



Individual session



Group session

Illness Management and Recovery (IMR)

Handout

Topic 8: Coping with Stress

“Exercise elevates my mood. My writing is a great distraction and helps me get my mind off the pressures of work and life in general. My sculpture also helps me to escape. Believing that there is a God and that He doesn’t hate me and that I can turn to Him also helps. I also like music and find listening to it helpful. “What helps you? God? Medication? Therapy? Art? Exercise? TV? Music? Reading? What?”

David Kime, artist, writer, floral designer, in recovery from bipolar disorder

Introduction

This Handout describes different ways of coping effectively with stress. To cope effectively, it is first important to know which situations you find stressful and what experiencing stress is like for you. This Handout suggests specific strategies for dealing with stress such as using relaxation techniques, talking with others, exercising, and using creative forms of expression.

sometimes it comes from something negative (such as being bored, having an argument with someone, or being the victim of crime).

Stress is the feeling of pressure, strain, or tension that comes from dealing with challenging situations.

According to the Stress-Vulnerability Model, stress is an important factor in mental illnesses because it can worsen symptoms and lead to relapses. If you can decrease stress, you can decrease symptoms.

What is stress?

Stress is a term that people often use to describe a feeling of pressure, strain, or tension. People often say that they are “under stress” or feel “stressed out” when they are dealing with challenging situations or events.

Nobody has a stress-free life and probably nobody would want one. Stress is a natural part of life. In fact, to pursue important personal goals, you must be willing to take on new challenges, which can be stressful. Being able to cope effectively with stressful situations can minimize the effects of stress on you and your symptoms, enabling you to continue pursuing your goals and enjoying life.

Everyone encounters stressful situations. Sometimes stress comes from something positive (such as a new job, new apartment, or new relationship) and

Coping effectively with stress can help you reduce symptoms and pursue your goals.

Q: What is it like when you experience stress?

What makes you feel under stress?

Different people find different things stressful. For example, some people enjoy the hustle and bustle of a big city, while others don't and find it stressful. Some people enjoy going to a party and meeting new people, while others find that stressful. Knowing what you personally find stressful will help you cope better.

Two main types of stress exist:

- Life events, and
- Daily hassles.

Life events refers to experiences such as moving, getting married, the death of a loved one, or having a baby. Some life events are more stressful than others. For example, getting a divorce is usually more stressful than changing jobs. To see how many life events you have experienced in the past year, complete the following exercise.

| Exercise: Identifying Life Events | |
|---|---|
| Life event | I experienced this life event in the past year |
| Moving | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Getting married | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New baby | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Divorce or separation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Injury | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Illness | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New job | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Loss of a job | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Inheriting or winning money | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Financial problems | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Injury or illness of a loved one | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Death of a loved one | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Victim of a crime | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Legal problems | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New boyfriend or girlfriend | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Broke up with a boyfriend or girlfriend | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Stopped smoking | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Went on a diet | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New responsibilities at home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| New responsibilities at work | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No place to live | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Hospitalization | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Problems caused by drinking or using street drugs | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Total number of life events checked: | <input style="width: 50px; height: 20px;" type="text"/> |
| moderate stress = 1 event | |
| high stress = 2-3 event | |
| very high stress = more than 3 events | |

Daily hassles are the small stresses of everyday life that can add up over time. Examples of daily hassles include dealing with long bus rides, working with unpleasant or critical people, having conflicts with family members or close friends, living or working in a noisy and chaotic place, and being rushed to do things. Use the following exercise to identify daily hassles in your life.

Life events and daily hassles are both sources of stress.

Q: What is the most stressful life event you have experienced in the past year?

Exercise: Identifying Daily Hassles

| Daily hassle | I experienced this event in the past week |
|--|---|
| Not enough money to care for necessities | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not enough money to spend on leisure | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Crowded living situation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Crowded public transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Long drives or traffic backups | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling rushed at home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling rushed at work | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Arguments at home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Arguments at work | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Doing business with unpleasant people (sales clerks, waiters or waitresses, transit clerks, toll booth collectors) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Noisy situation at home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Noisy situation at work | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Not enough privacy at home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Minor medical problems | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Lack of order or cleanliness at home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Lack of order or cleanliness at work | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Unpleasant chores at home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Unpleasant chores at work | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Living in a dangerous neighborhood | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Total number of hassles this week: | <input type="text"/> |
| moderate stress = 1 or 2 daily hassles high stress = 3–6 daily hassles very high stress = more than 6 | |

Q: What are the most stressful daily hassles you have experienced in the past week?

What are the signs that you are under stress?

Stress affects people physically and emotionally. It also affects their thinking, mood, and behavior. Some people show only physical signs of stress such as muscular tension, headaches, or sleep problems. Others have trouble concentrating or become irritable, anxious, or depressed. Still others may pace or bite their nails. Each person's response to stress is individual.

Being aware of your own signs of stress can help because once you realize that you're under stress, you can start to do something about it. Use the following exercise to identify your own signs of being under stress.

| Exercise: Identifying Signs of Stress | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Signs of stress | I experienced this sign |
| Headaches | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Sweating | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Increased heart rate | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Back pain | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Change in appetite | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Difficulty falling asleep | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Increased need for sleep | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Trembling or shaking | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Digestion problems | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Stomach aches | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Dry mouth | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Problems concentrating | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Anger over relatively minor things | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Irritability | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Anxiety | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Feeling restless or "keyed up" | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Tearfulness | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Forgetfulness | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Being prone to accidents | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Using alcohol or drugs (or wanting to) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q: Have you noticed any signs of being under stress in the past week?

How can you prevent stress?

Trying to prevent stress can pay off. By eliminating stressors, you are free to enjoy yourself more and to accomplish more goals. Most people find it helpful to be familiar with a variety of prevention strategies like these:

■ Be aware of situations that caused stress before.

If you found a situation stressful before, it will probably cause problems again. Knowing that a situation has been stressful will allow you to think of different ways to handle it so it won't be as stressful. For example, if you notice that you become irritable whenever you catch the bus at rush hour, try taking it at a less busy time or practice deep breathing if you become tense on a crowded bus. If large holiday gatherings with your extended family make you feel tense, try taking short breaks away from the larger group or try getting together with family members in smaller groups at times other than holidays.

■ Schedule meaningful, enjoyable activities.

Participating in activities you enjoy makes a significant difference in reducing stress. Some people find work meaningful and enjoyable. Others look to volunteering, art, hobbies, music, or sports for meaning and enjoyment. It all depends on what is right for you.

■ Schedule time for relaxation.

It's important to take time to relax each day to refresh your mind and body from tension. Some people find exercise relaxing, while others enjoy reading, doing a puzzle, or participating in some other activity.

■ Work to achieve balance in your daily life.

Being active and involved is important to keeping stress low. But too much activity can lead to stress. It's important to leave time for sleep and for restful, relaxing activities such as reading or taking a walk.

■ Develop a support system.

Seek people who encourage and support you rather than those who are critical and pressuring. It helps to build relationships with people with whom you feel comfortable. Common support systems include friends, family members, peers, professionals, and members of your religious or spiritual group. For more information, see IMR Handout—Topic 4: *Building Social Supports*.

■ Take care of your health.

Eating well, getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, and avoiding alcohol and drugs all help prevent stress. These healthy habits are not always easy to maintain, but they really pay off.

■ Talk about your feelings or write them in a journal.

Holding in your feelings can be very stressful. It helps to have an outlet for your feelings so that you don't keep them bottled up. These may be positive feelings—like being excited about a new job—or negative feelings—such as being angry at how someone else has behaved. Having someone to talk to such as a family member, friend, or professional can help. It might also help to keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings.

■ Do not be hard on yourself.

Some people increase their stress by being critical of themselves and what they are accomplishing. Try to be reasonable about what you expect from yourself. Give yourself credit for your talents and strengths.

Use the following exercise to identify strategies that you've already used and ones that you would like to try.

You can prevent stress by using specific strategies.

| Exercise: Strategies for Preventing Stress | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Strategy | I already use this strategy | I would like to try this strategy or develop it more |
| Be aware of situations that caused stress before | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Schedule meaningful activities | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Schedule time for relaxing | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Achieve balance in my daily life | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Develop my support system | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Take care of my health | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Talk about my feelings | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Write my feelings in a journal | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Avoid being hard on myself; identify positive features about myself | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other: _____ _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Q: Which prevention strategies would help you the most?



How can you cope effectively with stress?

Coping effectively with stress is a key to living a successful and rewarding life and being able to pursue your personal goals. Some examples of strategies for coping with stress include the following:

■ Talk to someone about the stress you are experiencing.

When I was packing up my stuff to move to a new place, I started having headaches and trouble sleeping. I called my sister and told her how stressed out I felt. She told me she felt the same way when she moved the last time. She even offered to help me pack. It made a huge difference.

■ Use positive self-talk.

Before, when I was under stress, I used to blame myself and think that there was no way out. Now I try to think more positively. I say to myself, 'This is hard, but I can do it,' or 'If I take this one step at a time, I'll be able to handle it.' It's hard to do sometimes, but it makes me feel better about myself.

■ Maintain your sense of humor.

For me, laughter is the best medicine. When I've been on a subway ride that lasted 2 hours instead of 45 minutes, I feel very tense and agitated. I have some funny videos at home, and I'll pull one out and have a good laugh. Believe it or not, it helps me to watch a Monty Python movie or one starring Adam Sandler.

■ Participate in a religious or spiritual activity.

I grew up in a religious home. Although I'm not sure I believe every aspect of that religion, I still find it comforting to go to services. And sometimes instead of going to services, I go for a walk in the park and see how beautiful nature can be. That's very spiritual for me.

■ Exercise.

I like to 'work off' my stress by getting some exercise. Sometimes I go for a run and sometimes I just do some jumping jacks until I calm down.

■ Write in a journal.

I've started keeping a journal to write down my thoughts and feelings. I don't care about the grammar or spelling—I just write down what comes into my head. Sometimes I write about stressful things and that seems to help. Writing helps me think things through.

■ Make or listen to music.

I'm a music person. I put on my headphones and blow away the stress of the day. I can even do it on the train, to distract myself on the long ride.

■ Create art or go to see art.

I like to sketch. I especially like drawing cartoons. I must admit I sometimes make some unflattering cartoons of people who are bugging me.

■ Play games or develop a hobby.

I like playing card games. When I don't have anyone to play with, I like solitaire. It's relaxing to me.

■ Use relaxation techniques.

If I've had a stressful day, it helps me to do some deep breathing. I put on some relaxing music, and sit in my favorite chair. Then I start by taking 10 deep, slow breaths. Then I let my breath out very slowly. As I exhale, I try to imagine that when I let out my breath, I'm letting out the tension in my body. Then I take about 20 or 30 more breaths. Sometimes I try to imagine a peaceful scene, like the ocean, when I'm breathing. I usually feel more relaxed after that.

For more information about relaxation techniques, ask your IMR practitioner for IMR Handout—Topic 8a: *Relaxation Techniques*.

Using coping strategies can help you manage stress effectively and enjoy your life.

Q: What strategies do you use to cope with stress? What strategies would you like to try?
Use the following exercise to record your answers.

| Exercise: Strategies for Coping with Stress | | |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Strategy | I already use this strategy | I would like to try this strategy |
| Talking to someone | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Using relaxation techniques | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Using positive self-talk | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Maintaining my sense of humor | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Participating in religion or other form of spirituality | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Exercising | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Writing in a journal | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Listening to music | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Creating artwork or going to see artwork | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Participating in a hobby | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



Examples of coping effectively with stress

People develop different strategies for coping with stress, depending on what works for them. The following people have recognized the kinds of situations that are stressful to them and have worked out strategies that help them cope effectively with these situations.

Leticia

For me, it's very stressful to rush to get somewhere on time. I start to feel anxious and irritable. Sometimes I even get a headache. So I try to plan ahead as much as possible, and allow myself plenty of time. On the nights before I go to work, I lay out my clothing for the next day. I get up at least an hour before I have to leave the house to catch the bus. Then I don't feel anxious. I can relax on my way to work and start the day feeling fresh.

Of course, I can't plan for everything. Sometimes the bus is late or the road conditions are bad. When I feel myself starting to get anxious, I do some deep breathing to slow myself down. Sometimes I use 'positive self-talk.' I tell myself, 'I have an excellent record at work of arriving on time and doing my job well. It's O.K. if I'm late once in a while. My boss has always told not to worry about this. Just relax.' It works for me.

Daniel

Recently I've been under stress because my mother has been ill and in the hospital. I visit her almost every afternoon and I think I'm doing all I can to help her. But sometimes I have trouble sleeping. I lie in bed worrying, so it takes me longer to fall asleep. Then I end up tired in the morning and have a hard time getting up.

It helps me to talk to someone about my worries. I talk to my sister and it helps a lot. I also try to do something relaxing in the evening, to take my mind off Mom's illness. If it's not too dark, I take a walk in the neighborhood. Or I might read a travel magazine or watch a nature show on TV. It helps me to feel more calm and to be able to fall asleep more easily.

Ching-Li

I feel tense when there is a lot of noise. I try to avoid those kinds of situations. But there are times when it's unavoidable, like at my apartment. I have roommates, and sometimes they watch television shows or make noise when they are cooking dinner. I like my roommates and I don't think they are being excessive. Noise is just part of having roommates.

It helps me to take a break and go to my room. I like to listen to my music on headphones; it drowns out the noise and takes me to a quieter place.

You can develop an individual plan for coping with stress that works for you.

How to develop a plan for coping with stress

Use the following exercise to put this information together as your individual plan for coping with stress.

This Handout includes exercises to help you identify stressful life events, daily hassles, signs of stress, strategies for preventing stress, and strategies for coping with stress.

| Exercise: Individual Plan for Coping with Stress | |
|--|--|
| Stressful situations | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| Signs that I am under stress | |
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| | |
| Strategies for preventing stress | |
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| Strategies for coping with stress | |
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Summary of the Main Points About Coping with Stress

- Stress is the feeling of pressure, strain, or tension that comes from responding to challenging situations.
- Being able to cope effectively with stress can help you reduce symptoms and pursue your goals.
- Life events and daily hassles are both sources of stress.
- Being aware of signs of stress can help you take steps to prevent it from getting worse.
- You can avoid stress by using specific strategies.
- Using coping strategies can help you manage stress effectively and enjoy your life.
- You can develop an individual plan for coping with stress that works for you.

