LIFE IN A PRESSURE COOKER
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LIFE IN A PRESSURE COOKER--
COPING WITH STRESS

OBJECTIVES OF PROGRAM:

By learning about stress, participants will be able to:

. anticipate potential sources of stress
. expose the symptoms of stress
. strengthen personal methods of coping with stress

MAIN TEACHING POINTS:

. Recognizing the signs of stress is the first step in coping with stress
. Stress affects the body in different ways.
. Techniques for coping with stress can be learned.

SUGGESTED PROGRAM FORMAT

1. Roll Call (See Program Activities for roll call ideas.)

2. Presentation of Program
   a. Introduction
   b. Signs of Stress
   c. Effects of Stress
   d. Ways to Cope

3. Evaluation

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

1. Roll Call
   (Choose one for members to answer to roll call).
   a. "Stress is..."
   b. "When I have a lot of stress, I feel..."
   c. "The first thing I do when I am under a lot of stress is..."

2. Introductory Activities

   A. Placing Group Under Stress

       Leader tells group:
       "In a few minutes I am going to ask each of you to describe a par-
        particularly stressful event in your life. I'll give you several
        minutes to think, then each of you will have time to talk."

       Pause for several minutes and remain quiet.
Now the leader tells the group:
"I have just placed you under stress. Instead of describing a past incident, tell me how you felt just now."

Allow time for each participant to describe reactions and feelings. Discuss the fact that while all experienced the same source of stress, reactions varied with individuals.

B. Speaking of Stress (p. 11).

Use this as a group activity by writing the scrambled words, letter blanks, and definitions on a chalk board, poster board, or butcher paper as shown. Have the group work together to unscramble the words. Fill in the blanks as they do. Allow 3-5 minutes for unscrambling the words. The activity will be exciting and fun and somewhat stressful as people compete to solve the word game. Answers to the game are: 1. change, 2. relaxation, 3. adapting, 4. communication, 5. stress.

The word game may also be made into a handout and done individually with answers shared at the end of the time limit.

3. Stress and Tension Log (p. 10)
4. Something, Somebody, Self Activity (p. 13)
5. Identification Activity (p. 14)
6. Progressive Relaxation (p. 7 and p. 12)
7. Controlled Breathing (p. 12)
LIFE IN A PRESSURE COOKER

Introduction

We all experience pressure or stress in varying degrees at various times of each day, week, month, and year of our lives. It occurs as the result not only of unpleasant situations in which we find ourselves, but also as a result of pleasant circumstances which, no matter how enjoyable, still require significant expenditures of our energy. Like the anxiety it produces, stress can be beneficial or counter-productive. Usually, minimal degrees of stress motivate individuals into productive action; maximum degrees of stress, on the other hand, oftentimes result in little or no productive outcomes.

Americans are expressing a new and growing concern for coping with the stress of everyday life. Close to one in two American families (44 percent) are finding it harder to cope with problems such as high food costs, meeting monthly bills, saving for the future, fear of crime, and time constraints caused by family and work responsibilities. Eight out of ten family members now indicate a need for less stress in their daily lives. Indeed, most persons agree with the experts that stress if one of the most important factors preventing their being as healthy as they could be.

This program will focus on the symptoms or signs of stress, the effects of stress, and ways to cope with stress.

To introduce the program, choose from the two introductory activities listed under Program Activities (p. 1).

Signs of Stress

Most of us are able to recognize when we're experiencing stress. There are emotional, mental, and physical signals which "flag" the fact that we're in a stressful situation. Recognizing and being aware of symptoms of stress in yourself (and others) is important so that you can work out ways of coping with stress. By becoming aware of the first signs of stress we can 1) more clearly identify the causes of stress for ourselves, and 2) learn to discharge the stress before it becomes a very distressful situation. Recognizing stress is the first step in dealing with it.

What are these recognizable signs that serve as stress indicators? Are the signs the same for everyone? In fact, there are almost as many reactions to stress as there are individuals. Not everyone reacts to stress in the same way.

Some of the more common signs and symptoms of stress include:

**Emotional Changes** such as:

- Irritability
- Lowered self-esteem
- Angry outburst
- Lack of interest
- Diminished initiative
- Tendency to cry
Depression
Suspiciousness
Jealousy
Restlessness
Anxiousness
Withdrawal

Mental/Intellectual Changes such as:

Forgetfulness
Preoccupation
Errors in judging distance

Physical Changes such as:

Increased heart rate
Elevated blood pressure
Tightness of chest
Sweaty palms
Trembling, tics or twitching
Tightness of neck or back muscles
Headache
Diarrhea

Lack of concentration
Lack of attention to details
Reduced creativity
Diminished productivity

Hand out the Stress and Tension Log (p. 10) and discuss the form with the participants. Encourage them to take it home and keep a daily or weekly record. This will help them to better understand their reactions to stressors.

Effects of Stress

Researchers divide the body’s reaction to stress into three stages.

STAGE 1. ALARM

This first stage occurs when the body recognizes that a stressor is lurking and mobilizes the body's biological/chemical defenses to cope with it.

Certain hormones are pumped into the bloodstream which speed up the heart rate, increase respiration, and slow down digestive activity.

THE BODY IS READY FOR A FIGHT!

In animals or primitive man this alarm system triggers physical action (fight) or running away (flight) which releases tension.

If there is neither fight nor flight, then there is NO RELEASE for the stress. Such a situation can lead to stress-related illnesses such as ulcers, headaches, backaches, palpitations of the heart, rashes, and various other ailments.
STAGE 2. RESISTANCE & ADAPTATION

In this stage, the body tries to repair the damage caused in stage 1 and bring the body back to a "normal" condition.

This defense system works so well that most of the time, we are not even aware of it. We are all bombarded by stress—but we are not all sick.

IT IS ONLY WHEN STRESS IS NOT POSITIVELY DEALT WITH THAT STAGE III RESULTS.

STAGE 3. EXHAUSTION

A body cannot be under stress all the time. Release must occur or illness is likely to be the result.

How does stress affect us?

Some doctors attribute more disease states to stress than others do; but most agree that stress is associated with the mind-body (psychosomatic) diseases. They are physical disorders that have their origin in or are worsened by psychological or emotional processes. In other words, in psychosomatic diseases, the mind affects the condition of the body. Some of the psychosomatic conditions that are related to stress are ulcers, diarrhea, constipation, allergies such as asthmatic reactions, and migraine and tension headaches.

Other doctors believe that conditions such as hypertension (high blood pressure), coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes mellitus, obesity, and accidents are caused in part by stress. There is agreement among doctors and researchers that stress is a factor in between 50-80 percent of all illness. More than half of all people who visit doctors with physical complaints have emotional problems that are partly or wholly responsible.

As both the functioning of the mind and the working of the body become better understood, their effects upon one another become more evident and support the old cliche' of "a sound mind is a sound body." However, the really important thing is to teach yourself ways you can control stress rather than giving in to it. By controlling reactions to stress we can turn stress into a positive force and even let it make life more interesting.

Ways To Cope

Stress is both an opportunity and a danger. If used well, stress can be an opportunity for growth and even less distressful feelings in the next similar situation.

There are many techniques for limiting the harmful effects of stress. These range from the simple instruction to "forget about it" to more sophisticated methods.

There is no one method of responding to stress that is a best for all people. Based upon your personality, level of stress, interests, availability
of time and equipment, one or two methods will probably be better for you than
others. You can try:
  • communicating feelings when under stress
  • adapting to the problem
  • progressive relaxation exercises
  • controlled breathing
  • physical activity
  • biofeedback
  • taking control

Leader Instructions: Briefly explain the various ways to cope, then
demonstrate and involve the participants in a short session (approximately
five minutes) of one of the following activities:
  Progressive Relaxation (p. 7 and p. 12)
  Controlled Breathing (p. 12)
  Something, Somebody, Self Activity (p. 13)
  Identification Activity (p. 14)

Communicate

Communicate your feelings to someone you trust who will listen without
criticizing. Talk, cry, express anger. No matter what you feel, express your
feelings and get them out in the open rather than bottling them up.

Even if you feel you have no one to talk to, there is always someone with
whom you can discuss your feelings. If you have a close, trusting relation-
ship with a relative or friend, call on this person and share your distressed
feelings. If you do not have a relationship like this with anyone, begin
developing a friendship to help you handle stress-related situations.

Depending on the situation and your response, talking to a professional
may be advisable. Help may be found in discussing a problem with someone such
as a:
  minister
  physician
  social worker
  school counselor
  psychiatrist
  psychologist

Assistance with problems may be found from groups of people who have had
similar experiences. Examples of these groups are:
  • Parents Without Partners – for people who are raising children without a
    spouse.
  • Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, and Al-Ateen – for alcoholics and their
    families.
  • Parents Anonymous – for parents who abuse their children or who are
    potential abusers.
  • Make Today Count – for people with life-threatening illnesses and their
    families.
Adapt

If you cannot control or change the situation which is the source of stress, you can try to adapt. Adaptation is a long process which does not occur spontaneously. It involves these steps:

1. Realize you cannot change or control the stressor. You must adapt yourself to the situation.
2. Weigh the alternative adaptive behaviors, decide which is best, and try it for a while to see if it satisfies you.
3. After a period of time, evaluate how well you have adapted to the problem. If still experiencing stress, then review the alternative adaptive behaviors. Either choose another one, think of some new way to adapt yourself to the problem, or continue trying the adapt behavior originally chosen. Learn to accept or adapt to what you cannot change.

Attitude is important in coping with stress. Developing a positive attitude leads to health and eagerness to work out problems as they arise. Recognizing and accepting one's limitations fosters a realistic attitude and reduces distressed feelings. Being organized in daily activities gives the feeling of being in control rather than being ruled by circumstances. A good sense of humor is an asset to handling stress. The ability to laugh at yourself or the situation is a healthy emotional outlet for dealing with life's crises.

Progressive Relaxation

This method of coping with stress is termed progressive relaxation because you start relaxing muscles in one part of the body and progress through the other parts of the body. You do this by first tensing and then relaxing muscles in your body so that you can recognize tenseness and learn to relax a muscle as soon as you feel tension in it.

Use the following example to demonstrate progressive relaxation to the participants:

Sitting with your eyes closed, extend your right arm, with the palm upward. Now make a fist and bend your arm at the elbow and tense your arm muscles. After ten seconds stop contracting the muscles all at once. The whole arm should fall to your side. Experience the muscle tension when the muscle is contracted, and the relief when it is relaxed. Learn to recognize both feelings and to be able to call upon either when desirable.

Encourage the participants to practice progressive relaxation at home using the handout of instructions on page 12.
comfortable position in a quiet place. Inhale slowly through your nose to the slow count of five. Expand the stomach so that you fill your lungs completely. Hold your breath to the count of five. Exhale through your nose to the count of five. Repeat this pattern for at least five minutes or more. Encourage participants to practice at home using handout on page 12.

Physical activity

Another means of reducing stress is to work it out—by concentrating upon some activity requiring physical work. Many sports activities will serve this purpose, but a caution is advised. If you are so competitive that you must win, these activities may be stress-producing rather than stress-reducing. Get into the activity itself—not the end result of the activity. Activities other than sports can also be stress-reducing. Working in a garden or sewing can serve the same purpose.

The questions to ask yourself are: 1) Which type of physical activity is best suited to your purposes? 2) Will you do it regularly? Don't wait. Set up a schedule to begin it now.

Biofeedback

Some people need more objective measures of relaxation. Biofeedback equipment measures physiological events and immediately reports to the person. Brain waves, muscle tension, and skin temperature are sometimes used as indicators of stress. One of the advantages of biofeedback training is the speed with which you can learn the relaxation response. The disadvantage is that it involves the purchase and maintenance of costly equipment. In the future the equipment needed is expected to be developed at lesser expense, with the technique becoming accessible to more and more people.

Taking Control

You can consciously and deliberately take control of stress...and do it now! An idealistic dream? Not so. Taking control can become a definite, concrete reality—provided you keep three things in mind: 1) Control is possible, 2) NOW is the only time you can take control, and 3) to take control is to decide which stresses are worth reacting to and which ones you won't allow to bother you. There are lots of people who are absolutely convinced that they have little, if any, control of their lives. Yet, being in control is within the grasp of practically everybody. As you take control, your view of yourself is almost sure to improve. As your self-esteem improves, energies are released that can contribute to your ability to become fully effective.

With some planning, you may be able to reduce a lot of pressure caused by your behavior. Suppose your boss is always hitting you with last-minute deadlines. You may be able to make allowances for his/her behavior by planning your work schedule a little "thin," allowing time for those last-minute assignments. Spot the pressure points that produce stress and develop your own
methods of reducing or eliminating the stress reaction. Pre-planning reactions (or lack of reactions) before stress occurs is one way of helping to deter inappropriate reactions. It's like defensive driving; you're prepared in advance for almost any emergency.

The entire process for taking control of stress NOW can be summarized in the Serenity Prayer.

"God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
Courage to change the things I can
And wisdom to know the difference."

And, do it now!

Use the "Something, Somebody, Self Activity" or the "Identification Activity" on pages 13 and 14 to demonstrate that control is possible and within reach. Then handouts can be used as part of the program or sent home with the participants.
### STRESS AND TENSION LOG

|---------------|----------------------|-------------|--------|--------------|------------|-----------------------|-------------------|

SPEAKING OF STRESS

This word game will help you understand vocabulary used in discussing family stress. Read the definitions in the right-hand column, then unscramble the words in the left-hand column.

Scrambled Word

1. genhca
   __ __ __ __ __

2. laxtnoriea
   __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __

3. dinaptag
   __ __ __ __ __ __ __

4. muntaconoimic
   __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __

5. srtses
   __ __ __ __ __

Definition

1. The act of making different, altering, or substituting.

2. An easing or loosening body or mind.

3. Adjusting to a new situation.

4. A way in which families can openly share thoughts and feelings.

5. A physical and mental response to a life change that requires adjustment and adaptation.

Coping with STRESS

Progressive Relaxation

Encourage the participants to practice progressive relaxation at home, using the handout of instructions on page 7. Start by tensing, then relaxing your feet. Next tense, then relax your lower-leg muscles. Once the lower legs are relaxed, concentrate on your thigh muscles. Check your lower limbs to be sure that you have not allowed tension to filter back into your feet or legs. Then turn your attention to your abdominal muscles, buttocks, chest, and back, arms, and hands. Continue relaxing one muscle group, then another, until you have relaxed all the muscles in your body. Relax your neck, head, and face muscles. Keep re-checking to make sure that your muscles stay relaxed. Don't rush it. Don't miss any parts of your body.

It will take about ten minutes to tense and relax all your muscles from your feet to your forehead. Next take some time to relax your mind. Take three deep slow breaths. Again. Breathe out slowly and feel the easy quietness of your whole body. Close your eyes slowly. Stay quiet for about ten minutes. Let your mind wander to a pleasant scene. Don't use this time to think about problems. Take it easy!

Make relaxation a part of your life by: 1) a commitment to do the progressive relaxation exercises regularly for at least several weeks, and 2) a willingness to do the exercises any time and any place to stop the effect of stress as it begins.

Controlled Breathing

Breathing patterns can also be used as a way of controlled relaxation. The following breathing exercise has proved helpful for many people. Get in a comfortable position in a quiet place. Inhale slowly through your nose to the slow count of five. Expand the stomach so that you fill your lungs completely. Hold your breath to the count of five. Exhale through your nose to the count of five. Repeat this pattern for at least five minutes or more.

Something, Somebody, Self Activity

The following activity begins to allow you to take control. Try it out.

1. On a piece of paper, write down something that you've been putting off, that you'll do before the day ends. (Read the newspaper, telephone a friend, write a letter. Something simple).

2. Next, write the name of somebody close to you, and some specific thing you'll do for that person before the day ends.

3. On the same paper, write down something special that you'll do for yourself before today ends.

If you repeat the "something, somebody, self" activity each day, you'll soon discover taking control can be much easier than you imagined. More importantly, taking control doesn't require any major changes in your life. The most significant changes come in small ways spaced over time. The point is that control is possible...and within your reach.

Identification Activity

1. List the pressures that produce a stress response in you. Remember, what causes stress in you might send someone else into deliriums of delight. (Make your own list).

2. After you've identified and listed the pressures that cause a stress response in you, identify the things you do that produce stress reactions in others. (Do you slurp your soup, set impossible deadlines, demand perfection?)

3. Go over the lists and check those things you're able to change.

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Evaluation Suggestions

Evaluation is to be conducted a month or six weeks after the program. Either a mail-out questionnaire or a telephone survey may be used. Some sample questions are shown below. Add others to cover points taught in your programs.

1. Since participating in the program on stress, what new techniques of coping with stress have you practiced?

2. What other changes have you made as a result of this program?

3. With how many other people have you shared the information?
References


Other Resources

Stress, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Complimentary from BC/BS of Texas, P. O. Box 5730, Dallas, Texas 75222.

Public Affairs Pamphlets
No. 305 Tensions-and How to Master Them
No. 464 How to Cope With Crises
No. 155 Mental Health is a Family Affair

Order from: Public Affairs Pamphlets, 381 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016.