body to recover from the consequences of stress and places a person in an optimal position for managing normal stressors, especially if they are engaging in regular exercise, getting good sleep, and eating properly.

Problems leading to stress are often related to our style of managing or interacting with our environment. Approaches that result in unnecessary stress include (but are not limited to):

- Attempting to do too much at one time

- Setting unrealistic time estimates, or poor time management
- Procrastinating on the unpleasant
- Disorganization
- Poor listening skills
- Doing it all yourself
- Inability to say “no”
- Trouble letting other people do their job
- Impulsive, snap decisions
- Not taking responsibility for the quality of your own life. Blaming others.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF STRESS

Emotional Signs:

1. Apathy, feelings of sadness, no longer find activities pleasurable.
2. Anxiety, easily agitated, restless, sense of unworthiness.
3. Irritability, defensive, angry, argumentative.
4. Mental tired, preoccupied, lack of flexibility, difficulty concentrating.
5. Overcompensating, avoiding dealing with problems, denial that you have problems.

Behavioral Signs:

1. Avoidance behavior, difficulty accepting/neglecting responsibility.
2. Compulsive behaviors in areas such as spending, gambling, sex, substances.
3. Poor self-care behavior (hygiene, appearance, etc.), late to work, poor follow through on tasks.
4. Legal problems, difficulty controlling aggressive impulses, indebtedness.

There are two approaches for coping with excessive stress:

1. Self-control, which requires taking responsibility for reactions to a situation.
2. Situational control, which includes problem solving, assertiveness, conflict resolution, and time management.

Hand out the “Stress in Your Life” map.

Now we’re going to look at some of the stressors in your life and see what steps we can come up with to help decrease the effects of those stressors.

At this point, the remainder of the session should be focused on processing client’s stressors and possible solutions. We will also have the “Problem Map” available to work to give the client a visual, tangible tool in which to learn to work through problems

identified in the “Life Stressors” map. Take the “problem” directly from the Life Stressors map. Don’t be hesitant to work a composite map on a marker board, chalk board, etc. This facilitates the client’s comfort and confidence in working with the mapping process.