

Dealing With Stress: Helpful Tips

From L.W.Y. Cheung, H. Dart, S. Kalin, B. Otis, and S.L. Gortmaker, 2016, *Eat Well & Keep Moving*, 3rd ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics).

(Welcome the participants and help them become acclimated to the environment. Offer refreshments if applicable.)

(Note to the presenter: Comments in parentheses are instructions you should follow while giving the presentation. Do not read these comments to the participants. This convention will be followed throughout the notes in this slide presentation. Note that the scripting here is to be used as a guide. Please feel free to change the language and order of the presentation if required for your audience.)

(Give participants a copy of this presentation by printing the PDF version of the slides in the Additional Resources folder on this Web Resource.)

What Is Stress?

- **Stress results from the pressures that are a natural part of living our lives.**
- **Changes and events in our lives, both good and bad, can trigger our stress alarm system.**
- **Examples are getting married, being ill, changing jobs, and running late.**

Stress is a natural part of our lives that results from the pressures that are so often part of daily life. Stress means different things to different people. It is a nonspecific response of the body to any demand placed on it.

What are some of the stresses that you have in your everyday life?

(Discuss some examples, such as sick children, traffic jams, running late, arguing with significant others, job deadlines, multiple jobs, pregnancy, loss of job, financial problems, death in the family, and holidays.)

What do you feel when those stressors occur?

(Discuss what happens to participants' bodies when they are under stress. Do their hearts pound? Do they get headaches? Do they feel tired or incredibly energetic?)

(Hand out copies of the Stress Test from Additional Resources and ask the participants to take the test now. Give them a few minutes to complete the test. When they have completed the test, ask them the following.)

Have all of you finished? Which questions did you score highest on? A higher score means you are either very stressed now or more likely to become stressed in the future. All of these questions cover signs of stressors in your lives.

Learn to Read the Signs of Stress

- **Cold hands**
- **Rapid breathing**
- **Rapid heartbeat**
- **Anxiety**
- **Forgetfulness**
- **Shakiness**
- **Headaches**
- **Muscle tension**
- **Knotted stomach**
- **Increased use of drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes**
- **Chronic irritability, short fuse**
- **Frequent illness or physical complaints**

As we've discussed, when you become stressed, your body responds in a variety of ways, including cold hands; rapid breathing; rapid heartbeat; anxiety; forgetfulness; shakiness; headaches; muscle tension; knotted stomach; increased use of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes; chronic irritability or short-fused anger; and frequent illness or physical complaints.

Think about how you feel when you become stressed. What do you do when you feel those signs coming on? Do you even realize that some of your actions are caused by stress and not something else?

Illnesses That Can Be Aggravated By Stress

- **Hypertension**
- **Coronary disease**
- **Ulcers**
- **Asthma**
- **Reduced immunity to infections**

Do you all know what each of these conditions is?

- Hypertension is the equivalent of high blood pressure. The increased pressure in the arteries causes injury and plaque buildup, which causes hemorrhaging or heart disease.
- Coronary disease is heart disease. It is usually a precursor to a heart attack. Coronary disease and heart attacks occur when the heart degenerates and cannot function properly.
- Ulcers are holes in the intestinal tract that are most often caused by bacteria and can be exacerbated by stress.
- Asthma is a condition in which the bronchial tubes in the lungs shrink, making it harder to breathe. People with severe asthma use inhalers.
- When you are under stress, your body's ability to fight off infections (such as the common cold and the flu) decreases.

(Discuss how serious each of these conditions is and that all of them can lead to death. Yet all of them can be mitigated with proper diet, exercise, and stress management.)

Stress, in general, is believed to shorten a person's life. That is why it is so important to learn to deal with stress and overcome the harmful emotional and physical effects it has on you.

What to Do if You Need Help

- **Stress is a part of life, but many times the number and types of stresses you have to deal with can feel overwhelming—that is a signal to get help.**
- **Friends . . . family . . . family doctor . . . qualified mental health professional . . . clergy member . . . stress management and relaxation programs . . .**

Many people need to speak to someone about the cause of their stress. The person listening can be a family member, clergy member, co-worker, friend, doctor, or mental health professional. You may also decide to take a stress management and relaxation class. This class can give you ways of reacting to and dealing with stress the next time it arises.

Be sure to do whatever it is that makes you feel comfortable before the stress becomes so great that you feel completely overwhelmed.

Techniques to Control or Reduce Stress

- **Alter the emotional and physiological response (practice meditation, mindful breathing, self-hypnosis, or progressive relaxation).**
- **Eat healthfully on a daily basis.**
- **Get regular physical activity.**
- **Alter those beliefs and assumptions that make stress more probable.**
- **Accentuate the positive.**
- **Alter the environment that is causing the stress (play music to drown out stressful noise).**

Once you've identified the stress, it is time to do something to reduce the stress. One method of doing this is by changing the environment that causes your stress. If it's your job, change jobs or create a situation that is more amenable to you. If it's where you live, move.

Another technique is to alter your emotional and physiological response to the stress. Employ techniques that lower your arousal to the stressor. Use meditation, self-hypnosis, and autosuggestion and progressive relaxation techniques (such as breathing exercises).

Ways of controlling stress on a daily basis include following a proper diet and getting adequate physical activity. Avoid foods that are high in sugar, salt, cholesterol, and unhealthy saturated and trans fat. Take a walk when you're feeling the urge to eat a gallon of ice cream because your boss is driving you crazy. The walk not only will help you relieve stress but also will make you feel good about getting some physical activity. If you eat well and are physically active daily, you'll also be better equipped to deal with stress as it arises in daily life.

Remember, to receive both the emotional and physical benefits of physical activity, you need only to be active for 30 minutes a day on all or most days of the week. That can be in the form of a walk, a run, a basketball game with friends, or dancing at a club—any moderate to vigorous type of physical activity. For greater health benefits and to control body weight, increase the intensity or the duration of physical activity.

There's good news if you are short on time: You don't necessarily need to accumulate your 30 to 60 minutes a day all in one stretch. The total amount of activity is what counts for your health. So you can be active for a steady 30 to 60 minutes, or you can accumulate your activity in 3 to 6 short (10-minute) bouts throughout the day.

There are other ways to control stress. You can become a more positive person by altering the beliefs, assumptions, and ineffective ways of thinking that make you more vulnerable to stress. Changing your attitude can be difficult, but it's less difficult than changing your environment. Suggestions for becoming more positive include daily affirmations, meditations, inspirational quotes or writings, and motivators.

Quick Tension Reliever 1: Deep Breathing

- **Get in a comfortable position.**
- **To the count of 5, take a long, slow, deep breath.**
- **Let your belly expand.**
- **As you exhale to the count of 5, imagine breathing out excess tension and breathing in relaxation.**
- **With each inhalation, say to yourself, “I am.” With each exhalation, say to yourself, “Relaxed.”**

Now I'll give you a couple of quick tension relievers that you can use when you feel the signs of stress coming on. Get into a comfortable position. To the count of 5, take a long, slow, deep breath. Let your belly expand. As you exhale to the count of 5, imagine breathing out excess tension and breathing in relaxation. With each inhalation, say to yourself, “I am.” With each exhalation, say, “Relaxed.”

Quick Tension Reliever 2: Stretching

- **While seated at a desk or in a chair, do the following:**
 - Inhale and raise your arms, gently stretching them toward the ceiling. Wiggle your fingers for 10 seconds. Now exhale while you let your arms go limp at your sides.
 - With your legs stretched out before you, alternately flex and point your feet for 10 seconds. Now just point your feet and wiggle your toes for another 10 seconds.

You can do this exercise at your desk in the office or at home. Let's try it here. Inhale and raise your arms, gently stretching them toward the ceiling. Wiggle your fingers for 10 seconds. Now exhale while you let your arms go limp at your sides. Stretch your legs out in front of you. Alternately flex and point your feet for 10 seconds. Now just point your feet and wiggle your toes for 10 seconds.

Summary: How to Deal With Stress

- **Change the beliefs and assumptions that allow you to become stressed.**
- **Manage your lifestyle: Resolve personal conflicts.**
- **Practice progressive relaxation, meditation, and mindful breathing.**
- **Eat healthfully: Avoid foods high in unhealthy saturated and trans fat, cholesterol, sugar, and salt.**
- **Be physically active regularly: Get at least 30 minutes per day (children need at least 60 minutes per day).**
- **Accentuate the positive in your life.**
- **Alter the environment to avoid or lessen the stressor.**

Let's review what we have learned in this training session:

- Learn about what is causing your stress and alter or avoid the situation.
- Read the signs in your body and your environment and change the stress so that the signs are eliminated or lessened.
- Eat healthfully and get regular physical activity at a moderate to vigorous pace.
- Change your beliefs—become a more positive person.
- Manage your lifestyle and resolve any interpersonal conflicts.
- Practice progressive relaxation, self-hypnosis, meditation, and mindful breathing.

Any questions? Thank you for attending this session.