

SECTION 5: STRESS MANAGEMENT

Shake It Off and Step Up

A story is told of a farmer who owned a faithful, old mule. The mule fell into the farmer's well. The farmer heard the mule "braying" - or whatever mules do when they fall into wells. After carefully assessing the situation, the farmer sympathized with the mule, but decided that neither the mule nor the well was worth the trouble of saving. Instead, he called his neighbors together and told them what had happened and enlisted them to help haul dirt to bury the old mule in the well and put him out of his misery.



PAHO/WHO

*Initially, the old mule was hysterical! But as the farmer and his neighbors continued shovelling and the dirt hit his back ... a thought struck him. It suddenly dawned on him that every time a shovel load of dirt landed on his back... **HE SHOULD SHAKE IT OFF AND STEP UP!** This he did, blow after blow. "Shake it off and step up... Shake it off and step up... Shake it off and step up!" he repeated to encourage himself. No matter how painful the blows, or distressing the situation seemed the old mule fought "panic" and just kept right on shaking it off and stepping up! You're right! It wasn't long before the old mule, battered and exhausted, **STEPPED TRIUMPHANTLY OVER THE WALL OF THAT WELL!** What seemed like it would have buried him, actually blessed him .. all because of the manner in which he handled his adversity.*

That's life!** If we face our problems and respond to them positively, and refuse to give in to panic, bitterness or self-pity ... **the adversities that come along to bury us usually have within them the potential to benefit and bless us!

—Author unknown

Can stress be managed?

One of the good features of stress is that once it is recognized and worked on it can be reversed. Nonetheless, like most other potentially damaging conditions it is best prevented.

By managing stress now, you can prevent disease from occurring later. If it has already occurred you may be able to minimize the amount of damage done and you will feel a greater sense of calm and well-being.

Stress management is a very individual process and there is no one best stress management technique. Nonetheless, for a stress management program to be effective it must be consistently practised and comprise the techniques that work best for the individual in question.

Primary, secondary and tertiary prevention of stress:

1. Techniques to avoid exposure to the stressor (i.e., primary prevention):

- (a) Avoidance of known stressors,
- (b) Cultivation of healthy personality traits and behaviors,
- (c) Identification and restructuring of cognitive distortions associated with stressful events,
- (d) Planning and prioritization,
- (e) Maintenance of good physical and mental health.

(2) Techniques to minimize the level of stress arousal once one has been exposed to a stressor (i.e., secondary prevention):

- (a) Minimization of the physiological arousal by using relaxation techniques and exercise,
- (b) Verbalization,
- (c) Support from others,
- (d) Use of anxiolytics,
- (e) Use of techniques to avoid exposure to stressors.

(3) Techniques to reduce levels of stress arousal (i.e., tertiary prevention):

- (a) Catharsis: A therapeutic technique whereby ideas, thoughts, fears, disappointments and suppressed material are expressed to result in a state of relief in the individual;
- (b) Inspiration: The process of experiencing a sense of optimism where one recognizes one's capacity to overcome challenges;

- (c) Acceptance by others: The individual comes to the realization that someone else understands, helping to ameliorate guilt;
- (d) Universalization: The person comes to the realization that his or her experiences are not unique;
- (e) Use of techniques to avoid exposure to stressors and to minimize the level of stress arousal once one has been exposed to a stressor.

Below is a simple but comprehensive set of guidelines in the form of a mnemonic for keeping one's level of stress to a minimum.

MANAGING STRESS EFFECTIVELY

Manage your time and your resources wisely;
Accept both victory and defeat with humility;
Nurture healthy school and work attitudes;
Avoid being impulsive or aggressive;
Gain insight into your strengths and weaknesses;
Indulge in goal-directed behavior but be flexible;
Never make promises which you are unlikely to keep;
Guard against being consumed by materialism.

Strive to develop a positive self-concept;
Think clearly and positively at all times;
Respect the feelings and the rights of others;
Experience a healthy attitude toward your sexuality;
Seek spiritual understanding and fulfillment;
Say "sorry" whenever you need to.

Engage in health-promoting activities;
Forgive yourself as well as others and be humorous;
Foster the development of effective social skills;
Enjoy nature and take good care of your environment;
Communicate effectively and not aggressively;
Take responsibility for your actions;
In times of need, accept assistance readily;
Value the gifts of family, companionship and friendship;
Enjoy the serenity of being alone at times;
Learn from your experiences and from those of others;
You need to "let go" of the pain of the past and embrace
the whole new world which the future offers.

–By Cyralene P. Bryce

Stress management for children and adolescents

As is the case with adults, prevention of harmful stress responses in children and adolescents is to be preferred over their management. They need to be prepared to handle life's challenges. The home and the school are uniquely placed to impart such preparation, which should include an understanding of the possible reactions to various stressors and a mastery of the necessary coping strategies.

In spite of this grounding, children and adolescents will continue to be exposed to very stressful life events. Death is a fact of life, as are a myriad of other losses. Regrettably, families will continue to be dysfunctional, children will continue to be victimized and many disasters are unavoidable. For these reasons, stress reactions of children and adolescents frequently have to be managed. Usually these reactions can be handled with support from caregivers, friends and teachers, but sometimes, professional intervention may be necessary if reactions are extreme or persistent. The need for such assistance should never be viewed as a sign of failure on the part of caregivers or teachers, but as a necessary step in returning the child to normalcy as quickly as possible. It should also be remembered that young children are the ones most likely to act out the tension within a family and family participation in consultation or treatment is always desirable.

A list of possible stress management techniques which are commonly used with children and adolescents follows.

(1) Expressive therapies, including:

- Narrative therapy
- Bibliotherapy
- Writing therapy
- Discussion exercises
- Play therapy
- Drama
- Dance therapy
- Movement therapy
- Music therapy
- Sand therapy
- Art therapy
- Photography

(2) Behavior therapies, including:

- Behavioral contracts
- Operant conditioning
- Shaping
- Participant modelling
- Assertiveness and social skills training
- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)
- Relaxation training

- Guided imagery
- Hypnosis

(3) *Health classes*

(4) *Peer counselling*

(5) *Family therapy*

(6) *Other psychotherapies*

(7) *Pharmacotherapy*

Children in the under 5 year age-group need lots of reassurance and ample physical comfort to assist them in coping with stressful situations. It is critical that ample opportunity be provided for them to express their feelings both verbally (free expression, songs, story-telling, etc.) and non-verbally (play, drama, art, etc.). Every attempt should be made to reestablish comforting routines as soon as possible after the incident. Care needs to be taken to provide children in this age group with adequate nutrition; this helps to provide oral satisfaction which is especially important since such children when stressed tend to revert to regressive behaviors. When children like these are restless or anxious their involvement in physical activity, e.g., skipping, jumping, dancing, etc. can be very helpful.

Children in the primary school age group are especially sensitive to loss, and expression of their experiences needs to be encouraged. This may be achieved through free expression, discussions (should always end on a positive note), story-telling, creative writing, reading exercises, disaster planning, play, art, drama, dance, song, music, etc. Physical activity helps to relieve tension. It may also be necessary to temporarily relax routine expectations but this should always be done with a view to resuming normal functioning as soon as possible.

The majority of the activities and interests of the adolescent are focused on the peer group, hence fear that their feelings or reactions are unusual or unacceptable might cause adolescents to become disillusioned, withdrawn or depressed. Consequently, the adolescent needs to be afforded ample opportunity either individually or in groups to discuss their feelings with peers and with adults so as to reduce their sense of isolation and to normalize the experience. They should also be encouraged to participate in community rehabilitation efforts if this is relevant. Classroom activities that relate the stressful situation to the ongoing course of study could prove invaluable in assisting adolescent students to integrate their experiences and observations in addition to providing specific learning experiences. Lectures about relevant topics should also be arranged.

Common sources of personal satisfaction

- Healthy interpersonal relationships
- Significant personal achievement or achievements of someone close to us
- Fulfilling one's obligations
- Completion of a task
- Being with one's family
- Contact with friends or relatives
- Satisfaction with one's living conditions
- Dining out
- Feeling rested
- Feeling healthy

How well suited are you to coping with stressful situations?

Read each statement below carefully, then circle the best answer to each question as it relates to the preceding 12 months of your life and find the total score. Please see Appendix 1 for an interpretation of the total score.

Note that tests like these serve only to alert us that there *may* be a problem.

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Always</i>
1. I am a disorganized person.	1	2	3	4
2. I don't have a hobby and/or participate in social or recreational activities.	1	2	3	4
3. I react badly to all types of failure and criticism.	1	2	3	4
4. I am a hasty person and I frequently get angry at other people.	1	2	3	4

5.	I dislike having to work but I do it because I have to.	1	2	3	4
6.	I use non-prescription, mind-altering substances, e.g., caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, etc., to try and cope.	1	2	3	4
7.	I am trapped by undesirable circumstances that I just have to live with.	1	2	3	4
8.	I do not understand why I do the things which I do.	1	2	3	4
9.	I have financial obligations which I just can't seem to meet.	1	2	3	4
10.	I do not know what I want out of life.	1	2	3	4
11.	I do not feel good about myself and no matter how successful I am, I still feel empty.	1	2	3	4
12.	I tend to have a very negative outlook on life.	1	2	3	4
13.	I do not express my feelings and opinions when it is necessary.	1	2	3	4
14.	I find it difficult to share in the joys and successes of others.	1	2	3	4
15.	I feel responsible for the happiness of others.	1	2	3	4
16.	I do not get along very well with other people and I have few friends.	1	2	3	4
17.	I am embarrassed to ask for help when I need it and I find it difficult to accept encouragement and support from others.	1	2	3	4
18.	I do not learn from my mistakes or from those of others.	1	2	3	4
19.	I find it difficult to say "no" without feeling guilty.	1	2	3	4
20.	I tend to look down on people.	1	2	3	4
21.	I blame other people for my mistakes.	1	2	3	4

22.	I worry about things which I cannot change and which do not seem to bother other persons.	1	2	3	4
23.	I do not eat a balanced diet.	1	2	3	4
24.	I find it difficult to experience joy, happiness or pleasure.	1	2	3	4
25.	I find it difficult to forgive myself or others.	1	2	3	4

Total Score: _____

End of Section Quiz

Please circle the correct answer.

1.	For a stress management program to be effective, it must be consistently practised.	T	F
2.	Acceptance by others can help to ameliorate guilt.	T	F
3.	Social support can help to protect against stress.	T	F
4.	Self-forgiveness can help to reduce one's stress levels.	T	F
5.	Stress is best prevented.	T	F
6.	Stress cannot be reversed.	T	F
7.	Dining out can be a source of satisfaction.	T	F
8.	Never make promises that you are unlikely to keep.	T	F
9.	There is no one best stress management technique.	T	F
10.	Completion of a task may be satisfying.	T	F

Quiz answers appear in Appendix 2.

