

Targeting Stress



Lesson 1: Targeting Stress— An Introduction

Introduction

This lesson will —

1. Increase your understanding of stress and the role it plays in your health and wellness.
2. Emphasize the importance of managing stress.
3. Identify the way you personally react to stress.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson you should be able to —

1. Demonstrate an increased understanding of stress.
2. Identify five positive ways to cope with stress.
3. Reduce your stress by choosing one new stress reduction technique to use for the next week.



Getting Started

Two Activities to Highlight Stress

The following are two activities to get you thinking about stress. The first can also be used to help members of a small class (8-12 people) get to know one another in a short period of time. Pick only one activity for a 45-minute class. If working as an individual through the workbook, you will want to choose the second activity.

Activity 1: Getting to Know You

Have the group sit in a circle or around a table. The first person on the instructor's left begins by introducing himself or herself (first name only is easier). The instructor can also have each person give their home state, favorite vacation spot, hobby, or favorite holiday. When finished the next person on the left introduces himself or



herself, plus repeats the information provided by all previous individuals. If there are 8 people in the group, the last person would repeat all 8 names along with any other information, plus their own name and added information. At the end of the exercise, ask the participants how they felt when asked to remember everyone's name and home state. Was it stressful? What did they feel, think, or do that made them aware that they were under stress?

Activity 2: Identifying Your Stress

Complete the ***Are You Stressed Out?*** Quiz (see Worksheet 1.1) on your own. Next, pick one area where you are hoping to improve your stress management skills and write it down in the space provided below.

If used for classes, discuss the results of this quiz with the person sitting next to you.

If used for Individuals, discuss the results of this quiz with someone you trust (for example, a friend, co-worker, or family member).

Instructor Note: Have volunteers share what they hope to achieve by the end of this class with the whole group.

The One Area I Want to Improve Is:

Are You Stressed Out?

Take this quiz* to find out.

Check the box if the statement is true about you.

- I often have digestive upsets.
- I tend to lose my temper easily.
- I have trouble sleeping.
- People say I am a "worry wart."
- I have difficulty concentrating.
- I feel tired and drained all the time.
- I watch a lot of TV.
- I often get migraines or tension headaches.
- I feel "blue" and have a hard time getting over it.
- I am really impatient with other people
- I feel "burned out."
- I feel the harder I work, the more behind I get.



* adapted from the American Heart Association. (1993). *Common sense about feeling tense*. Dallas, TX: Author.

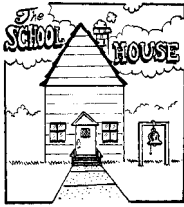
Count the Checks.

If your score is:

0-3 Congratulations! You don't seem to be experiencing many common symptoms of stress. Through **Targeting Stress** you will discover new ways to maintain your low-stress habits.

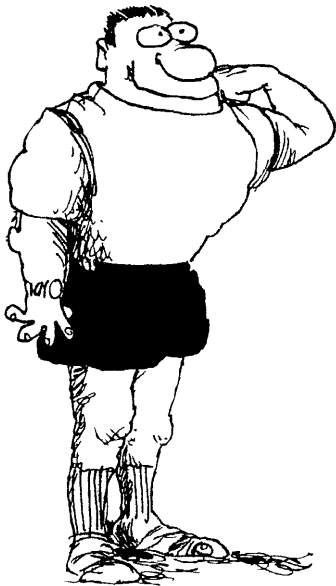
4-8 You have quite a few symptoms of stress. Learn how to cope better by participating in **Targeting Stress** and working through the exciting material that follows.

9-12 The many symptoms you are experiencing may be related to high levels of stress. You can begin to relieve these symptoms by **Targeting Stress** through learning and practicing many of the skills to be discussed in the following pages.

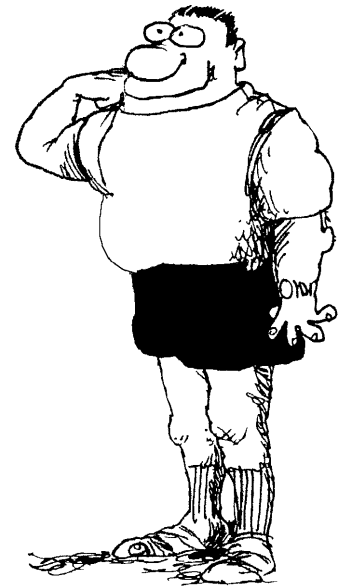


The School House

A Brief History of Stress



Walter B. Cannon (1914, as cited in McCance, 1990) was the first to use the term “stress” to describe physiological and psychological demands on organisms and their attempts to return to something called “homeostasis” or back to the way they were before the stressor. You see nobody likes to change. Even positive change (like getting married, starting an exercise program or losing weight) can be stressful. In general, we like to stay the



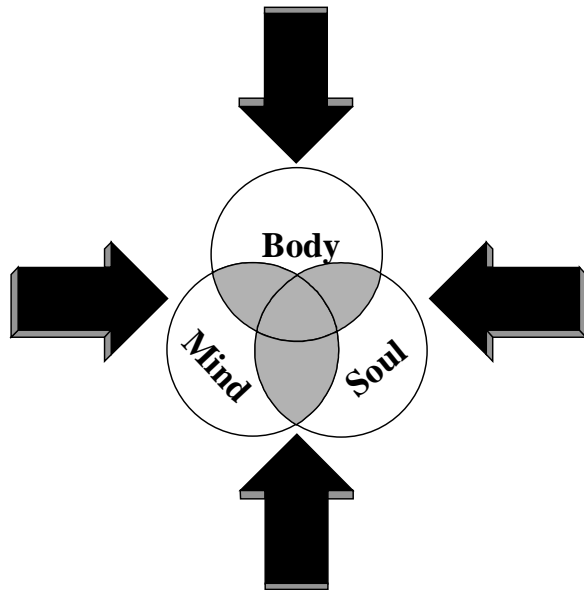
way we are.

Stress is anything that pressures us to change. Illness is stressful. Watching your favorite team lose is stressful. Jumping out of perfectly good airplanes is stressful. However, what causes one person distress may be entertaining to another.

Hans Seyle (1946, as cited in McCance, 1990) popularized the concept of “stress”. He showed that hormones are released by our body in response to both psychological and physical stressors. This explains why our heart races, our breathing and perspiration increase, and why we are ready to fight, flee, or freeze when we are feeling stressed. Adrenaline rushes through our body helping make us ready for action. If we perceive the stressor as good (for



example, our team is winning) the adrenaline rush we feel is seen as positive (that is, exciting, energizing). However, if we think of the stressor as bad (“I know I should have double checked that parachute”) the rush we feel is viewed as negative (that is, sick to my stomach, queasy). In either case, Seyle pointed out that chronically high cortisone levels can lead to diseases such as high blood pressure, peptic ulcer disease, and heart disease. Too much of a good or bad thing can damage your body.

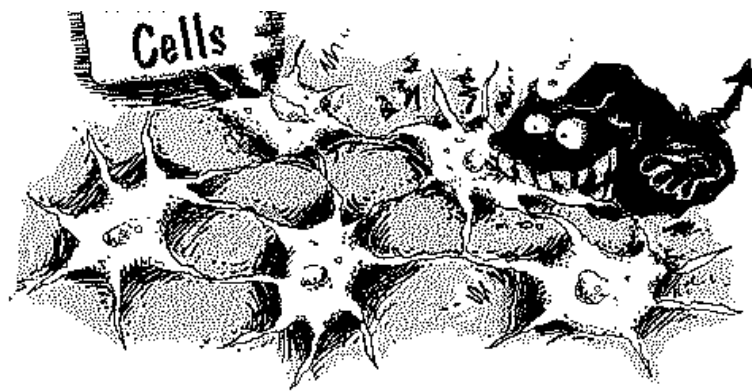


Stress Impacts Us on Many Levels

Philosophers, theologians, and scientists have divided a person into many different parts in an effort to describe what makes us unique from the rest of the animal kingdom. However, recently the focus has been on how the body works together as one unit. We know that it does not matter where stress starts, it soon

spreads to affect all the parts that make up who we are. Physical stressors affect the way we think (our mind) and the way we feel about our self (our soul). The way we feel about our self (for example, feelings of guilt or shame) affects the way we think about our self and impacts on the way our body works.

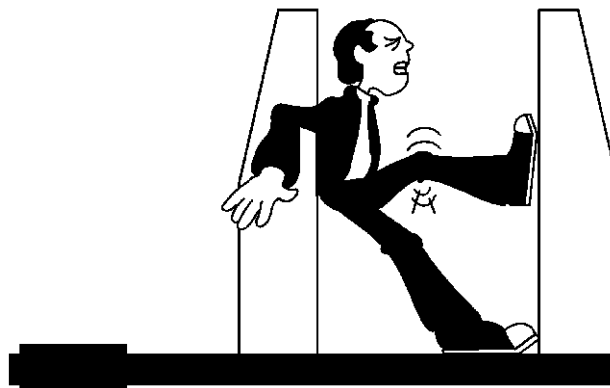
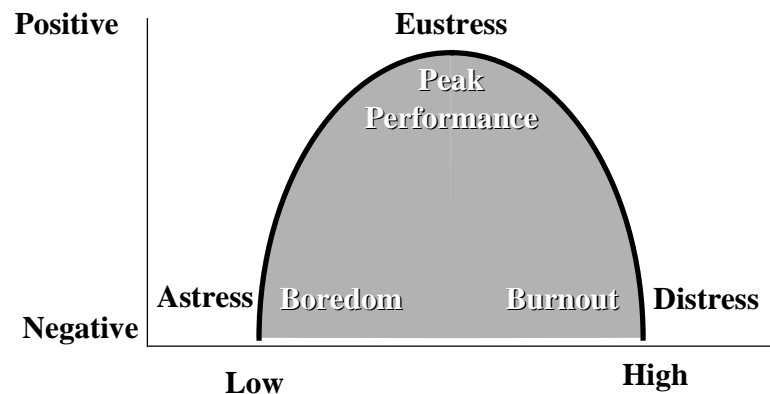
For example, scientists have discovered that “life changes and/or emotions resulting from life changes occurring for a prolonged period of time were associated with decreases in one or more immune functions” (McCance, 1990). This is not really a new finding. Galen, a physician during the 2nd century A.D. observed that depressed women developed breast cancer more often than non-depressed women (McCance, 1990). We now know that depression (feeling sad or blue) lowers your body’s ability to fight infection. This in turn can lead to illness. The two new fields of psychoneuroimmunology and neuroimmunology look at the relationship between our perceptions of stressors and their affect upon our immune system.



So in review, what is stress?

Stress is any demand (positive or negative) that requires our mind, emotions, or body to change. Is all stress bad? No, some stressful situations we seek out because of the thrill. Some changes stressful situations bring make us change for the better. Also, the right amount of stress can help us function at our best or “Be All You Can Be.” However, too little stress and we feel bored; too much stress and we may feel “burned out”. The proper balance of stress is important to function effectively.

What is Stress?



Take a few moments and answer the following question: **How do you react to being under stress?** If you are completing this lesson as part of a group, take five minutes and discuss this issue with the person sitting next to you. If you find you have extra time, discuss better ways to manage your stress. If you are completing this on your own, you may want to pause for a moment and discuss this with a friend.

Stress Reactions

The table below lists some of the more common ways people respond to stress. Perhaps you will find some of the ways you react to stress listed. If some of the ways you react to stress are not listed, feel free to add them.

PHYSICAL	EMOTIONAL	COGNITIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pounding heart • Rapid breathing • Sweaty palms • Cold hands and feet • Lack of energy • Headaches • Muscle tension • Sleep difficulties • Stomach disturbances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability • Nervous, edgy • Lack of patience • Crying • Losing temper • Worrying • Emotional sensitivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory lapse • Lack of concentration • Increase in careless errors • Negative attitude • Pre-occupation

People respond to stress in different ways because of temperament, situational factors, modeling by parents and significant others, and past history of coping with stress. Some of the ways we respond to stress may be helpful. Some responses help us focus on or have enough energy to complete a task. Other responses to stress may signal the need for positive change in our lives and give us the drive to make those changes. However, there are some ways of reacting to stress that interfere with our ability to change in a positive direction.

Worksheet 1.3 is a partial listing of ways people tend to respond to stress. Some are positive and some are negative. Compare these lists with the ones you created. Don't be overly critical or get down on yourself. Instead, use them as a starting point for change. No one can change unless they first know where they are and then develop a plan or road map for how to change. Praise yourself for areas where you are doing great.

Worksheet 1.3

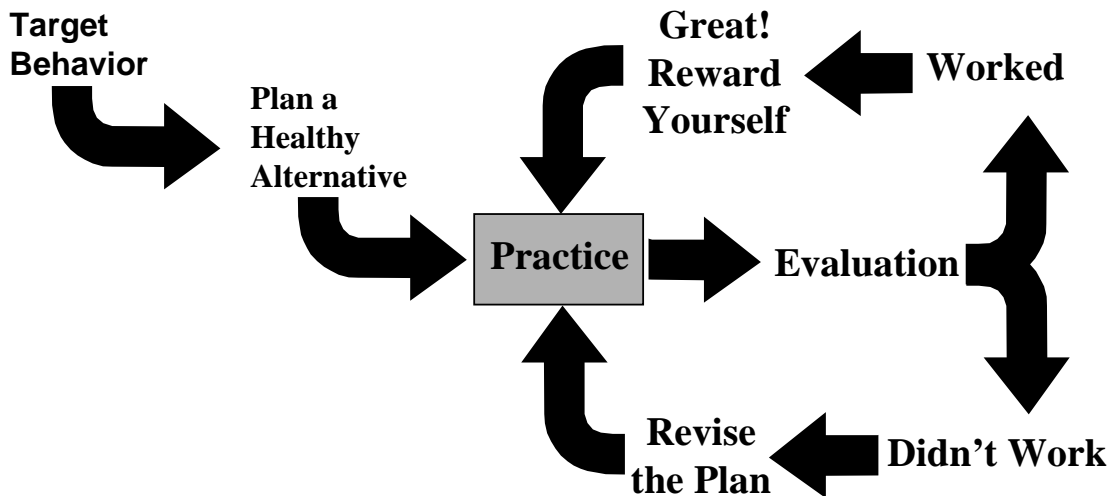
Coping with Stress	
To Do	To Avoid
Physical activity	Being a couch potato
Go for a walk	Yelling at your spouse, family, and friends
Sleep at least 4 hours while in a field environment and 7-8 hours per night elsewhere	Sleeping too little or too much
Talk with a friend	Withdrawing from others
Eat a healthy diet	Eating too little or too much
Be assertive	Being aggressive or passive
Develop a hobby	Working harder, not smarter
Manage your time	Letting time manage you
Take mini-vacations throughout the day (one-three minute breaks from work to stretch, take a walk, etc.)	Not taking a break throughout the day Eating lunch at your desk Skipping lunch Being a workaholic
Take a vacation (also, take a day of leave before and at the end of your vacation)	Not taking time off from work
Practice relaxation	Dwelling on problems
Have fun	Alcoholic beverages, caffeine, and tobacco



Skill-Building Become a Behavioral Engineer

Change does not normally occur by chance. It is the result of being aware of what you do now to handle stress and developing a plan for how to do it differently. Once the plan is made, try it out. If it does not help you manage your stress better, do not get down on yourself. Being too critical of yourself reduces your ability to change. Though others may try to help you make positive changes in your life, only you can make the changes stick. If the plan you developed does not work the first time, revise it. Keep working on your plan for positive change until you are successful. Oh, and one more tip—work on the small changes first. Build a history of solid success before you start to tackle major areas that you want to change. Always remember, the more you work at changing, the better you get. Practice may not make perfect, but it eventually brings success. You can do it!

Practical Guide to Behavior Change



Here are some additional terms to keep in mind as you develop your own stress management plan.

Target Behavior: This is a feeling, thought, or action that you want to change.

Healthy Alternative: This is a feeling, thought, or action you would like to do instead.

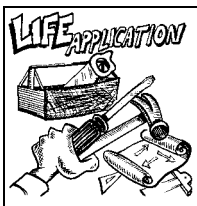
Practice: Plan the day and times that you will practice the healthy behavior. Practice until you become comfortable with new behavior.

Evaluation: How well did the practice go? What can be done to make it go better next time?

Didn't Work: Don't get down on yourself. You need you! Either pick another healthy alternative, practice more, or in some other way change how you are doing it now. New habits are formed by doing something once and then repeating it. Keep trying. Practice makes perfect.

Worked: Congratulations! Don't forget to reward yourself. Rewards or positive reinforcement help to maintain the positive steps you are taking.

Go Back to Practice: Continue to practice and fine tune the new, healthier alternative behavior until it becomes second nature. The more you practice, the easier it becomes.



Life Application

We have already looked at negative ways to cope with stress. Now let's talk about change. Look back over the list of things you do to cope with stress. Pick one negative way you use to manage stress and develop a plan for positive change. Use *Worksheet 1.4* and set a date to begin to make positive changes in your life. Next pick one positive coping technique you do not use, but would like to begin using to help you manage stress. You may also pick one coping technique that you already use, but would like to use more often. Write down a plan for how you would increase the use of that technique everyday. Some examples are provided on *Worksheet 1.5*.

Worksheet 1.4

Practical Guide to Behavior Change	
Target Behavior	
Plan a Healthy Alternative	
Practice	
Evaluation	
Didn't Work: Revised Plan	Go Back to <i>Practice</i> .
Worked: Great! Reward Yourself.	
Go Back to Practice	

Target Behavior: This is a feeling, thought, or action that you want to change.

Healthy Alternative: This is a feeling, thought, or action you would like to do instead.

Practice: Plan the day and times that you will practice the healthy behavior. Practice until you become comfortable with new behavior.

Evaluation: How well did the practice go? What can be done to make it go better next time?

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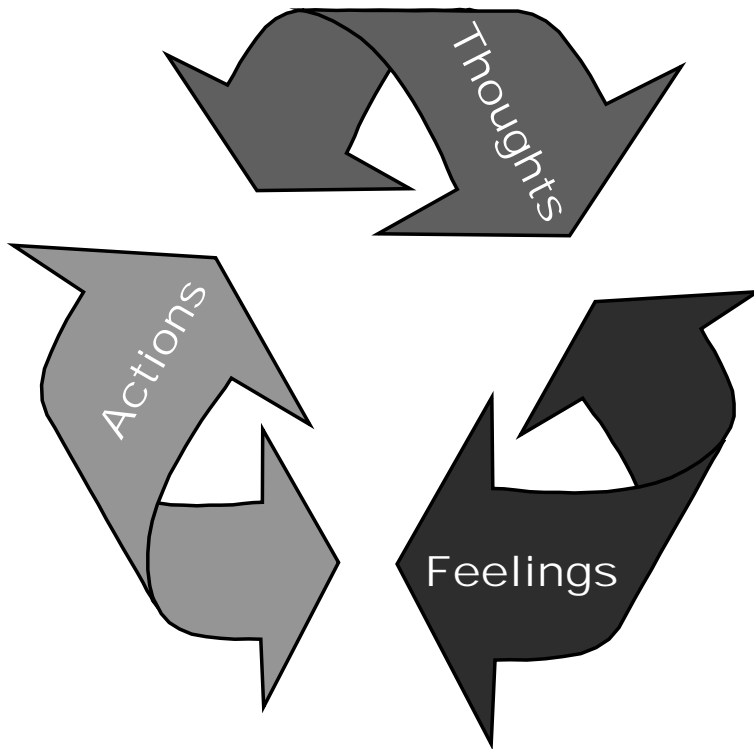
Worked!: Congratulations! Don't forget to reward yourself. Rewards or positive reinforcement help to maintain the positive steps you are taking.

Go Back to Practice: Continue to practice and fine tune the new, healthier alternative behavior until it becomes second nature. The more you practice, the easier it becomes.

Practical Guide to Behavior Change

Target Behavior	Feeling tense during work.
Plan a Healthy Alternative	Take a brief (one to two minute) break to stretch by walking or doing some exercises in (see Special Article, <i>Exercise and Stress</i>).
Practice	Every hour starting tomorrow. (Set watch to chime on the hour as a reminder).
Evaluation	How tense do I feel compared to before?
Didn't Work: Revise the Plan	Change or add another activity: 1. Continue stretching breaks every hour 2. Add taking a walk at lunch and after work to unwind. Go back to <i>Practice</i> .
Worked: Great! Reward Yourself.	Buy a new pair of walking shoes.
Go Back to Practice	The more you practice, the better you become! Keep looking for new ways to make it exciting (for example., walking with friends, varying the route or exercises).

Where Does Change Start?



One final point, it does not matter where you start to change the way you manage stress. The *Healthy Alternative* can be a thought, a feeling, or an action. For example, if you tend to withdraw from others when under stress, instead you can seek opportunities to be with others. The “action” of being with others will lead to different ways of “thinking” about yourself and your situation. This will in turn lead to different ways of “feeling” about yourself or your situation. Additionally, you may discover new resources for dealing with

your stressors.

Here is another example. You may want to take a different tack if you tend to get down on yourself when under stress by calling yourself names (e.g., “stupid”, “clumsy”, “I’ll never amount to anything”, _____). Go ahead and fill in the blank. We all have a preferred name or two we call ourselves when we foul up, and everybody fouls up from time-to-time. There is an old joke that goes, “How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but it has to really want to change.” Though other people can help us change, the only one who can really change you is you. Calling yourself names is like shooting yourself in the foot. It does not help you get to where you want or need to go. It reduces your ability to change.

If you take this approach to handling stress, you may want to change the way you think about yourself. Say, “STOP” to yourself (loud enough so you can hear it over the name calling), and start making positive statements to yourself. Hitting a home run is rare. Build your confidence by picking small areas to improve on first, then build upon those successes. Reward yourself when successful. If not successful, don’t go back to name calling. A baseball player whose batting average is .300 is highly successful, even

though he failed to get a hit 7 out of 10 times. Go back to the drawing board and change the plan for success. Remember, the more you practice, the better you get.



Stay Tuned

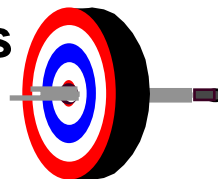
In the next lesson, we will cover Personal Stress Management. This session will explore personal sources of stress and how you can improve your ability to cope with these stresses through developing some simple, yet effective skills.



Give Us Feedback

Please take a moment to complete the feedback form provided at back and return it to your instructor or mail it to USACHPPM. This information helps us know how we are doing, so we can do better at providing helpful solutions for today's problems. Thank you.

Targeting Stress



References

American Heart Association. (1993). *Common sense about feeling tense*. Dallas, TX: Author.

Cannon, W. B. (1914) as cited in McCance.

McCance, K. L. (1990). Stress and Disease. In K. L. McCance and S. E. Huether (Eds.) *Pathophysiology: The Biological Basis for Disease in Adults and Children*. St. Louis: Mosby.

Seyle, Hans (1946) as cited in McCance.