

STRESS MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

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What do you think of when you think of stress? Write down the words and images that come to mind as you think about stress.

As you look at your list, are most of the items you listed negative? I wouldn't be surprised if that is true. Most of us see stress as negative. In fact, that seems to be promoted by our society today - "*Stress is bad, eliminate stress from your life and life will be good.*" Our vision of the perfect life is living on a tropical island, not having to work, soaking in the sun all day. **But not all stress is bad.** In fact too little stress can be as harmful to us as too much stress. Too little stress can cause boredom, body deterioration and even depression. How many of you know someone who retired healthy, and within several years their health had deteriorated and death soon followed?

With that said, try to think of stress that is good for you and list as much as you can.

Let me give you some from my list: work, exercise, budgeting and paying bills, shopping, sports, studying, deadlines, competitions, confrontations. Each of these things can be positive or negative for us depending on our mindset, or the amount of the activity. So don't have the mistaken idea that all stress is bad. But it is also true that too much stress can also be very harmful and we'll be focusing on that type of stress in this workshop.

What is stress?

Stress is the wear and tear our bodies experience as we adjust to our continually changing environment. It has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings.

Positive stress is called **eustress**. It can help compel us to action, it can also energize and challenge us to growth and self-improvement, and can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective.

Negative stress is called **distress**. This is what we usually think of when we think of stress. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression; which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke.

Stressful circumstances will either help or hinder us, depending on how we react to them. So the goal is not to eliminate stress, but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us.

How can I tell if a stressor is positive or negative for me?

Only you can determine how any stressor is affecting you because each person responds differently to stress. What is distressing to one person may be a positive challenge or even a joy to another. Even when we would all agree that a particular event is distressing, we are still likely to differ in our physiological and psychological responses to it. Thus you have to learn what is distressing to you and how to manage that distress constructively.

Distress causes body tension. When tension becomes chronic and is not balanced by relaxation, we start to experience negative affects both physically and psychologically, some of which we have already talked about.

Severe distress can come from a major distressing event in your life (i.e. the death of someone very close to you or a bad accident), or it can come from accumulating too many small stressors over a period of time. Some of you may have taken the *stress tests* you find in magazines. These tests point to the fact that stressful circumstances can accumulate and build over time. One of the most common tests was created by Holmes and Rahe. I have included a copy of this test at the back of this workshop. **Turn there now and take the test.** It is important that you understand that the point system is a generalization. As I said before, many of the circumstances you circled on the test could be positive and energizing rather than distressful for some people. That would lower the amount of distress a person is experiencing.

Another way to understand distress is to learn to pay attention to your body. Your body can tell you when you are experiencing too much distress.

The following list includes symptoms that are an indicator that distress is becoming severe. Check any boxes that apply to you:

- | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> guilt feelings | <input type="checkbox"/> emotional sensitivity | <input type="checkbox"/> frequent crying | <input type="checkbox"/> hopeless feelings |
| <input type="checkbox"/> interest loss | <input type="checkbox"/> obsessive worry | <input type="checkbox"/> emotional withdrawal | <input type="checkbox"/> low energy level |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sleep problems | <input type="checkbox"/> appetite problems | <input type="checkbox"/> poor concentration | <input type="checkbox"/> nightmares |
| <input type="checkbox"/> weight gain/loss | <input type="checkbox"/> loss of confidence | <input type="checkbox"/> irritability | <input type="checkbox"/> angry outbursts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> generalized anxiety | <input type="checkbox"/> excessive insecurity | <input type="checkbox"/> confused thinking | <input type="checkbox"/> hallucinations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> delusions | <input type="checkbox"/> suicidal thoughts | | |

If you start experiencing five or more of the above symptoms for several weeks, your body is telling you that you have gone beyond your optimal stress level and have too much unrelieved distress. At that point you can do one of two things:

- 1. Reduce the stress in your life**
- and/or
- 2. Improve your ability to manage it.**

HOW CAN I MANAGE MY STRESS BETTER?

1. Begin to list your Stressors. For each stressor, ask yourself “Is this stress energizing or overwhelming me?” Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about the meaning of these events? How is your body reacting? Do you become nervous or physically upset by the stressor?

I have to identify unrelieved distress and the symptoms that warn me that I am becoming overwhelmed or overstressed. Once I understand my distress, I can work toward changing it.

2. Determine which stressors I can remove or at least reduce. When you can change the stressor without causing other problems in your life, do it! For example: Am I working too much overtime when it is voluntary? Can I set boundaries or limit my contact with a person who is distressing me.

3. If the stressor itself cannot be changed, I have to find ways to manage the stress better by learning how to reduce the negative effects it has on me physically and psychologically.

I can do this by:

- 1. Changing my thinking and reaction to the stressor**
- 2. Changing by behavior**
- 3. Changing my lifestyle**

CHANGING MY THINKING AND REACTION TO STRESS

1. Reframing. This is a technique used to change the way we look at things in order to feel better about them. The key is to recognize that there are many ways to interpret the same situation.

Remember, every circumstance in our life can be looked at in positive and negative ways. Healthy reframing comes as I learn to interpret situations in ways that enable me to focus on the positive aspects, and resolve the negative aspects.

2. Positive thinking and contentment. Many of us have a tendency to think negatively. Common negative thoughts include worry, dejection, failure, irrational fears, powerlessness, and despair. These thoughts tend to take away our peace of mind and increase our distress, especially when they become the focus of our thoughts.

There are three things that we can do to reduce this distress:

1. Make a conscious effort to spend more time focusing on the positive things in your life.
2. Choose to spend less time thinking about the negative.
3. Enjoy the present, and see the good in your life.

In the Bible, peace and contentment are ongoing themes. The Apostle Paul gave us some good instructions for obtaining peace and contentment in Philippians 4. On the next page, read through Philippians 4 and underline phrases that deal with peace and contentment. Let these verses help teach you what the Apostle Paul calls the “secret of being content” Phil. 4:12.

Philippians 4

¹Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

²I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. ¹⁷Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. ¹⁸I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

²⁰To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

²¹Greet all the saints in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send greetings. ²²All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

²³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote what has come to be known as the Serenity Prayer and it was adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous. It is a good prayer for every one of us to memorize and carry with us.

**God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
Courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference
Living one day at a time
Enjoying one moment at a time
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace.**

CHANGING MY BEHAVIOR

1. Be assertive. Passiveness allows others to walk all over you. You surrender the control of the situation to others. Being assertive means standing up for your personal rights, and expressing your thoughts, feelings and beliefs directly, honestly and spontaneously in ways that don't infringe on the rights of others. Assertive people respect themselves and others. They take responsibility for their actions and choices. In case of failure, they will get disappointed, but their self-confidence remains intact. Expressing negative feelings at the appropriate time avoids the buildup of resentment. This will help you manage your stress more successfully.

2. Get organized and manage your time better. One of the most common causes of stress is being disorganized at work or at home. Here are some tips to get organized: Write lists of tasks to accomplish, prioritize the list, and schedule when you will complete each task. Having a list and schedule also helps you provide the facts needed when your boss overloads you. Your boss may have no idea that you are overwhelmed with work and the additional responsibilities he is giving you cannot be accomplished in a professional manner unless something else goes. You can then also give your boss a choice. If he wants you to accomplish this new task, what on your list can be delegated to someone else. We also have to learn to say "No" when appropriate. Sometimes we have to draw the line. Stressed-out people often cannot assert themselves. Instead of saying 'I don't want to do this' or 'I need some help,' they just buckle down and try to do it all themselves. Now they have more stress! Plan your day to include work breaks which physically and mentally take you away from the office. Try not to bring office work home. Learn to delegate. When you have a list of tasks, you can look at what on the list can be done by others – delegate.

3. Ventilation. People who keep things to themselves without sharing with their friends or loved ones carry a considerable and unnecessary burden. Share your problems and concerns with others. Develop a support system of relatives, colleagues or friends to talk to when you are upset or worried. Secondly, when you are frustrated, write it down. After you vent the frustration on paper, destroy the writing and let it go. Finally, for those who look to God for help, vent your frustrations to God; openly, honestly and intensely. God is more than willing to share our frustrations and to lift it off our shoulders. Read the Psalms and see how good King David was at venting his emotions to God.

There are two other valuable ways to vent and reduce the emotional tension of distress. **Grieving** and **Laughing**. They may seem on opposite ends of the spectrum, but both are equally valuable in working out stress. When you are feeling overwhelmed, get alone and have a good crying session. You will find that your body relaxes noticeably when you let the emotional pain come out through crying. Laughter and humor are also very therapeutic. A belly laugh is really good for you. It relieves muscular tension, improves breathing, and regulates the heart beat. The Bible says "A cheerful heart is good medicine." Proverbs 17:22 (NIV)

CHANGE YOUR LIFESTYLE

Developing a balanced lifestyle is important for managing your day-to-day stress. Consider making the following a part of your day.

1. A well balanced diet. This is crucial in preserving health and helping reduce stress. Certain foods and drinks act as powerful stimulants to the body and hence are a direct cause of stress. This stimulation, although quite pleasurable in the short term, may be quite harmful in the long run. This includes Caffeine, Alcohol, Smoking, Sugar, Salt, and Fat. Work on reducing these. Eat balanced meals at regular times each day to help keep your body functioning at optimum levels. Eat sensibly and don't overeat. Foods that can help relieve stress include complex carbohydrates, fiber, and vegetables. Examples would include whole grain breads, cereals, rice, potatoes, vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds.

2. Exercise. Research has shown that physical exercise is the best tension reliever. It is a very important remedy for stress. Nothing eases stress more than exercise. I'm sure most of you know the physical benefits of regular exercise, but are you aware of the mental benefits. Exercise provides an outlet for negative emotions such as frustration, anger, and irritability. It improves mood by producing positive biochemical changes in the body and brain. It reduces the amount of adrenal hormones your body releases in response to stress, and releases greater amounts of endorphins, which are natural pain killers and mood-elevating chemicals in the brain. Try to exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week. Moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging.

3. Water. In addition to exercise, it is important that your body gets enough water. Water is necessary for our body to operate efficiently. Water is vital to the body in temperature regulation, nerve impulse conduction, circulation, metabolism, immune system, eliminative processes, sensory awareness and perceptive thinking. Americans, on average, drink only eight ounces of water per day. The rest of the water the body needs must be extracted from other liquids or foods that we eat. Too little water is a real threat to the system. Many chemical reactions inside the body will not occur without the right amount of water. It only takes a one percent fluid loss in the body to become dehydrated. Stress, alcohol and caffeine all influence the amount of water and the speed in which your body loses it. Any of these factors, alone or in combination, could cause a small but critical shrinkage of the brain, which can impair neuromuscular coordination, decrease concentration, and slow thinking. To maintain efficient operation, you want to drink the following: 150 pounds or less: 8 cups per day. For every 20 pounds over 150 drink an additional cup (i.e. 190 pounds, 10 cups). Over 250 pounds, drink 12-13 cups per day.

4. Deep breathing. This infuses the blood with extra oxygen and also stimulates the body to release tranquilizing endorphins. It is one of the simplest yet most effective stress management techniques. You can do it anywhere, anytime, and it becomes even more effective with practice.

Other stress reducing activities can include:

A warm hot bath (adding soothing aromas can increase the stress reduction)

Soothing, peaceful music or nature sounds

In a now famous American study from 1967, Dr. Thomas H. Holmes and Dr. Richard H. Rahe developed a do-it-yourself stress test called the "Social Readjustment Rating Scale." To find your stress level, circle every experience that you have had in the last 12 months and total the points.

100	death of a spouse
73	divorce
65	marital separation
63	detention in jail or other institution
63	death of a close family member
53	major personal injury or illness
50	marriage
47	fired from work
45	marital reconciliation
45	retirement
44	change in health or behavior of family member
40	pregnancy
40	sex difficulties
39	gain of new family member through birth, adoption, or marriage
39	major business readjustment
38	change in financial state
37	death of close friend
36	change to a different line of work
35	change in number of arguments with partner
31	taking on a new mortgage
30	foreclosure on a mortgage or loan
29	change in responsibilities
29	son/daughter leaves home
29	trouble with in-laws
28	outstanding personal achievement
26	partner begins/stops work
26	starting or finishing school
25	change in living conditions
24	revision of personal habits
23	trouble with boss
20	change in working hours or conditions
20	change in residence
20	change in schools
19	change in recreational habits
19	change in church activities
18	change in social activities
17	major purchase such as a new car
16	change in sleeping habits
15	change in number of family gatherings
15	change in eating habits
13	vacation
12	Christmas or holiday observance
11	minor violation of the law

Holmes and Rahe consider a score of less than 150 to be minor stress. Those who score 150-199 are experiencing mild stress, 200-299 are experiencing moderate stress, and a score over 300 is someone experiencing major stress. It is estimated that 35% of those with a score below 150 will experience an illness or accident within two years, while those with a score between 150 and 300 have a 51% chance, and those with a score over 300 have an 80% chance of a significant illness or accident.