
Stress Management

2. Interventions

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Abstract:

Stress management strategies are beneficial to people across a broad spectrum of chronological, gender, cultural, and ethnic characteristics. Men and women, young and old, from divergent socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic back-grounds can benefit from stress management interventions. Sensitivity to needs and values of individuals and communities, particularly for high-risk groups, guides modification of assessment and intervention techniques. The language, belief system, and cultural distinctions of individuals guide the choice and alteration of stress management strategies.

Key Terms: Coping; stress; exercise; humor: and social.

Eloping Self-Assessment:

Self-awareness is one of the most effective stress management tools. Self-awareness helps people learn about interactions among mind, body, and spirit, increases a sense of control, and counters self-defeating perceptions. Interventions that promote self-awareness help people make sense of life events and circumstances that may be bewildering or discomforting. Many experiences in life lead to feelings of emptiness and disharmony, because people are unable to connect the experience with thoughts, feelings, actions, and physiological responses. Self-awareness helps individuals recognize stress that they create thought negative, exaggerated, unrealistic thinking. This recognition affords an opportunity to change these negative thought patterns, thereby decreasing stress and increasing control. Strategies that increase self-awareness can empower individuals to make new connections and to reframe and reinterpret their experiences in light of their own inner strengths and wisdom.

Stress Warning Signs

The negative stress cycle can be difficult to interrupt. Recognizing warning signs of stress is a necessary first step. Often individuals have long ignored physical, emotional, or behavioral cues or reactions to a stressor that are stress warning signs. The man suffering from chronic intermittent backaches, who ignores the daily muscle tension caused by poor posture that precedes the backache, provides an example. If he had attended to his

early stress warning signs of poor posture and muscle tension, then he might have avoided the backaches that kept him from exercising and socializing. Becoming aware of these stress warning signs is the first step. After this connection is made, developing skills to reduce negative mood states, unhealthy behaviors, and physical symptoms becomes much easier. To continue with the previous example, preventing a backache from becoming disabling is easier when the man notices muscle tension and then stops, takes a few deep breaths, corrects his posture, and gently stretches the area, rather than waiting for the backache to become incapacitating before acting.¹

Clinicians teach people to identify their warning signals of stress and to stop, take a few breaths, and break the cycle. Boxes 1-6 provide a sample form for identifying and recording this information. These signals or cues differ from individual to individual and can be physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, relational, or spiritual. When asked to monitor their response to a particular event, individuals become more consciously aware of these cues. Although this heightened awareness initially may increase an individual's consciousness of physical pain or emotional discomfort, awareness is a necessary first step in recognizing the negative effects of stress and the relationship of thoughts, feelings, behavior, and biological processes.

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Box 1: Physical symptoms.

- Headaches
- Indigestion
- Stomachaches
- Sweaty palms
- Sleep disturbances
- Dizziness
- Back pain
- Tight neck and shoulders
- Racing heart
- Restlessness
- Tiredness
- Ringing in ears

Box 2: Behavioral symptoms

- Excess smoking
- Bossiness
- Compulsive gum chewing
- Attitude critical of others
- Grinding of teeth at night
- Overuse of alcohol
- Compulsive eating
- Inability to get things done

Box 3: Emotional symptoms.

- Crying
- Nervousness and anxiety
- Boredom (no meaning to things)
- Edginess (ready to explode)
- Feeling powerless to change things
- Overwhelming sense of pressure
- Anger
- Loneliness
- Unhappiness for no reason
- Easily upset

Box 4: Cognitive symptoms

- Trouble thinking clearly
- Lack of creativity
- Memory loss
- Forgetfulness
- Inability to make decisions
- Thoughts of running away
- Constant worry
- Loss of sense of humor

Box 5: Spiritual symptoms.

- Emptiness
- Loss of meaning
- Doubt
- Unforgiving
- Martyrdom
- Looking for magic
- Loss of direction
- Cynicism
- Apathy
- Needing to "prove" self

Box 6: Relational symptoms

- Isolation
- Intolerance
- Resentment
- Loneliness
- Lashing out
- Hiding
- Clamming up
- Lowered sex drive
- Nagging
- Distrust
- Lack of intimacy
- Using people

Learning a relaxation Technique:

Eliciting the relaxation response is another technique to help people develop awareness and counter the negative effects of stress. Relaxation techniques counter the stress response by reducing sympathetic arousal.² The immediate physiological effects of relaxation are decreases in heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and muscle tension. The long-term physiological effect is a decrease in central nervous system arousal with a concomitant decrease in musculoskeletal system, autonomic nervous system, psycho-neuronal, and psycho-endocrine systems' arousal. To the extent that stress causes symptom, eliciting the relaxation response can break this stress-symptom cycle. In addition to the physiological changes such as improved mood and behavioral changes, including a reduction in risky behaviors, can occur. The relaxation response can counteract stress-related disease processes, particularly processes associated with immunological, cardiovascular, and neurodegenerative disorders.³

The relaxation response is an innate physiological response²; therefore, a number of techniques that involve mental focusing can be used. All of these techniques have two basic components:

1. The repetition of a word, sound, phrase, prayer, image, or physical activity;
2. The passive disregard of everyday thoughts when they occur.

Audiotapes are recommended to help guide this process of focusing, especially during the initial learning phase. Clinicians often can introduce individuals to the immediate calming

effects of relaxation response in less than 5 minutes. One effective way is to have the person make a fist and notice what happens to the breathing pattern. Most people have a tendency to hold their breath while tensing a body part. Now ask the person to take a few deep diaphragmatic breaths while making a fist. Most people will notice that the tension is much harder to maintain while taking a deep breath. This awareness helps to recognize the relationship between breath and tension. This connection between breathing and relaxation is the principle behind Lamaze techniques for helping mothers control pain delivery.⁴

Most people hold their breath when they perceive a threat (stress), feel anxious, or become angry. By stopping and taking a few deep breaths when they become aware of physical changes (holding the breath or clenching the jaw) or emotional changes (feeling anxious or angry), individuals can elicit the relaxation response, reduce sympathetic arousal, calm negative mood states, and gain a sense of control.

Mini-Relaxations

Mini-relaxations can be taught quickly and used throughout the day to help develop awareness and to counter the negative effects of stress on the mind, body, and spirit. Individuals can be taught to monitor minor stress warning signs (jaw and shoulder tension) and to use a mini-relaxation to keep these initial symptoms of stress from developing into an incapacitating tension headache. A mini-relaxation exercise can be anything from a few conscious, deep diaphragmatic breaths to several minutes; **Box 7.**

Box 7: Mini-Relaxation

- Count slowly up to 4 as you inhale and slowly back down again as you exhale
- Change your breathing to diaphragmatic breathing. Try inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. You should feel your stomach rising about 1 inch as you and falling about 1 inch as you exhale.
- Take a few deep diaphragmatic breaths, and as you do so, begin to recall something that would bring a smile to your face, which might be the image of your child's face, your favorite pet, or another loved one; or it could be the memory a favorite place, food, or event in your life.

Complementary Therapies:

A variety of alternative and complementary therapies can prevent and reduce harmful effects of stress.

These include acupuncture, hypnosis, aromatherapy, reflexology, and chiropractic and herbal therapies. These approaches have developed outside the mainstream of traditional Western medicine; however, developing evidence of efficacy has promoted growing acceptance of some of these approaches.⁵ People increasingly are using alternative and complementary practices as self-help measures, and research to study their effects has exploded in recent years.⁶ Clinicians can assist clients to base their use on evidence of safety and efficacy. In particular, herbal remedies require cautious use because they can have harmful, as well as beneficial effects, and they sometimes interfere with other treatments. Among the alternative therapies available, there is strong evidence of effectiveness of acupuncture and hypnosis, and they are becoming widely accepted within mainstream health care.

Acupuncture is an ancient Chinese technique used to reduce pain and to prevent and manage various disorders by placement of fine needles at specific meridian points on the body. Acupuncture is not a self-help approach, so seeking treatment from an experienced acupuncturist is required. The Western scientific community cannot explain why acupuncture works but acknowledges its effectiveness. Even the World Health Organization has listed illnesses that can be managed with acupuncture,⁵ and some health insurance plans cover it.

Hypnosis comes from a Greek word meaning sleep.^{5,7} Hypnosis narrows consciousness and elicits relaxation, inertia, and passivity, like sleep, yet awareness is never lost completely and the hypnotized person can respond.⁷ The exact mechanisms through which hypnosis works are not known, although perhaps its ability to induce deep relaxation and its possible action in shifting brain activity from the analytical left side to the non-analytical right side might be explanatory.⁵ Nevertheless, its effectiveness in managing a variety of conditions, notably smoking and anxiety-related problems, and managing pain is well recognized. Trained therapists provide hypnotherapy to manage stress and various mental health problems, including phobias,

addictions, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Self-hypnosis, a form of deep relaxation similar to relaxation techniques described above, can be a useful stress-reduction tool. Self-help guides such as *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook*⁸ provide safe and easy-to-follow guidelines. One note of caution is warranted: hypnosis is not recommended for people with organic brain disorders, psychotic disorders, or other severe mental disorders.

Journal Writing

Journal writing, more specifically, self-confessional writing is useful in processing emotions and in measurably improving physical and mental health.⁸ Journaling can assist people to reflect upon stressful events and their reactions to these events. Such reflection is an opportunity to reform perceptions and to consider alternative ways to manage stress. Individuals may find resolutions to conflicts that work uniquely for them. These resolutions then may increase a sense of control and mediate negative consequences of stress. This self-reflective process shares elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy, an intervention effective in reducing harmful effects of stress.

Healthy Diet:

Countering negative effects of stress requires caring for physical health and wellbeing. The mind and body are connected; therefore, paying attention to one while ignoring the other does not promote overall health. The body requires rest, a healthy diet of balanced food choices from the five food groups, and exercise. Food is now viewed as a positive influence on health, physical performance, and state of mind, rather than simply a fuel needed to prevent disease and sustain life.⁹ Nutrition is becoming an important component of early intervention strategies to improve physical, cognitive, emotional, and social functioning.

Encouraging healthier dietary choices helps people to recognize that control over their health and well-being is possible. This knowledge, in turn, helps counter the negative effects of stress, and can influence poor dietary choices. Clinicians can encourage people to monitor their daily dietary patterns to gain awareness of how they use food in times of stress. Tools like food diaries help people to monitor the amount and quality of what they eat and drink and to set realistic goals.⁷

Physical activity:

Combining a healthy diet with a regular exercise routine has many health benefits and can positively affect quality of life. Regular physical activity decreases the risk of death from heart disease, lowers the risk of diabetes and hypertension, and is associated with a decreased risk of colonic cancer.¹⁰ Regular physical activity, even at moderate levels, is associated with lower death rates for adults at any age. Psychological well-being is enhanced and the risk of developing depression can be reduced; regular physical activity appears to reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety and to improve mood.

Regular physical activity helps people adopt a more active lifestyle as they begin to feel better physically and emotionally, helping to break the negative stress cycle. These positive effects can be obtained with exercise of only moderate intensity. For example, a brisk walk of 30 to 60 minutes, 3 to 5 times a week, promotes fitness and decreases risk of disease.

Sleep Hygiene:

Good health and the ability to meet life's many demands and manage stress effectively require proper rest. Many people suffer from sleep deprivation that can cause or exacerbate conditions such as depression and fatigue and contribute to poor concentration and ineffective problem solving. Insomnia can be induced by stress or other cognitive-behavioral factors, such as unrealistic expectations, inappropriate scheduling of sleep, trying too hard to sleep, consuming caffeine, getting inadequate exercise, and a number of other factors including illness, alcohol or drug use. By determining the extent to which sleep disturbance is the result of behavior or stress-related issues and by counseling people to follow several sleep hygiene or behavior guidelines (keep a sleep diary, having a regular sleep wake cycles, and making prudent dietary changes), clinicians can help individuals improve their sleep patterns.¹¹

Cognitive Restructuring:

Many stressful situations can be created or exacerbated by negative, exaggerated, catastrophic thinking. Cognitive therapy is a conceptual model for a short-term intervention to modify this thinking and reduce stress. In the context of cognitive therapy, cognitive restructuring is a technique or series of strategies that help people evaluate their

thoughts, challenge them, and replace them with more rational responses. Appraisal, or the way in which a situation is viewed, can be a major cause of stress. When situations are viewed in a negative, distorted, or illogical manner, this perception can adversely affect emotions, behaviors, beliefs, and physiological parameters. Cognitive restructuring teaches people to recognize that negative thinking often causes emotional distress. This recognition, in turn, reduces the negative consequences of stress and enhances health.¹²

Cognitive restructuring does not gloss over or deny misfortune, suffering or feelings. Many circumstances exist in peoples' life for which it is appropriate to feel sad, anxious, angry, or depressed. More accurately, cognitive restructuring is a technique that helps people become unstuck from these moods so that they can experience a broader range of feelings.¹³ In this structured method, individuals are asked to consider their cognitive appraisal of a situation and how this assessment affects feelings, behaviors, and physiological processes. Reframing, or cognitive reappraisal, educates individuals in monitoring thoughts and replacing those that are negative and irrational with those that are more realistic and helpful.

Affirmations:

Affirmations can be an effective stress management and cognitive restructuring skill, because they are a method of countering self-defeating negative thoughts and attitudes, in addition to being helpful in addressing spiritual needs.¹² An affirmation is a positive thought, in the form of a short phrase or saying, which has meaning for the individual. By reinforcing new ways of thinking or behaving in the present moment, affirmations are statements that people can use to reaffirm new intentions and to clarify goals.

Clinicians can coach individuals to create an affirmation as a way of developing a more helpful, realistic belief system. For example, thoughts such as "I can't handle this" and "My day is ruined" can be countered with "I can handle this" and "I know ways to increase my comfort." Repeating an affirmation often throughout the day, perhaps after eliciting the relaxation response or as part of a breathing exercise, can become second nature and can help to enhance self esteem and reduce stress.

Social Support:

Having supportive family, friends, and co-workers is for many individuals an important contributor to effective coping and stress hardiness.¹⁴ Many people believe that confiding in others and talking out problems can be a helpful way to get good advice or uncritical support. Social support comprises a network of close family, friends, co-workers, and professionals. Clinicians can do much to facilitate social support to promote effective coping and reduce stress.

Assertive Communication:

Effective communication is an important stress management skill. An important coping and problem-solving skill, communication can be adversely affected by exaggerated negative thoughts and deeply held negative beliefs and assumptions.¹² People who have difficulty with communication usually have one or all of the following problems:

- Disparity between what they say (statement) and what they want (intent)
- Confusion about or resistance to stating clearly how they feel, what they want, or what they need (assertiveness), with either a tendency to deny their own feelings (passiveness) or indifference toward the feelings of others (aggressiveness)
- Inability to listen.

The first principle of effective communication is that people are clear about what they want and what they need (intent) in statements to others. Although it would be wonderful if a son, spouse, friend, or other were great mind reader, assuming that does little to help with communication. Clinicians can help individuals match statements with intentions. This process requires that individuals recognize distorted, exaggerated thoughts and emotions and take responsibility for their part of conversation. Communicating effectively is an art and skill. People need to recognize that they have a right and a responsibility to speak up and to do in an assertive manner. The clinician can help individuals in matching their emotion with the explanation (frustration equals unmet expectation). Practicing this technique many times will be required before communication improves. Other people need time to be accustomed to the changes. Effective communication takes both practice and patience with every involved.^{12,15}

Empathy:

Empathy is an effective stress management intervention, because it helps communication.¹² Empathy is the ability to put another person's perspective into consideration and to communicate this understanding back to the person. Empathy helps individuals become better listeners.

Empathy can be facilitated through the technique of active listening. Active listening requires conscious, empathic, nonjudgmental awareness. Listening also helps clarify the issues involved and can deescalate many emotional exchanges.

When one uses active listening, the other person often feels heard. An opportunity to clarify any misunderstanding becomes available. This exercise may help reduce emotional arousal, defensive behavior, and conflict. Active listening allows the individual to buy time and to get a better perspective on what the other person is thinking and feeling. Individuals can then make a choice as to how they want to respond. They may choose to use assertive communication or to step away from the interaction. Active listening promotes empathic, objective, and nonjudgmental communication.

Healthy Pleasures:

Engaging in healthy pleasures (activities that bring feelings of peace, joy, and happiness) is, for most individuals, an important part of life. However, for individuals who are feeling overwhelmed with daily hassles, illness, or loss, this practice may have been lost. Individuals may feel that they do not deserve to have pleasure or that they are waiting for happiness until the stressors are resolved or until they go away. This belief makes breaking the stress cycle even more challenging; however, rewards motivate behavior.¹¹ By asking people to pursue a healthy and pleasurable activity every week, motivating them to become more involved in their lives and break this cycle is often easier. The activity can be simple and it need not cost money. For example, people often find pleasure in watching a sunset, observing birds at a feeder, calling a friend with whom they have not spoken in years, reading a favorite poem or book, watching a funny movie.¹⁶ Hobbies are purposeful leisure activities that can balance hectic, stressful lives. A hobby should be chosen from interest and/or talent.

Many hobbies have added benefits of increasing activity (e.g., gardening) or promoting social engagement (e.g., a book club or chorus). Clinicians can suggest that individuals make leisure activities a regular part of the week as a purposeful and conscious plan to break the stress cycle.

Spiritual Practice:

In response to stress, people can feel disconnected from life's meaning and purpose which, in turn, affects spiritual health and well-being. Meeting spiritual needs may be facilitated by spiritual practice or activities that help people find meaning, purpose, and connection. For example, individuals may choose to elicit the relaxation response through prayers. This focused, relaxed state of mind might help them develop a spiritual perspective that can engender a shift in values and beliefs to help cope with a stressor they cannot change, such as chronic illness or loss of a loved one. Clinicians might suggest a referral to a chaplain or clergy member, provide spiritual music or art work, recommend spiritual reading material, and provide personal presence.

Clinicians can suggest activities that provide a sense of meaning and purpose. Keeping a gratitude journal can be an important strategy to help individuals focus on aspects of life that are more positive and that become clouded from view when feeling overwhelmed by stress. Finding ways of helping others (tutoring children, reading to the blind, or visiting an elderly adult) can have a positive influence on spiritual health and well-being. Altruism, generosity, kindness, and service to others are more than moral virtues. These attributes not only help to make the world a better place, they also help people find meaning and purpose in life. Religious and existential well-being provided some defense against depression for people living with chronic and life-threatening conditions [17]. Elderly, chronically ill, and homebound people can be encouraged to produce written or oral histories that can be a legacy or, when able, to contact others needing care or to make telephone calls to raise funds for a favorite charity.

Clarifying Values And Beliefs:

To manage stress and develop a balanced lifestyle, people must recognize the things that are important to them, reflect on where they

are in life, evaluate what needs to be changed, and generate an action plan for that change.¹⁸ This process is known as values clarification. The first step is to identify what is important, meaningful, and valuable so as to assess whether actions are consistent with beliefs. What people believe and value guide their actions by endorsing certain behaviors and changing others. When people assess their values and beliefs, they employ the ability to make their own choices rather than relying on beliefs and values dictated to them by others.

Setting realistic Goals:

Developing an action plan for change to work toward a more balanced health-promoting lifestyle that is consistent with a person's values and beliefs is an important stress management strategy. Setting realistic, attainable goals facilitates this exercise. Goal setting is a dynamic process that involves both the individual and the clinician.¹² Goals should be specific, concrete, measurable, and achievable. Clinicians can facilitate this process by respecting the individual's input, using a values clarification exercise to facilitate a more complete database to guide individuals to identify and prioritize problems to be addressed, and set mutually agreed upon long-term goals. Clinicians should encourage individuals to challenge themselves when their behaviors are not consistent with what they identified as important and meaningful to them. For example, when an overweight man with hypertension and high cholesterol levels continue to smoke and eat high-fat foods, encourage him to look at these behaviors relative to what is meaningful to him, such as his family. The cost benefit is usually clear and the responsibility for the change is with the individual, not the clinician.

Clinicians can use the following questions to help individuals clarify long-term goals.¹²

- What is the most important and meaningful in your life?
- What aspects of your life would you like to change most right now?
- How can you begin the first step in that change?
- On what date would you like to achieve that goal?
- How can you reward yourself for success?
- How will your life be different when you succeed?
- How can I help?

Humor:

Humor is not only enjoyable and one of the most antidotes to stress, it has also been to have significant health promoting properties.¹⁹ Laughter creates predictable physiological changes in the body. Similar to how it behaves with other forms of exercise, the body responds in two stages: (1) an arousal phase with an increase in physiological parameters and (2) a resolution phase, during which these parameters return to resting values or lower values. Laughter is powerful stress reducer.¹⁹ Humor can be empowering; it gives people a different perspective on their problems and it facilitates objectivity, which increases a sense of self-protection and control in their environment. Finding humor in a stressful situation can help people to reframe perception of the event. More and more hospitals are recognizing the value of humor to health

promotion. Some hospitals have laughter libraries, humor rooms, comedy carts that can be wheeled into an individual's hospital room, or clowns to bring laughter and joy the bedside. Humor is a powerful, inexpensive stress reduction and health-promotion strategy that can offer a valuable perspective for people on their world and on themselves.

In conclusion, stress management strategies provide an opportunity for individuals to acquire the necessary skills to cope more effectively and become confident in self-managing. From this awareness, the individual is able to challenge and change perception, decrease stress reactivity, improve self-management skills, and minimizes the harmful consequences of stress. Understanding influences of stress on health and illness is essential.

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