



Nourishing Your Mind and Body:

Manage Stress for Better Health

Lesson Guide

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Target Group

Adults 50 and older, but others can benefit

Activity Time

40 to 55 minutes

Learner Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Understand the psychological and physiological effects of stress
- Identify factors that contribute to stress
- Assess individual risk factors related to stress
- Understand and learn how to use practical strategies and techniques to manage their reaction to stress
- Develop a personal action plan for taking charge of their levels of stress

Preparation and Supplies

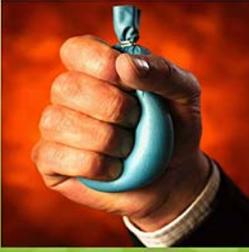
Obtain copies of the handouts for each participant.

- Nourishing Your Mind and Body: Manage Stress for Better Health Brochure
- Participant Activity Sheet: Factors Contributing to Stress
- Participant Handout: Suggestions for Managing Stress
- Participant Activity Sheet: My Personal Action Plan for Managing Stress

Evaluation

Optional activity: Refer to the discussion question on PowerPoint slide 10 related to participants' personal warning signs of stress. Consider writing responses on a large sheet of paper or whiteboard.

Nourishing Your Mind and Body:
Manage Stress for Better Health



Jane Strommen, Ph.D.
 Gerontology Specialist

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Slide 1

Outline




Effects

Factors

Assessing risk factors

Making a plan

Coping techniques

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Today, we will be focusing on tools and skills that can help you manage the daily stresses and challenges you face. As a result of this lesson, participants are expected to be able to:

- Understand the psychological and physiological effects of stress
- Identify factors that contribute to your stress
- Assess individual risk factors related to stress
- Understand and learn how to use practical strategies and techniques to manage your reaction to stress
- Develop a personal action plan for taking charge of your levels of stress

What is stress?



Physical, mental or emotional strain or tension

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People have different ideas of the definition of stress. Probably the most common definition is “physical, mental or emotional strain or tension.” Another popular definition of stress is “a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”

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Stress, a Big Problem?



Most physician visits are stress-related

Linked to six leading causes of death in U.S.

Nine to 10 adults have had serious stress in their life

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Stress-related disorders include stomach ailments, tension headaches, high blood pressure, addiction and almost any other disease that comes to mind.

The six leading causes of death in North America are linked to stress. They are: heart disease, cancer, stroke, chronic lower respiratory diseases, accidents and diabetes.

Of the adults who reported having experienced serious stress in their lives, half of them say their symptoms were serious enough to disrupt their lives to the point they cannot function well on a daily basis (poor sleep, relationships impaired and productivity compromised).

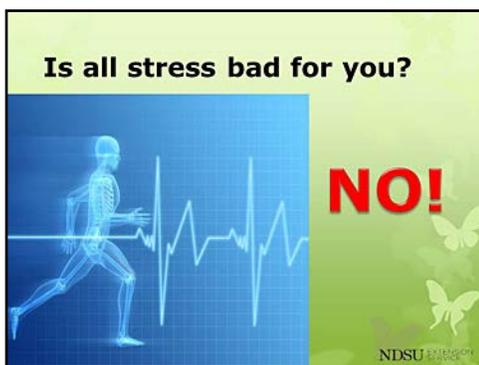
Stress has become a pervasive challenge in our society and can have a profound impact on our quality of life and health. The key is to prevent serious problems due to stress by equipping yourself with the skills to help you during these difficult times.



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You can experience at least three kinds of stress:

- Routine – due to pressures of work, family and other daily responsibilities
- Changes – due to sudden negative change, such as divorce, serious illness or loss of job
- Traumatic events/personal crisis – occurs when a person is at risk of being seriously hurt or killed. Examples of a traumatic event/personal crisis include a major accident, natural disaster, war and assault. This type of stress can cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



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Having no stress at all does not make people happier and more successful. Sometimes stress helps people prepare for challenges.

One type of stress is called “good stress” or “acute stress.” For example, some people experience an increase in heart rate and perspiration before a presentation or exam that actually helps them succeed. So good stress can inspire and motivate you.

When situations are nonstopping or perceived as nonstopping, the body does not get a chance to relax and recover. This causes constant tense muscles and other symptoms. This type of stress is called “bad stress” or “chronic stress.” When stress is not managed in a positive manner and the person remains tense for a long period of time, their overall physical and mental health is affected.

Joan is preparing for her daughter's wedding. Because she is very excited and nervous, she did not sleep well last night. She was too busy thinking about all of the details and things she needed to do and remember.

What type of stress is this?

1. Acute, good stress
2. Chronic, bad stress

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Answer: This is short-term, good stress. The level of nervousness has a positive effect because it helps Joan prepare successfully for her daughter's wedding. When the wedding finally happens, she will relax and feel a sense of achievement.

Perception of Stressors

Stress is different for all of us.

“People are disturbed not by a thing, but by their perception of a thing.” Epictetus

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Stress is different for all of us. People will perceive the same stressor in a number of ways and, therefore, react to it differently. An event can be overwhelming to one person and exciting to another. For example, many politicians, comedians and public speakers truly enjoy appearing on stage in front of huge crowds, while the same situation provokes anxiety and fear for other people.

Your perception of a situation depends on your personality type, resilience, life experience, health status, and mental and emotional resources.

Body's Reaction

- Increased heart rate and muscle tension, and a higher blood pressure
- Confusion, anger, fear and sweating



We are not faced with the same types of dangers of long ago, but our bodies react in similar ways.

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Many scientists consider stress as a reaction of our body to sudden changes in the environment. Just like animals, people need extra energy to stay and fight or run away when faced with danger. Our stress response can be life-saving in certain situations.

The body's normal reaction to a dangerous situation is an increase in heart rate and muscle tension and a higher blood pressure.

Today, people are not faced with the same types of dangers of long ago, such as fighting off wild animals to save their families. However, we still are subject to situations that make our bodies react in similar ways, such as tense muscles, faster heartbeats, increased blood pressure, confusion, anger, fear and sweating.

These physical and emotional reactions experienced during times of stress help us have increased concentration and other bodily functions necessary to prepare us for a challenge.

What happens to the body after meeting a challenge? The heart rate, muscle tension and blood pressure return to normal as the body relaxes. The body is recovering and the individual feels emotionally rewarded for overcoming the challenge.

Can you tell when you are experiencing stress?



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What are your personal warning signs of stress? Take a few minutes to think about how your body reacts to stressful situations. Does your heart rate increase? Do you get a headache or tense muscles? Recognizing your personal response to stress can help you look more closely at specific situations that might contribute to being stressed.

Common Stress Symptoms



Difficulty sleeping	Crying spells
Loss of appetite	Poor concentration
Low energy	Constant worry
Frequent colds and infections	Feeling blue
Muscle tension and aches	Tension and irritability
Increased substance use	Difficulty making decisions

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People respond to stress in different ways, physically or mentally. Humans are the only species that worry themselves over imagined fears.

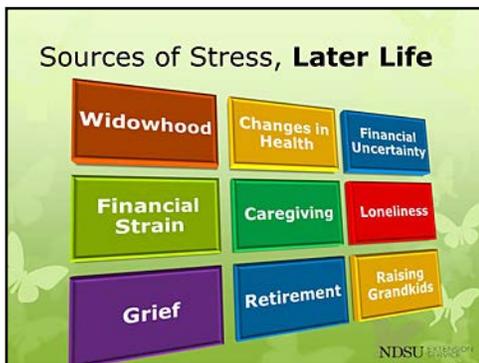
Here are just a few of the common symptoms of stress. You can see that they can be physical, mental or both. They serve as indicators that you need to slow down and pay attention to what is going on in your life. If we neglect our warning signs, problems will develop. Results of neglecting stress include increased health problems, disrupted relationships, burnout, depression and decreased ability to care for ourselves and others we care about.

Making changes early to reduce stress is easier and more helpful. Recovering from the effects of stress takes longer if we wait until we are overwhelmed to try reducing the stress.



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Individuals experience stress across the lifespan, from babies to the very old. This slide includes just a few of the stressors associated with midlife. Can you think of others?



Slide 13

This slide includes just a few of the stressors associated with later life. Can you think of others?



Slide 14

Once you realize that you are stressed, determining what is causing your stress is important for trying to control it. What situations cause you to be stressed? What situations produce changes in your body, feelings and behaviors?

Distribute the handout "Factors Contributing to Stress."

This is a checklist that may help you look closely at specific situations that may be contributing to being overstressed or distressed. Once you are aware of the events or situations that may be contributing to it, then you can begin to plan to address the contributing factors. Review the list and check the items that you know are contributing to your stress. Add those that may be particular to your situation.

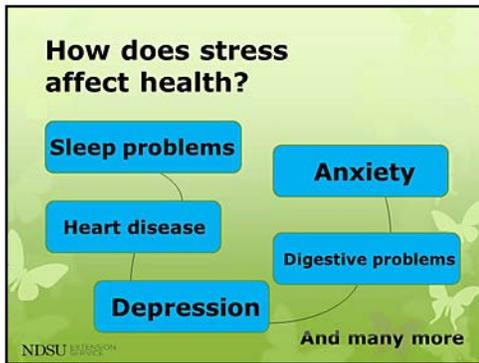
Look at your list and number the two items that are the major contributors to your present stress by placing 1 and 2 by your top two stressors. Do not number more than two. You may recognize more than two factors, but you don't want to add to your stress by addressing everything at once. You can address additional factors at a later time. You will not be sharing these with anyone; this exercise is only for your benefit.



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Stress from routine pressures of work, family and daily responsibilities may be the hardest to notice because they are more constant than in situations of acute or traumatic stress. You may have no clear signal for your body to return to normal functioning and, through time, this constant strain may lead to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and other illnesses.

That is why learning healthy ways to cope with stress in your life is important.

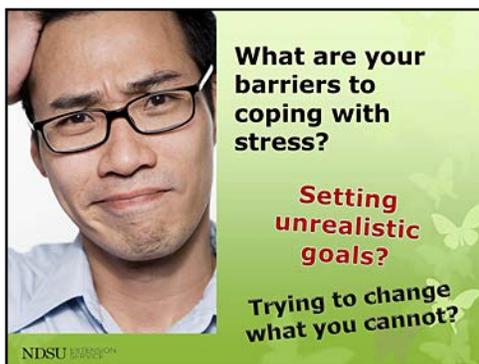


Slide 16

How does stress affect your overall health? Constant stress can lead to many diseases. For example, high blood pressure as a result of stress can cause heart problems, including heart attacks. Stress also can cause headaches, migraines, back pain and ulcers.

Research also has associated stress with a weak immune system. Because the immune system is responsible for fighting diseases and germs that attack the body, a person with chronic stress could become ill more frequently.

In addition, people who experience chronic stress may try to find relief from drugs, smoking or alcohol. However, these types of stimulants provide a feeling of relief that lasts only for a brief period of time. In the long term, the person is likely to become addicted, causing the stress to get worse.



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While identifying our warning signs and sources of stress is important, it does nothing to reduce stress unless we take action. However, getting sidetracked by barriers to coping with stress is easy to do.

Barriers to taking action often include:

- Not sure what to do – need to take time to brainstorm things you can do to reduce stress
- Things won't change – our negative self-talk limits us taking action
- Unrealistic goals – selecting a stress-reducing activity that is too involved, too time consuming, too expensive
- Lack of support – not reaching out to other people who can help you and support you
- Postponing stress reduction – a stress-reduction activity is planned too far into the future when you need help now

Clearly identify what you can change and what you cannot change; sometimes this means we need to “let go” or learn to change your attitude to live with the situation.

Try to recognize your barriers and remove them so you can take productive action to reduce stress.

How can I cope with stress?

Lifestyle Behaviors:

- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Sleep



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We can't eliminate or stop stress, but we can manage it. A healthy lifestyle is one in which you have adequate knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to protect and take care of yourself to prevent illness, minimize stress in your life and engage in optimal functioning.

What are the lifestyle behaviors you need to cope with stress?

- Nutrition - Stress influences eating habits and foods influence physical functioning and the stress response. Stress-inducing foods include caffeine, monosodium glutamate, sugar and saturated fats. Be careful with "comfort foods" because they can cause weight gain and add to your stress.
- Physical exercise – Incorporate physical activity into your daily life because it actually creates brain changes that promote emotional well-being.
- Sleep – One of the most important things you can do, along with diet, is to keep yourself in balance. Most people need seven to nine hours of sleep each night.
- Limit smoking and alcohol – Alcohol may give you a temporary feeling of comfort, but it is short-lived. When a person is stressed, tobacco smoking will worsen the condition, increasing adrenaline production, which increases blood pressure, constricts blood vessels and raises your heart rate.
- Financial management – Worrying about financial problems can cause issues with sleep, appetite, addictions, self-destructive behaviors and relationship conflicts.

Coping With Stress

Laugh!

Focus on relationships.

Learn how to relax.



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In addition to lifestyle behaviors, developing your personal responses to stress is important. Here are just a few examples:

- Learn to relax – Relaxation techniques are proactive, thus giving an immediate sense of being in control. Examples include meditation, yoga and tai chi.
- Make time for fun – Make time for the things that you enjoy doing, whether is it bowling, bird watching, fishing or needlework.
- Laugh – It is good for your body, mind and soul.
- Share your concerns with others – Talking to someone is helpful; perhaps that person can help you see the problem in a different perspective.
- Create a quiet scene – Read a good book or play beautiful music to take you out of the turmoil of a stressful situation.
- Work on relationships – Focus on the important people in your life and nurture those relationships.

Keep in mind that coping with stress is very personal. A strategy or activity that works for one person may not be a stress reducer for another person. Distribute the handout "Suggestions for Coping with Stress" and ask participants to review the list of suggestions to see if they find ideas that might work for them.

Personal Action Plan

Write the two major stressors in the top blanks.

Determine a realistic goal for each stressor and write it down.

Identify activities or strategies for each goal.

Determine how much time you will need to reach each goal.

Think about who might help you fulfill each goal.

Decide how will you celebrate.

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Developing personal action plans help us remember, keep track of and accomplish the agreements we make with ourselves. Now, complete your action plan for coping with stress.

Distribute copies of “My Personal Action Plan” and provide the following instructions:

1. Write the two major stressors in the top blanks.
2. Determine a realistic goal for each stressor and write it down.
3. Identify activities or strategies that will help you complete each goal – use the “Suggestions for Coping With Stress” handout for ideas.
4. Determine how much time you will need to reach each goal.
5. Think about who might help you fulfill each goal.
6. Decide how you will celebrate when you reach each goal.

Again, this information is only for your benefit; you will not be asked to share this information. *Consider providing an example by sharing your personal action plan to cope with a stressor in your life or use a generic example.*

Allow participants five minutes to complete the action plan.

Keys to Managing Stress!

Make a program!

Develop a plan!

Make small changes in life!

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Prevention is more effective than management because it is a proactive approach that allows you to change your living habits before you have serious health problems due to stress. Once you are dealing with stressors, you need to manage your reactions to them to avoid chronic conditions that impact your health.

Small changes in your lifestyle may have long-term benefits to your longevity and quality of life. Many of our health habits are deeply engrained and may take awhile to address, but taking small steps can lead to significant change.

Our bodies, minds and relationships to other people and the environment are all interrelated. Therefore, no one strategy, once employed, can make changes in every aspect of your life.

We are unique individuals, so adopting other people’s strategies for stress prevention and management will not be successful for us. You must determine the strategies and techniques that suite your lifestyle, values, interests, strengths and resources.

Developing a comprehensive plan that addresses the stressors in life and draws on multiple tools and techniques is essential. Having a variety of tools for different stressors gives you more flexibility and resources, and it provides a reserve to draw upon, depending on your mood, circumstances and needs.

Remember



No magic solution is available to relieve stress.

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When to Seek Help

- Chronic thoughts of doom and gloom
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Changes in sleep and eating patterns
- Impaired concentration, memory and daily functioning
- Worsening relationship conflicts
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Symptoms have been continuing for six months without significant improvement

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Recognize when you need more help. If problems continue, talk to a psychologist, social worker or professional counselor.

Seek professional help from physician, counselor, social worker or psychologist for intense stress

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To-do List



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Want more information?

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml

American Institute for Stress
www.stress.org/

Medline Plus – U.S. National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/stress.html

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