OPTUM®

How To Better Manage Stress

Workbook

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Learning Points

Participants will:

- Assess their current state of balance and stress.
- Explore ways to better balance the conflicting demands of their lives.
- Identify resources that can be used to meet needs.
- Examine personal values and choices.
- Learn skills for managing multiple demands.

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Definitions

Positive stress provides the pressure that helps some people concentrate and perform better and more efficiently. If you can relax your mind and body once the excitement is over and the challenge is met, you're coping well with the stresses in your life.

Negative stress happens when your mind and body stay geared up in overdrive. There's no period of relaxation between one stress "crisis" and the next. If your stress has become a way of life, you're not managing it well. But you can learn how to cope better.

Stress is neutral — the stress syndrome is a natural physiological response.

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Coping Is Key

Life is full of changes, conflicts and demands. Many people are unaware of how much stress they're under or the sources of that stress.

Fortunately, stress isn't necessarily bad. Whether it's positive or negative depends on how we manage it.

Failure to cope with stress can cause anxiety and depression, and eventually, can damage our health and well-being.

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Our Bodily Reactions

In stressful situations, our hereditary and learned responses set off a biological trigger within the body. The “fight-or-flight” response is a natural reaction designed to help confront or escape threats to survival.

Our stress reactions can include increased heart rate, rising blood pressure and secretions of stimulatory hormones, creating the response known as fight-or-flight. Throughout history, this response has helped humans survive by providing the extra strength and quick thinking needed to overcome crises and threats. But if exposed to this continuously, the body’s ability to cope with additional forms of physiological or psychological stress is lowered.

If we don’t de-stress and return to normal, the long-term effects of stress can harm our bodies by taking resources from other systems that handle general maintenance and directing them toward the muscles in preparation for fight-or-flight. So, long-term exposure to stress may eventually cause physical deterioration.

These days, certain anxious thoughts and feelings — an embarrassing moment, an upcoming job performance review, a bad date — can elicit a bodily fight-or-flight response. Because our brains can’t discriminate between stressors, the hypothalamus and biochemistry take over whenever we feel stressed.

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Our Bodily Reactions

Short-term stress is part of life. We cope and the body returns to normal. But in our fast-paced, modern lives, we likely face situations that can't be quickly or easily resolved. The body remains mobilized and in a state of resistance. We can withstand the stress response for four days before exhaustion sets in. Over time, if bodily functions don't return to normal, our mental and physical health may be put at-risk.

The symptoms of short-term stress are those physical preparations the body makes for fight-or-flight, and those commonly associated with stress: increased heart rate, breathing and sweating, muscle tension, etc.

Chronic stress wears down the body and lowers our immunity to infections and disease. Mental health problems and other negative outcomes can occur. The long-term effects are those that have a greater impact on both our physical and mental health, including aggravated chronic conditions, appetite disruption, weariness and a higher susceptibility to colds.

Since we can't escape stress, our survival depends on our ability to learn how to live with it and how to mitigate the effects of stress by using healthy coping mechanisms.

Because an individual's stress response is so unique, we should learn what level of stress we operate best at and what stressors we find most difficult to deal with.

Stress, however, is not always negative. Some may find a certain level of stress motivating and challenging. We can turn even the most difficult situation or event into something positive and grow from that experience. Your ability to manage this stress is important to your well-being.

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Breathing Exercise

Try the following exercise:

Sit in a balanced position. Settle into your chair so you feel as little strain as possible on your lower back and abs. Imagine a cord attached to the top of your head, pulling your spine perfectly straight and aligned from the top of your head to the bottom of your spine. Move your feet around until they are both comfortably placed on the floor, about one to one-half feet apart with your calves perpendicular to the floor.

Lift your hands and drop them to your thighs. Now, visualize the cord being cut and allow your head to move slowly to a comfortable position.

Take a deep breath and gently and easily exhale.

Allow your next breath to be the one your body takes itself and watch your abdomen expand as you breathe in and contract as you breathe out.

When you feel settled into your breathing, say to yourself on the inhale, “I am…” and on the exhale, “… relaxed.” Allow your body to slip into relaxation easily and comfortably.

Continue this practice and soon, you will be able to relax just by taking a deep breath

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Changing Thoughts and Attitudes

Our brain's neuronal connections and structures are established through our experiences and the environment in which we process information and learn to adapt. Once a thought pattern becomes set, it becomes a mindset, which bounds our perceptions and responses – and can even age us faster. Continuous stress reactions in adulthood can cause further deterioration.

In a healthy, balanced system, the brain constructs an inner reality of the physical world through the input sent to it from the eyes, ears, skin, etc. As we develop emotional intelligence and the inner qualities of flexibility and adaptability, fluid thinking can replace mindsets to quickly perceive how to move past, through or around problems and limitations.

The vital link to health and performance is control. How you respond to a situation can dictate whether you come out of it better or worse — even in situations where you think you have little control.

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About Professional Support

You may consider seeking professional support if you experience any of the following:

- Sleep problems.
- Performance issues at work.
- Relationship difficulties with family or friends.
- Loss of interest in hobbies you normally enjoy.
- Lack of care about normal everyday work tasks.
- Excessive anxiety or worrying more than normal.
- Feeling overwhelmed or sad for more than two weeks.
- A noticeable change in appetite, eating too little or too much.
- Behavior and coping methods have become harmful to yourself or others, whether that is through aggressive behavior or unhealthy habits, such as drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs.
- Thoughts of harm to self and/or others.

Keep in mind some of these conditions may warrant more urgent professional help and you should seek support if you are unsure.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to all employees and their covered dependents and may include some free counseling sessions per issue, per year. Please check with your employer or your health plan for details.

Citations

American Psychological Association: How to choose a psychologist. http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/choose-therapist.aspx.

Helpguide.org: Depression Symptoms and Warning Signs. https://www.helpguide.org/articles/depression/depression-symptoms-and-warning-signs.htm.

Helpguide.org: Suicide Prevention. https://www.helpguide.org/articles/suicide-prevention/suicide-prevention.htm.

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Appendix A: Common Symptoms

Though we most commonly associate symptoms of stress with physical manifestations, stress actually impacts us as multi-dimensionally.

Physical

- Constipations
- Diarrhea
- Dry mouth
- Indigestion, appetite disruption
- Headaches: migraines
- Nausea
- Nervous stomach, cramps
- Perspiration
- Pounding heart, chest pains
- Rapid pulse
- Shortness of breath
- Trembling hands

Emotional

The emotional effects of stress can make us edgy, hostile, anti-social, depressed, angry, frustrated or bored. It becomes difficult to function, we get lethargic and feel defeated; we feel alienated and paranoid.

- Anxiety
- Apathy
- Attitude change from positive to negative — easily demoralized
- Boredom
- Depression, sense of despair
- Easy to anger, hostility
- Feelings of inadequacy or failure
- Feelings of powerlessness
- Irritability, impatience
- Heightened worry or fear response
- Lack of humor
- Moodiness
- Nervousness

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Appendix A: Common Symptoms

Mental

The changes that take place in the brain as a result of the stress response interferes with higher functioning ability (i.e., the ability to think, reason, evaluate and make choices).

- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Difficulty concentrating
- Dry mouth
- Memory problems
- Mental blocks
- Rapid pulse
- Slowed-down thought processes

Behavior

- Aggressive behavior
- Increased hyperactive gestures or movements
- Increase in drug or alcohol use
- Increase in impulsive or reckless behavior

Social

- Disrupted relationships
- Increase isolation or alienation
- Increased vulnerability to hurt feelings or resentment
- Lowered trust
- Reduced confidence

Spiritual

- Emptiness
- Lack of connectedness
- Meaninglessness
- Sense of hopelessness
- Shortness of breath
- Reduced confidence

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