

Understanding Stress

Unit

1

Unit 1

Understanding Stress

Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Understand that stress is an unavoidable part of everybody's life
- ✓ Recognize the symptoms that tell you when you have chronic stress overload

Where Are You Now?

When we present a stress management course, we often look for the greatest areas of our life that produce stress.

- According to Peter Hanson, MD, a best-selling author of several books about stress, work and the workplace causes most of our stress.
- According to the Holmes-Rahe stress scale, which has been popularly used in stress management workshops since the late 1960's, the greatest single stressors come from our personal lives.

In reality, it depends on what's happening in different areas of our life, and how we respond to things that add to our stress levels, no matter where they are coming from.

We know intuitively that the economy, threats of layoff, doing more with fewer resources will add stress to our work. However, even in an ideal workplace there can be people we don't get along with, orders that do not arrive on time, and phones that don't get answered. On the home front, finding a new place to live, weddings, family gatherings, finances, and inflation can add stress to our lives.

The word "stressor" is something we hear frequently. A stressor is something that puts real or perceived demands on your physical, emotional, or spiritual self. Stressors can be positive or negative.

Defining and Identifying Stress

Stress is our mental, physical, and behavioral response to something that could threaten our safety or well-being. Too much stress can result in serious physical, psychological, interpersonal, or performance problems. Too little stress, however, can also lead us to be unconcerned with getting on with things, including getting out of bed in the morning.

What Does It Mean?

The pre-assignment is a way for you to review where your life is right now and bring the topic of stress to a prominent place where it can be discussed.

We know from research dating back to the 1960's (Holmes & Rahe, 1967, Journal of Psychosomatic Research, Vol. 11) that there is a health toll that chronic stress brings with it. Their research demonstrated that the more stressful events you encountered in a 24 month period, the more likely you were to become ill.

While we have tempered that research with the knowledge that positive stress can be very good, and we know that not all people respond to stress in the same way, we do know that there is a direct correlation between perceptions of stress and the impact on our health. Generally, the more significant life events you encounter, the more potential there is for you to become ill.

Ways to Look at Your Stress

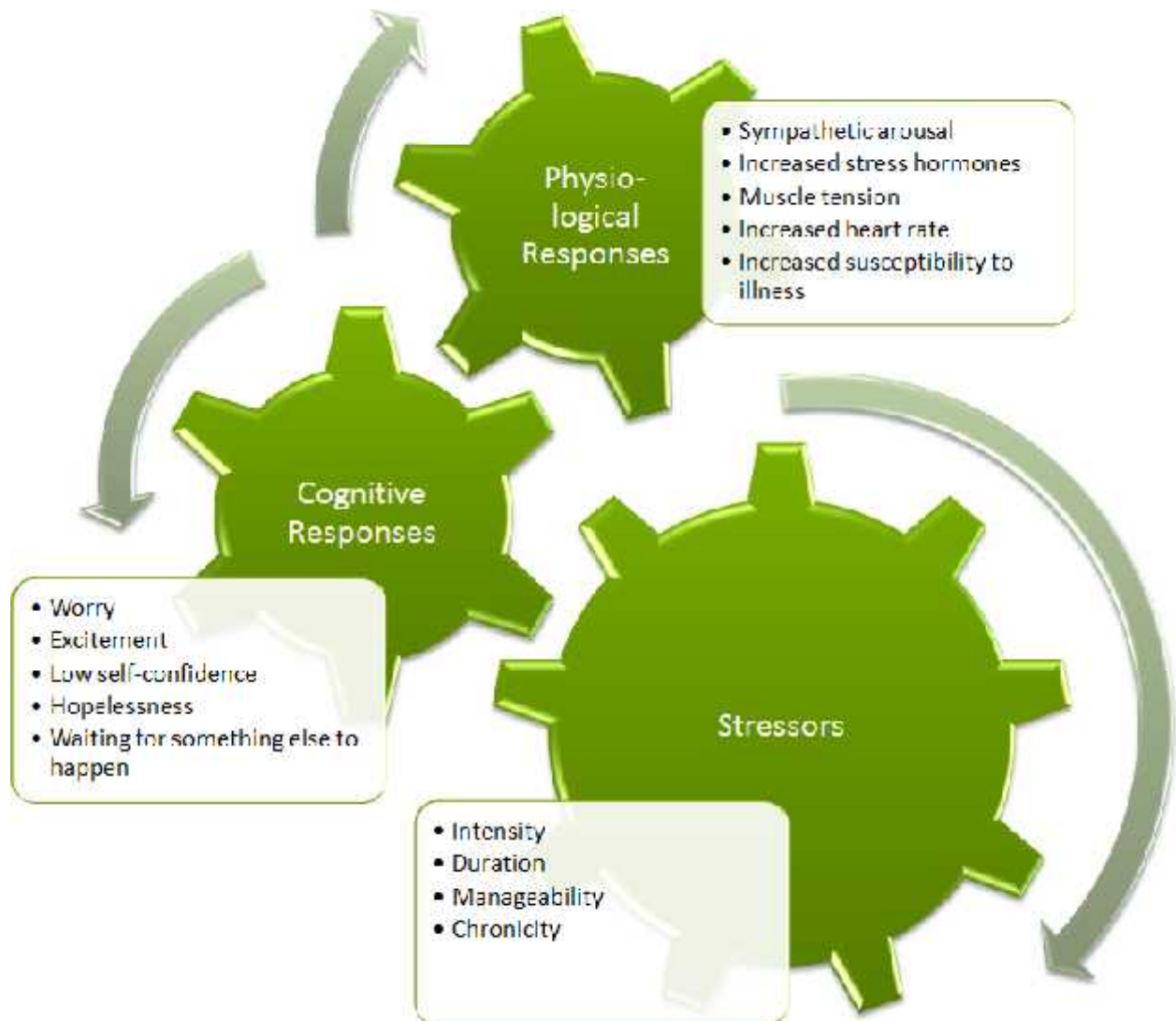
Stressors lead to stimuli which evoke some kind of a response. Whether your response is physical or psychological, stressors require that we adapt and respond in some way. The greater the gap between the demands and the resources, the more stressful a situation becomes for us.

Some stressors are small, like finding there is no toilet paper when we go into the bathroom, or calling someone and their voicemail is full. Farther up on the scale, there are major negative events, like being caught in a storm and unable to get home through downed power lines, or being the victim of a crime. Looming larger are catastrophic events, often unexpected, such as natural disasters, acts of wars, or riots.

Events over which we have very little control, which occur suddenly and unpredictably, and which have an impact that lasts for a long period of time, generally have the biggest impact on physical and emotional health. In addition, even small events that are chronically repeated over a long period of time (like your colleague being late for work every day for a prolonged period) can be equally taxing.

Understanding Stress

These factors:



Can all contribute to these coping behaviors:

- Avoiding priority tasks
- Rigidity or disorganization
- Self-destructive behaviors (such as substance abuse or alcoholism)

(Sources: "Stress, Appraisal, and Coping" and "Psychology Frontiers and Applications")

Stress and Your Health

Stress is a significant factor in health problems in the world today. Repeated stress, whether positive or negative, leads to a release of hormones in the body. It is the constant battering of these stress-related hormones that can have a negative effect on our health over time.

Dr. Peter Hanson, author of *The Joy of Stress* and many other books on managing stress, says that stress is neutral until it lands on us. What we choose to do about stress determines how it will affect us, and so while it does not directly “cause” these problems, it certainly contributes to them.

- Heart attacks or strokes
- Substance abuse (illegal drugs, improper use of prescription drugs, alcohol)
- Abdominal problems, such as irritable bowel syndrome
- Physical illness
- Hypertension
- Migraines
- High cholesterol
- Insomnia
- Depression and anxiety

What is Stress About?

Stress can be about changing lifestyles.

Many people feel that life has become more stressful, although those who have successfully leveraged technology and established a satisfying balance of health, wellness, and work may not feel that way! Our access to food from different geographic areas, mass transportation, communication, and other privileges are enjoyed by many people.

Stress can be about power.

Many of us feel more stressed when we feel powerless to change the way things are. Stress is an equal opportunity opponent: it affects people of every age and every culture, regardless of whether you are male or female.

Stress can be about self-esteem.

When our self-esteem is high, we feel more powerful and therefore less reactive to negative stressors. When our self-esteem is low, we feel like we have no power to make any changes and that can cause us more stress.

Stress is about change in our environment.

Change can be exciting when it brings something we look forward to, even if we have to do extra work to get the changes into place. Unexpected change, though, can bring negative stress with it, even though we can see that the change itself has many positive aspects. If we don't like the situation we find ourselves in, if we are familiar with being in that situation, or if we feel that at least we know what will happen when we are in the situation, we find it less stressful than when we are stepping into the unknown.

People who make comments about not liking change or not being adaptable could benefit from some intervention and stress-reduction techniques, because the world continues to change rapidly, and we are forced to change along with it, whether we want to or not.

Flexibility

Being flexible can reduce stress! Try sitting at a different spot at the table occasionally, taking a different route to work, changing your hairstyle, or going somewhere different to experience different foods.

Eustress

Don't forget that stress isn't all bad. In 1974, Richard Lazarus defined the term "eustress" to describe healthy or positive stress. The prefix *-eu* comes from the Greek word that means "well" or "good," making eustress (good stress) distinct from the negative associations of *distress*.

Positive stress motivates, increases energy levels, and can drive people forward to embrace the work before them.

What about having no stress at all? An absence of stress can actually lead to boredom or frustration. When people who enjoy a variety of activities as a part of their day suddenly find themselves all caught up and with some free time on their hands, they can actually become bored and experience feelings of fatigue. A balance of positive stress is ideal, although the human component to this is that each person responds to stress individually. That means what is good stress for one person can be negative for another.

Building a Solid Foundation

Taking Care of Your Body and Your Mind

In considering the foundation that you offer to support yourself, we speak in terms of four pillars that support stress management:

- Good nutrition
- Exercise
- Strong, supportive relationships

- Relaxation techniques

Many of us are already familiar with the ideas behind these pillars; however, we don't always act as though we do. This is a good opportunity to do some thinking out loud.

Test Your Knowledge

Prepare a list of what you think each of us should be doing to manage our stress related to each pillar. Try to have five items for each topic.

Good Nutrition

Exercise

Strong, Supportive Relationships

Relaxation Techniques

The "Less Stress" Lessons

Relaxation techniques are crucial for managing stress. Let's talk about some techniques that you can use anywhere, any time.

Body Scan

In order to relax, we must first learn where, when, and how we store tension in our body. Does everybody know where they store their tension? It may be in the back, their neck, their stomach, or some other part of their body. How will they know? This part of their body reacts: they get a stiff neck, they get an upset stomach, or they have back pain. When you figure this out, you can also design remedies such as yoga, stretching, massage, warm baths, healthy eating, to help reduce their impact.

Breathing Through Your Diaphragm

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, once said, "Our breath is the bridge from our body to our mind."

Loosen your clothes, close your eyes, mentally relax your body, and take ten or more deep breaths. Your goal is to breathe into the bottom of your lungs (where the oxygen is readily absorbed), not the usual upper lung breathing we do. Put your hand on your stomach and feel it move as you breathe in in order to make sure you are getting the air in good and deep. We call this diaphragmatic breathing, because you are using your diaphragm muscle to breathe. When people are experiencing anxiety they are most often breathing into the upper area of their lungs rather than the bottom.

Each time you exhale, count silently: "one," after the first breath, "two," after the second breath, etc., up to at least ten. If you lose count, or find yourself working on thoughts as they pass through your mind, start your count over again. When you are finished, you should feel more calm and relaxed. (Your blood pressure will go down temporarily too.) If you're in a meeting, on the phone, or dealing with a customer, count in your head.

Stretching

Stretching has multiple benefits. It increases blood and oxygen flow in your body, as you focus on areas of your body and encourage yourself to be mindful of your movements, and relax your mind.

Visualization

Use positive imagery to boost your mood and enhance your visible performance. In your mind, picture a place that you love. Feel the sunshine on your face, or the breeze on your skin. See the things that you love to see in great detail. If you are getting ready for a presentation or an interview, visualize yourself performing it perfectly, so that when you get to the event your mind thinks you've done it before, so this will be even easier than the last time you did it (a technique used by athletes and peak-performance coaches).

Sensory Awareness

Shakespeare once said, "There's not a minute of our lives should stretch without some pleasure." Try to slow down and be more aware of your surroundings.