

## SECTION 4: STRESS AND YOU

### How do we contribute to our stress levels?

Most of the stress that we experience comes from our life-styles and is, therefore, self-imposed. Many of the harmful effects of exposure to stressors depend on the individual's perceptions of the stressor, their emotional reactivity toward the stressor and their means of coping with the stressor.

The majority of these stressors tend to be related to our *home* and *family*, our *work* and our *individual characteristics*.

### Stress and the family

The family in which an individual grows up, coupled with the family created through marriage, usually provides the most influential and intense interpersonal relationships to be experienced in life. Such relationships play a central role in the mental health and well-being of individuals. Our basic self-concept develops within the family unit through social interaction. Who we are and what we think of ourselves result in a large part from the perceptions and evaluations of our closest relatives. Unfortunately, family interactions are not always healthy and in some instances they can prove to be major sources of distress.

Dysfunctional families are characterized by poor communication, pervasive insecurity, lowered self-esteem, rigid patterns of interaction and a lack of genuine intimacy. Individuality is not fostered and relationships are strained. Some family members may attempt to control others by using fear, punishment, guilt or dominance. Eventually, such systems break down because the rules and restrictions are no longer able to keep the family structure intact.

In healthy families on the other hand, family members each have a voice and can speak for themselves. Individual differences and open communication are allowed and encouraged. Rules are fair, non-discriminatory, achievable, consistently applied, and flexible depending on changing situations. Change is not seen as a threat but it is anticipated and invited. When differences lead to disagreements, such situations are viewed as opportunities for growth and not as forerunners of a crisis.



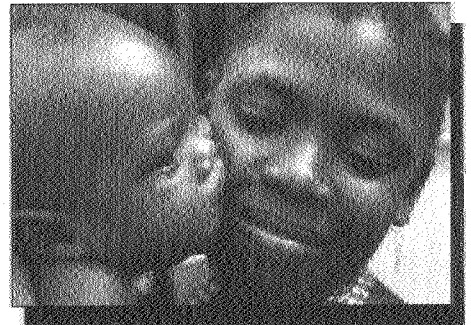
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*Strong satisfaction with home and family have been repeatedly demonstrated to mitigate the influences of stressful situations. Below is a list of the possible mechanisms by which the family unit protects members against stress:*

1. Provides a safe, supportive and caring network which fosters individuality, clear thinking, goal-directed behavior, wise resource management, maturity and a sense of responsibility;
2. Provides role models, guidance and feedback to allow for the development of adaptive behaviors, adaptive social skills and effective coping mechanisms;
3. Fosters a sense of belonging, self-worth, self-respect, self-confidence, self-actualization and respect for others;
4. Creates an atmosphere which encourages rest and relaxation, recreation, humor, exercise and physical and mental well-being;
5. Provides a forum where information, experiences, ideas and resources can be shared;
6. Offers empathy and encouragement when needed.

*The most common causes of marital problems include:*

- Poor communication
- Financial disputes
- Sexual difficulties
- Disappointment with the "love object"
- Unreasonable demands or inflexibility
- Differing beliefs, goals and priorities
- Selfishness, dishonesty or insensitivity
- Lack of commitment
- Poor time management
- Jealousy, controlling behavior or abuse
- Problems with in-laws
- Major challenges (e.g., death of a child)



## **Stress and the workplace**

For most employees, work is more than a 40-hour-a-week commitment. Even if the actual work day is eight hours, most individuals spend at least 10 to 12 hours per day engaging in work-related activities. In addition, many individuals find a substantial portion of their satisfaction and identity in their work. Work exerts an enormous influence on how persons value themselves and how they relate to others.

The distinction between stress at work and stress at home is an artificial one at best. As a consequence of stressors experienced at work, an individual may be irritable at home,

short-tempered and fatigued. This may result in arguments with his or her spouse, and marital discord may become a source of additional stress which may impact negatively on the person's job performance.

Anyone can become a victim of occupational stress. Generally, however, the most stressful jobs are those in which there is responsibility for people. The possibility of physical danger either to oneself or to others contributes to the stressfulness of a job.

People are particularly vulnerable to occupational stress at several points in their working lives--on entry into the working world, at times of promotion and at the time of retirement.

*Below is a list of some stressful occupations and the occupational stress rating associated with them:*

Air Traffic Controller	8.0	Nurse	6.5
Policeman	8.0	Fireman	6.3
Pilot	7.7	Paramedic	6.3
		Teacher	6.2

Overall, persons with demanding jobs with very little say in how to cope with these demands are at the greatest risk for developing a stress reaction. Research has shown that contrary to popular belief managers are not invariably over-stressed, since despite their demanding jobs most of them are in control of how such a job is performed.

## What are some of the possible signs of occupational stress?

1. High absenteeism
2. High incidence of stress-related illnesses
3. High staff turn-over
4. Poor productivity
5. Poor staff morale
6. Poor staff relations
7. Clique formation
8. Poor work attitude
9. Lack of initiative
10. Frequent mistakes and accidents
11. Substance use by staff
12. Acts of sabotage



***A healthy work environment is one which:***

1. Rewards productivity in a tangible way;
2. Fosters healthy competitiveness, high standards of professionalism and self-development;
3. Is flexible, progressive and non-discriminatory;
4. Looks after the interests of its staff by way of appropriate staff assistance and support when necessary;
5. Sets realistic goals, standards and deadlines and assists staff with resource management;
6. Emphasizes job satisfaction and ensures a good match between the person and the job;
7. Keeps staff well-informed with accurate information, encourages worker participation at all levels of the decision-making process and adequately prepares them for change;
8. Gives both praise and constructive criticism when necessary, with a system of accountability for all;
9. Is safe and comfortable to work in;
10. Fosters healthy staff relations.

## **Stress and the individual**

***A situation that is stress-arousing for one person might be a neutral event for another person. Some people can survive in very hostile environments without experiencing stress. Whether a given situation is stressful or not depends on how we appraise it and how we rate our ability to deal with it.***

How we appraise and cope with events will depend on demographic characteristics, experiences while growing up, personality traits, coping skills, social support network and socioeconomic status.

The one common variable in all of these aspects is ***the individual***. People who generally cope successfully with stressful situations have a variety of personal attributes that minimize the levels of stress to which they are exposed. Such persons know how to approach situations for which they do not have a readily available response. In other words, they have an adaptive personality.

***Personality can be defined as the totality of emotional and behavioral traits that characterize the person in day-to-day living under ordinary conditions.*** It is relatively stable

and predictable. Personality is shaped by both genetic and cultural forces, where culture consists of the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors that are transmitted between generations and that mold the developing personality from infancy through to adulthood.

We vary our behaviors as the situation requires. This results in a basic personality that is overlaid with *situational role playing* where the roles can be quite diverse (e.g., you are your child's parent now and your mother's child 15 minutes later!). In this context, roles are normative behaviors expected of a group of individuals (e.g., mothers, teachers, siblings and workers) which are socially defined and tend to be relatively stable. As we adopt new roles we must acquire the behavior expected in that role; effective role performance involves identifying, maintaining and balancing the functions we assume or acquire in society (e.g., as worker, child, parent, student, teacher, friend, politician). *Persons tend to be more effective when they perform a given role the way that they know best and not according to a given stereotype.*

*Below is a list of personal attributes that form the basis of an adaptive personality:*

1. Positive self-concept
2. Clear thinking
3. Goal-directed behavior
4. Wise resource management
5. Good communication skills
6. Ability to deal with conflicts effectively
7. Use of adaptive social and interpersonal skills
8. Maintenance of good physical and mental health

## Exercise: "A Look at Myself"

**"Remember, there is good and bad in everyone"**

List five good points about yourself. Where possible, use single words or phrases.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

List five bad points about yourself. Where possible, use single words or phrases and place an asterisk next to the ones that you would like to change.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

## How stressful is your job?

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 scores. Please see Appendix 1 for an interpretation of the total score.

Note carefully 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 feel isolated in my job.	1	2	3	4
2. I feel frustrated in my job.	1	2	3	4
3. There is a lack of feedback about my job performance.	1	2	3	4
4. I do not know exactly what my responsibilities are at work.	1	2	3	4
5. My level of training is not adequate for me to perform my work duties efficiently.	1	2	3	4
6. I have very poor relations with my co-workers.	1	2	3	4
7. I have very poor relations with my boss.	1	2	3	4
8. Too many people make demands of me when I am at work.	1	2	3	4
9. There is no clear and/or effective management hierarchy at my workplace.	1	2	3	4
10. I have no control over how I perform my job.	1	2	3	4
11. I get very little support from my colleagues.	1	2	3	4
12. I get very little support from my superiors.	1	2	3	4
13. My job is not challenging.	1	2	3	4
14. No one understands the functions of my department.	1	2	3	4
15. Promotions at my workplace are not based on merit.	1	2	3	4

16. I am unsure as to the future of my job.	1	2	3	4
17. I use coffee, tobacco, alcohol and/or other drugs to try and cope.	1	2	3	4
18. My working environment is unsafe.	1	2	3	4
19. My working environment is uncomfortable.	1	2	3	4
20. My job does not pay well.	1	2	3	4
21. The targets related to my job are unrealistic.	1	2	3	4
22. The budgets related to my job are unrealistic.	1	2	3	4
23. I work under inflexible and insensitive working conditions.	1	2	3	4
24. I do not have adequate resources to work with.	1	2	3	4
25. I have to work outside of my normal working hours to complete my work.	1	2	3	4

Total score:

## End of Section Quiz

*Please circle the correct answer.*

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Good self-esteem protects you from making mistakes.                              | T | F |
| 2. Strong family ties help to protect against the effects of stressful situations.  | T | F |
| 3. Personality variables affect people's reactions to stress.                       | T | F |
| 4. Some people can work in very hostile environments without experiencing distress. | T | F |
| 5. Males can be victims of sexual harassment on the job.                            | T | F |
| 6. Situational role playing is indicative of a major psychiatric disorder.          | T | F |
| 7. Death of a child is a possible precursor of divorce.                             | T | F |
| 8. Managers are invariably over-stressed.   | T | F |
| 9. We must be loved by everyone for our lives to be useful.                         | T | F |
| 10. Wise resource management is distressing.  | T | F |

Quiz answers appear in Appendix 2.

## N O T E S

[illegible]

## 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.*



*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.

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
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.

## NOTES

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