

Lesson 2

Stress Management—Taking Charge

In many cases, stress is accepted as part of daily life, and people do little to cope with it consciously. Although it is impossible to eliminate stress completely and you need a certain amount of stress to be active and productive, there are three ways to reduce unwanted stress or manage it productively:

- Manage your physical and psychological well-being so you can resist harmful effects of stressful events.
- Monitor your present level of stress so that you can recognize early warning signs of stress and do something about the problems causing it.
- Maneuver to avoid extremely stressful situations by eliminating the causes of stress and changing your reactions to stressful events.

Keys to Reducing Stress

Manage Your Psychological and Physical Well-being

One way to manage your psychological and physical well-being is to have people you can turn to for emotional support. This support might come from family, church members, friends, or others who have experienced the kind of stress you are experiencing. Emotional support involves give-and-take. You must be willing to support other people in addition to receiving support from them.

Diet also appears to influence a person's ability to cope with stress.

Elevated blood cholesterol levels combined with hypertension or high blood pressure increase your chances of stroke and heart attack.

Be moderate in your consumption of coffee, tea, soft drinks, and drugs containing caffeine. Caffeine stimulates the sympathetic nervous system and may promote even more nervousness and tension.

Although alcohol and drugs are common ways of dealing with stress, they can be addictive and tend to deal only with the symptoms of the problems. They mask the cause of stress without eliminating it.

Eat an adequate and nutritious breakfast each day. Most authorities suggest you consume at least one-fourth of your daily calories and nutrients at breakfast. Hunger can leave you less able to cope with stress. All in all, it just makes good sense to eat moderately and regularly, especially when you're under stress.

A basic exercise program also is likely to improve your ability to manage stress. Stretching and flexing the muscles of the neck, arms, shoulders, back, thighs, and midsection reduce the chance that these muscles will tighten up and produce common indicators of stress—headache, neckache, and backache.

A more advanced exercise program that is likely to help manage stress involves cardiovascular fitness. Over a period of time, cardiovascular exercise will benefit the heart, lungs, and arteries and result in biochemical changes that elevate your mood and encourage a healthy self-concept. You can do more work or do your regular work with less fatigue.

Although many people may be "on the go" during the day, their activity is most often sporadic and does not necessarily improve the strength and endurance of the cardiovascular system.

The best cardiovascular fitness program involves daily aerobic or rhythmic, repetitive exercise three

times a week. Aerobic exercise moves oxygen through the body. The activities most commonly used for cardiovascular conditioning are running, brisk walking, cycling, swimming, rowing, aerobic dancing, and cross-country skiing. These activities are noncompetitive and less psychologically stressful than other sports such as golf or tennis.

If you're older than 35, have a thorough medical checkup before beginning such a program.

In addition to support groups, diet, and exercise, managing stress also means balancing your personal, social, and work-related activities.

- Develop a variety of interests, activities, and relationships.
- Balance work with recreation.
- Don't keep anxiety and anger bottled up (talk about problems to someone who cares).
- Set reasonable personal expectations and goals.
- Learn to accept what cannot be changed.
- Learn to say no to requests you cannot reasonably handle.
- Give in once in a while, even if you think you are right.

Monitor Your Present Level of Stress

Recognizing early warning signals of stress-related problems is the second step in reducing damage caused by stress. Not all symptoms of excessive stress can be observed easily.

Early Warning Signs:

- Exaggerated, out-of-proportion anxiety;
- Excessive moodiness;
- Withdrawal from responsibility;
- Constant insomnia;
- Poor emotional control;
- Severe feelings of helplessness and dependency;
- Marked change in appetite or sex drive;

- Chronic fatigue; and
- Susceptibility to illness.

Other indicators of stress are such comments as:

- "I can't keep my mind on my work;"
- "I feel all tied up in knots;"
- "I can't relax;" and
- "I feel miserable and I don't know why."

Or have you noticed:

- A door slammed a little too hard;
- An overpowering sense of fatigue;
- Lots of faultfinding and bickering; and
- A constant state of turmoil.

All of these signs indicate stress has reached a serious level.

In addition to recognizing symptoms of stress, you need to be prepared for potentially stressful events. For instance, certain times of the year may be particularly stressful for some people because of work or other pressures. Or you may be anticipating, or undergoing, major changes such as moving, retirement, pregnancy, or a new job, which could be very stressful. If you are undergoing many changes, look for ways of coping with stress and avoid, if possible, taking on anything new at this time.

A helpful way of monitoring your stress level is to keep a Daily Stress Log like the following sample. Record how often, causes of, and reactions to stressful events, people, places, and situations. As you take steps to manage stress, the Daily Stress Log provides a before and after check on your progress. A Daily Stress Log worksheet is provided at the end of this lesson to help you monitor your own levels of stress.

Daily Stress Log
(sample)

Date June 27

Time	Place	Source of stress	Tension level*	Coping strategy
7:00am	home	alarm clock didn't go off on time	4	Deep breathing. Revised daily schedule.
7:30	outside	car won't start	4	Kicked tire. Identified and solved problem.
10:00	work	salesman	2	took break from job-- 15 - minute walk.
11:55	work	unpleasant phone call	4	Deep breathing. Consider the source, ignore rudeness.
1:00	in town	boring meeting	2	Daydreamed. Met with friends.
2:00	post office	received overdue notice on bill	3	Decided to skip night out this week to save money.
2:30	bank	long lines-- no open windows	3	Deep breathing: "What will it matter in 20 years"?
3:00	work	noticed a stain on clothing	2	Went to washroom, wet with cold water, blotted dry.
3:30	car	train	4	Rolled up window and yelled. Felt better.
5:00	cleaners	couldn't find my grey suit	3	Went into back with clerk, found my suit.
6:00	home	kids/music	3	Went to quiet place and read (also threatened kids).
7:00	home	TV	2	Turned it off. Went for 15 - minute walk.
7:15	home	dog strayed away from yard	4	Additional 10 - minute walk after 15 - minute chase.
10:00	home	TV	3	Took warm bath, listened to music
10:30	home	bored	3	Worked on hobby

*Tension level 1 = Slight 2 = Moderate 3 = Strong 4 = Intense

Major source of stress today: Interruptions and delays

Assessment of how you managed stress today: Some potential problems, but handled it OK.
More aware of stress.

Today's exercise: Walking

Duration: 55 minutes

Maneuver to Avoid Extremely Stressful Situations

You can handle stress through two maneuvers—**arrange stress and change your reaction to stressful events.**

Arrange Stress

This suggestion is always questioned. How can anyone arrange stressful situations? Most of the time you cannot, because many stressful events occur unexpectedly. However, there are many situations that you know are stressful. You can plan around these and lessen the effects of stress. For many people, stress results when they feel overwhelmed by many things that need to be done at the same time. If you plan in advance how to handle potential problems, you can often prevent them from getting out of hand. And, often you can postpone some situations so that two very stressful events don't happen at the same time.

Change Your Reactions

Since everyone lives in a stressful environment at some time, here are a few rules for handling stress.

- Have a positive attitude—If you can convince yourself that the source of stress is necessary, you will have fewer after-effects.
- Accept and discuss—Accept that your lifestyle produces stress and that you can control the unwanted side effects. Look for trouble spots and do what you can to try to change them. Discuss situations that you and your family find particularly distressing. Work together to reduce the causes of stress.
- Clarify responsibility—Much stress in a family can be reduced by clarifying family members' roles and responsibilities. Make sure everyone understands clearly what is expected of him or her. Set clear priorities for yourself and your family. Communicate positively and discuss issues openly.

- Improve your time management—Time, managed well, can help reduce stress resulting from too much to do in too little time. Set up realistic time limits for yourself and others.
- Learn to relax—Often, in the midst of stressful situations, it might be difficult to relax. Yet just a few minutes of sitting in a comfortable chair listening to soothing music, taking a warm bath, doing deep muscle relaxation (alternately tense and relax muscles of your body), or meditating will help you relax and reduce stress. At times you need to loaf a little. True, too much inactivity often breeds boredom and may increase stress, but everyone needs some “do nothing” time. Daydreaming and reflecting may allow time for creative solutions to problems.

Reducing Stress Through Relaxation

Your body sends you signals that tell you when you are stressed. Often you don't recognize the signals or simply ignore them.

Listen to your body and take some action to reduce excess muscle tension. Learning to relax is like learning any other new skill; it takes patience and practice.

People vary in their reactions to relaxing techniques. Some people feel calm or very relaxed after trying some of the following exercises. Others notice relatively little change, especially the first few times.

You may want to set time aside once or twice each day for relaxing. These techniques can be used at times during the day when you take a break as well as when you find yourself in a stressful situation.

Easy Relaxation Techniques

(Dr. Martha Lamberts of Washington State University has outlined the following relaxation techniques.)

- Most of us have learned to breathe from our chests. Yet, belly breathing is the natural way, and a good stress-reducing habit. Sit or lie comfortably in a relaxed position. As you slowly breathe in, let your belly expand. Think of it as a balloon you are filling with air. As you exhale, let the air out of your “balloon” slowly. Place your hands on your stomach. You should feel it rise and lower as you breathe.
- In a relaxed position, breathe through your nose, easily and naturally, eyes closed. As you breathe out, think “one.” As you breathe in, think “one.” Continue for 10 to 20 minutes, but don’t watch a clock just think “one.” If your mind wanders, gently pull it back to thinking “one” every time you exhale; “one” every time you inhale. After 10 to 20 minutes, sit quietly for a few minutes with your eyes closed. Then, for a few minutes more, sit with your eyes open. Don’t worry about doing it “right.” Relaxation will happen; allow it. Do this once or twice daily.
- Try to touch your ears with your shoulders. Hold this for a count of 4. Then let your shoulders drop. Now rotate each shoulder separately toward the rear. Do each shoulder 5 to 10 times. Then do both shoulders together.
- Sit down and relax, closing your eyes. Massage the back of your neck, concentrating on the part that feels tense. Cup your thumbs at the front of your neck and massage on both sides of your spinal column, letting your head fall limply back against your rotating fingers. Use your fingers to massage around your hairline and under your jaws and your cheekbones. Gently draw a line up and down the side of your nose with one finger. How do you feel? Do you feel warm?
- Lie down with your knees bent. Press your back down hard so that every part of your back touches the surface. At the same time, pull in hard on your stomach muscles. Then relax, totally letting go of tension. This is good for your back and great for firming abdominal muscles, too.

Plan of Action

To take charge of stress, it is important to identify sources of stress and skills that you have for managing it. **Use the following guide to set up your own plan of action for stress management—take charge.**

I. Identify your three strongest sources of stress and the degree of stress you feel regarding each.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

II. How do you respond to each source of stress?
(Review Lesson One)

Physical _____

Emotional _____

Mental _____

Social _____

III. Why are you dissatisfied or unhappy with each of the three stressors?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

IV. What would you like to change in each of the three situations?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

V. Identify skills you possess that could help in managing stress.

Physical skills (energy, strength, agility)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Emotional strengths (self-confidence, empathy, calm)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Support from others (family, friends, clubs)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Mental resources (humor, problem-solving, insight)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Present lifestyle (rituals, hobbies, health)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

VI. Develop a plan of action. Describe each step you will take to reduce the level of stress and solve the situation.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

VII. What goals would you hope to achieve and when?

Ideal goal: _____

Challenging goal: _____

Acceptable goal: _____

VIII. Act on your plans.

Knowing When To Get Help

Although most stress can be managed, monitored, and maneuvered, it is important to obtain professional help before the situation is completely out of control. Such resources as the family doctor, mental health professionals, counselors, and clergy may help in dealing with extreme levels of stress and the physical and emotional trauma that often accompanies it.

In some instances, stress can trigger depression. Understanding depression in yourself and others is the topic of Lesson 3.

Additional Reading

The Joy of Success: How To Make Stress Work for You by P. Hanson, M.D., Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews and McMeel, 1988.

Kicking Your Stress Habit by D. Tubesing, Duluth, Minn: Whole Person Associates, Inc., 1981.

Stress and How to Live with It by J. Robinson and C. Tevis (Ed.), Des Moines, Iowa: Meredith Publishing Co., 1982.

Stress for Success by P. Hanson, M.D., New York, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1989.

References

Farm Family Stress by S. Middleton, East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan Cooperative Extension Service, E-1897, May 1983.

Stress: Friend or Foe by R. Weigel, Ames, Iowa: Iowa Cooperative Extension Service, 1SP27b, 1982.

Stress Without Distress, A Guide to Self-Understanding and Prevention of Stress-Related Illness and Premature Death by M. Gagliardi, Boseman, Mont., Montana Cooperative Extension Service, Bulletin 1249, 1981.

Successful Living in a Stressful World by M. Lamberts, Pullman, Wash.: Washington Cooperative Extension Service, EM4729, 1983.

Study Questions

Lesson 2

Stress Management—Taking Charge

1. What are the three ways to reduce unwanted stress or manage it productively?

2. Is it desirable to reduce all stress from your life?

3. How can relaxation be helpful in managing stress?

4. Establishing a personal plan of action is one way of learning to manage stress. What are other ways of learning more about stress management?

Study Answers

Lesson 2

Stress Management—Taking Charge

1. Manage your physical and psychological well-being. Monitor your present level of stress. Maneuver to eliminate the cause of stress and change your reaction to stress.
2. It is not possible to remove stress completely. In fact, some stress may be useful in helping us perform well or to use care in dangerous situations. What is necessary is for each person to find an optimal level of stress—not too much or too little.
3. Relaxation can provide a diversion or period of calm in a hectic day. Relaxing also lowers blood pressure for short periods of time. This can be helpful before important meetings, during stressful encounters, or at times when control and composure are needed.
4. Reading books, magazines, pamphlets. Listening to stress tapes. Attending workshops and seminars. Contacting professionals in stress management. Talking with others about stress management skills.

NOTES

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