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## Strategies for Reducing Stress

### Definition:

*Stress* refers to the biological and psychological response an individual has to a threat or situation, real or imagined. Generally, *stress* results when the demands of a *stressor* exceed the capacity of the individual to successfully manage the stressor, or, exceed the capacity the individual believes he or she has to manage the stressor. Stress can influence many aspects of our health and emotional well-being. However, not all stress is negative. Managing stress and stressful situations requires practice and mastery. Stress reduction can help you think more clearly, increase your ability to focus, sleep better, reduce tension headaches, etc.

### General Tips:

- 1) KEY – Preparation and daily use of strategies is the key to successfully managing stress. You manage stress best before the stressful event occurs.
- 2) Listen to your body, mind, and emotional condition.
- 3) Perseverance – Keep going. Stress management can be one of the hardest things to learn.
- 4) Insight – Knowledge about your stressor(s) can provide insight about the best strategy to use.
- 5) Extreme case scenario – Research has shown that some situations of extreme stress don't change very easily or very quickly. These situations can be quite resistant to our efforts to change. In those situations, do your best with what you have. That's good enough.
- 6) Maintain health – Poor health is fertile ground for stress related conditions.
- 7) Positive Outlook – Maintain a positive attitude. No negative thinking.

### Specific Strategies:

- 1) Deep Breathing
  - a. Get into a comfortable position. Sit in a chair, or lie on a bed with good posture in a relaxed position. Reduce distractions. Close your eyes. Start small (i.e. 5 minutes) then increase to longer and longer times.
  - b. Place one hand on your chest and another on your stomach.
  - c. Begin by taking a deep breath, inhaling slowly through your nose. This should be for about 2 seconds or so.
  - d. Allow the breath to fill your lungs so your abdomen (diaphragm) extends without raising your shoulders. Pause for a moment once your lungs are full.
  - e. Exhale Slowly – Open your mouth and allow the breath to go out slowly. Exhale in a slow, paced manner. Remember to go s-l-o-w-l-y.
  - f. Repeat – Go through the steps of inhaling and exhaling again. Develop a pace of repeating these steps that is comfortable for you. Gradually increase the time you practice.
  - g. Other suggestions – Do this when there are no distractions and, preferably, during a regular part of your day (i.e. before bed). Use before stress related events. If you get distracted while doing this, that's ok. Bring yourself back to breathing, let the distraction go, and focus on breathing once again.

## 2) Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- a. Begin deep breathing. Sit in a chair or lie in a bed with good posture in a relaxed position. Reduce distractions.
- b. Let muscle tone go – Start with one foot, and let all the muscle tone go into the chair, bed, or floor. Let the weight of your foot fall into the chair or bed. The chair will hold you up. The bed will hold you up. If your leg moves a little, that's ok. If you experience a distraction, come back to focus on your breathing, and let the muscle tone/ weight of your foot go once again.
- c. Progressive – Slowly progress up the leg, stopping at each section letting the weight of the shin, thigh, and hip fall into the chair or bed.
- d. Repeat for each body area – Repeat muscle relaxation steps for the other leg and then progress up the back, shoulders, hands, arms, neck, head, etc. so you have thoroughly gone through each area of the body thoroughly.
- e. Maintain – Check in and go over each body area so relaxation is maintained. Repeat as necessary.

## 3) Guided Imagery

- a. Begin deep breathing. Do progressive muscle relaxation.
- b. Imagery – Take a slow, purposeful journey to a favorite place you find comforting and safe such as the mountains, ocean, gardens, etc. Look at a couple of pictures before you start to refresh your recall/ experience. Begin by imagining yourself lifting up and up, looking down with your mind's eye as you are sitting in the chair or laying in bed.
- c. Savor the trip – Think about each part of the journey from where you are now as you go to your favorite spot. Imagine you are a leaf floating upward by a gentle breeze, suspending you along until you arrive.
- d. Savor the stay – Imagine with your mind's eye the details about where you are. The sun, the breeze, the clouds, children's voices, the call of the birds, smells, etc. Savor all of it.
- e. Maintain – Remain at your spot for about 15 minutes or so. Increase the time spent there as you are able.
- f. Return – After a period, allow the same gentle breeze to lift you up, and carry you along back to the place you started. Slowly open your eyes. Stay there sitting in the chair or laying in bed for a couple minutes.
- g. Visit frequently – Use guided imagery on a regular basis to reduce stress and maintain calm.

## 4) Identify Negative Thinking & Negative Self-Talk

- a. Identify and eliminate negative thinking. This leads to greater stress, a poor self-view, and stormy relationships with others.
- b. Examples: *Note: Some overlap with others . . .*
  - i. All-or-nothing thinking – See everything as extremes, not a range of possibilities.
  - ii. Negative expectations and predictions – Persistent negative predictions/ expectations about the future.
  - iii. Depreciating the good – Positive things don't matter or are looked down upon when they happen.
  - iv. Punishment – Punitive self-view. The belief that bad things happen or you are placed in difficult situations as punishment for past sins.

- v. Emotional reasoning – Feeling something *must* make it true. This is frequently the basis for destructive behaviors such as ‘emotional’ rash spending – using the credit card when you can’t afford the item.
- vi. Labeling – Using a negative label to yourself or someone else.
- vii. Over emphasize or over minimize – The tendency to magnifying the negative and/or minimize the positive.
- viii. Cognitive Filter – Limited to seeing details and can’t see the whole picture
- ix. Mind Reader – Interpreting actions of others based on your beliefs, not facts
- x. Generalizations – Global conclusions taken from a minor situation
- xi. “Should” statements – Shoulda, woulda, coulda. Creates negative expectations of self and others
- xii. Cognitive Straight Jacket – Being locked into seeing the world through a rigid set of rules and ideas. Creates straight jacket thinking. Can’t see out of the box.
- xiii. Personalizations – Always seeing yourself as the cause of the problem(s).
- xiv. Catastrophication – Whatever happens, will be disastrous.
- xv. “Ever-critical-eye” – Perfectionistic and critical view of self and/or others. Leads to a cycle of overachievement and disappointment; never measuring up to the expectations of yourself or others.

#### Further Reading and References:

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- 4) Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard Medical School Benson-Henry Institute for Mind-Body Medicine: [www.mbmi.org](http://www.mbmi.org)
- 5) Siegel, Daniel J. (2007). The Mindful Brain: Reflection and attunement in the civilization of well-being. W. W. Norton.
- 6) Thorn, B.E. (2004). Cognitive Therapy for Chronic Pain. Guilford Press.