

STRESS REDUCTION*

▶ ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

🕒 **Time:** 20 minutes

➔ **Objectives:** By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Recognize physical and emotional symptoms of stress and burnout;
- Distinguish between effective and ineffective strategies for coping with stress.

★ **Training Methods:** Brainstorm, Large Group Activity

✓ **In This Activity You Will...**

- Facilitate a group discussion on symptoms of stress, coping mechanisms and the impact on health (12 minutes).
- Explain the difference between the “stress response” (fight or flight response) and the “relaxation response” (2 minutes).
- Conduct a full belly breathing exercise and debrief (6 minutes).

✂ **Materials:**

- Flip Chart
- Markers
- Handout – Effective Ways of Coping with Stress and Burnout
- Handout – Signs and Symptoms of Stress and Burnout
- Handout – Techniques for Eliciting and Relaxation Response

📎 **Preparation:**

- Print handouts
- Prepare flipchart with “What is Stress?” written on it

Instructions

1. Begin group discussion by asking participants to define stress. Record group responses on prepared flip chart.

Ask participants:

What happens when you are stressed? How do you feel? [Review definition: Stress is anything—real or imagined-- that is perceived to be a threat to your wellbeing.] Having a diagnosis of HIV infection can certainly be perceived as a threat, and is indeed referred to by many as a life-threatening condition.

Ask participants:

What causes you to be stressed? [Answers may include: bills, supervisor, worrying about children or grandchildren, loneliness, bad news, health problems, spouses, fighting, lack of money, etc.]

2. Ask participants, “Does stress affect your viral load and T cell count?”

Answer: When people with HIV infection experience prolonged high levels of stress the T cell count can drop and the viral load can increase.

3. Ask the group to identify **physical and emotional symptoms of stress and burnout**, and record responses on flip chart. Some responses may include fatigue, difficulty breathing, nervousness, poor appetite, headaches, inability to sleep, sexual dysfunction, depression, anger...
4. Ask the group to identify **ineffective ways of coping with stress**; behaviors that may alleviate symptoms temporarily, but are not helpful in the long run. Record responses on flip chart.

Ask participants:

What are some unhealthy things you do to deal with stress? [Answers may include: worry, argue, drink, overeat, don't eat, don't take medications or follow your diet, have suicidal thoughts, do too much, etc.]

* This module comes from Duke University, Partners in Caring; Center for Creative Education, 2006.

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Even when you're down and out and feeling depressed, you can always counteract a negative thought with a positive one, and even if you don't believe it, if you keep saying it, it actually becomes a reality over time. It's just training yourself to focus on the positive.

Carol Garcia
Peer at Christie's Place
San Diego, CA

5. Ask the group to identify effective ways of coping with stress; behaviors that help to reduce symptoms and improve quality of life. Record responses on flip chart.

What are some things that could help reduce stress? [Answers may include: exercise, hot baths, aromatherapy, sex, meditation, yoga, prayer etc.]

6. Summarize by pointing out that the group has come up with many signs and symptoms of stress and burnout, as well as many ways that people cope with stress. Emphasize the importance of learning to distinguish between effective and ineffective coping.

7. Distinguish for the group the difference between the “stress response” (fight or flight response) and the “relaxation response.”

The stress response is what happens to the body when you experience stress. The heart rate goes up; respiratory rate goes up; blood sugar goes up; digestion shuts down; muscles tense; attention turns outward looking for danger; and immune function decreases. Most people recognize this as an “adrenaline rush.”

When the source of stress is acute, such as when you are suddenly surprised and frightened, these effects last only long enough for you to fight or run (take flight), and then the body automatically brings about the “relaxation response.” When the relaxation response occurs the body relaxes, attention turns inward, immune function goes back to normal, respiration and heart rate slow down, etc.

However, when the source of stress is chronic and prolonged, the body does not automatically bring about the relaxation response, and you experience all of the negative effects of stress and burnout. It then becomes important to engage in effective ways of coping with stress that bring about the relaxation response and restore the body to health.

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There are many ways you can bring about the relaxation response. Most of us intuitively know how to relax, and we all have our own techniques. One simple technique for relaxing that can be easily learned and easily taught to others is deep “full belly” breathing. {You have handouts in your manuals with instructions so you can review them at home, and you can use the handouts to teach clients some techniques when you work as a peer educator.}

8. Ask everyone to move their chairs away from the table. Inform the group that we will demonstrate some “full belly” breathing for a few minutes.

Sit up in your chair with your back straight, your feet flat on the floor, and your hands in your lap. (If you are at home you may choose to lie flat on the floor on a blanket with a small pillow to support your head, or lie on a bed or sofa.) Make sure you are not too hot or too cold. Loosen any tight clothing, especially around the waist.

Close your eyes and begin to allow your body to relax.

Begin to breathe slowly and evenly, extending each inhalation and exhalation, gradually deepening and slowing down your breath.

When you inhale, allow your lower belly to completely

relax and fill up like a balloon.

When you exhale, allow your lower belly to relax back down to normal. Exhale slowly and completely. Gently tighten your lower belly at the very end of the exhalation.

Continue to breath deeply, slowly, and evenly, expanding the belly as you breath in, and gently contracting the belly at the end of your exhalation.

9. Call people’s attention back and accept responses on how the belly breathing felt and how they can incorporate a simple relaxation technique at home.

Okay, everyone bring your attention back to the group. How did that feel? How can you use this technique in your daily lives? This is a simple example of how to do self-care. It doesn’t take a long time, just taking a few minutes to relax and breathe deeply can change how you feel, how you respond to people and how you maintain your sanity and health.

Summary

Wrap up session with key point:

- Learning to recognize the negative effects of stress and practicing effective coping strategies can help keep you healthy and prevent burnout

* This module is part of the online toolkit Building Blocks to Peer Success. For more information, visit http://www.hdwg.org/peer_center/training_toolkit. This module comes from Duke University, Partners in Caring; Center for Creative Education, 2006.

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SESSION HANDOUT # 1 of 3

TECHNIQUES FOR ELICITING THE RELAXATION RESPONSE FULL BELLY BREATHING AND SIMPLE MEDITATION TECHNIQUE

Les Harmon, NP

1. Full Belly Breathing

Sit in a chair with your back straight, your feet flat on the floor, and your hands in your lap. Or you may choose to lie flat on the floor on a blanket with a small pillow to support your head, or lie on a bed or sofa. Make sure you are not too hot or too cold. Loosen any tight clothing, especially around the waist.

Close your eyes and begin to allow your body to relax.

Begin to breathe slowly and evenly, extending each inhalation and exhalation, gradually deepening and slowing down your breath.

When you inhale, allow your lower belly to completely relax and fill up like a balloon.

When you exhale, allow your lower belly to relax back down to normal. Exhale slowly and completely. Gently tighten your lower belly at the very end of the exhalation.

Continue to breath deeply, slowly, and evenly, expanding the belly as you breath in, and gently contracting the belly at the end of your exhalation.

2. Simple Meditation Technique

Find a quiet place that is not too hot or too cold. Turn off radio, TV, cell phone, etc.

Sit in a chair with your spine straight, your feet resting on the floor, and your hands resting in your lap. Or you may choose to sit on the floor on a cushion, or lie on the floor or the bed. Loosen any tight clothing.

Close your eyes and take a few minutes to relax. Allow your body to become very still, and let your breathing become even and quiet. Then begin to focus your attention on an object of meditation. Some suggestions for an object of meditation include a word or phrase, a prayer, or a visual image. The breath is often used as an object of meditation. Simply count your exhalations up to ten, go back to zero and count to ten again, and so on. Or you may choose to inwardly say the word “one” with each exhalation.

Focus all of your attention on the object of meditation. The mind is always active, so it is normal to constantly experience thoughts and feelings. When your find that your focus has shifted to thoughts or feelings simply return your attention to the object of meditation.

Meditate for a few minutes every day at the beginning, gradually increasing your meditation time to 15 minutes or longer.

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SESSION HANDOUT # 2 of 3

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS AND BURNOUT

Physical symptoms

- Fatigue
- Poor appetite
- Headache
- Muscle tension
- Sleep disturbances
- Shallow breathing
- Heart palpitations
- Susceptibility to illness

Emotional symptoms

- Fear
- Anger
- Mistrust
- Depression
- Sadness
- Indifference
- Forgetfulness
- Emotional “numbness”

Behavioral symptoms

(Ineffective ways of coping)

- Acting out
- Not taking medications
- Isolating and withdrawing
- Blaming others
- Crying jags
- Impatience
- Denial and avoidance
- Substance abuse (recreational drugs, prescription drugs, alcohol, food)
- Inappropriate sexual behavior
- Excessive worrying

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SESSION HANDOUT # 3 of 3

EFFECTIVE WAYS OF COPING WITH STRESS AND BURNOUT

- Ask for help
- Talk with family and/or friends
- Take time off from work
- Engage in spiritually nourishing activities
- Meditate
- Exercise—get up and get moving
- Avoid junk food
- Avoid overuse of caffeine, alcohol, tobacco
- Get plenty of rest
- Drink plenty of water
- Take your medications and keep your doctor appointments
- Engage in creative activities
- Think positively
- Don't worry about what you can't control
- Spend time outdoors
- Listen to music
- Reserve a little quiet time for yourself each day
- Practice deep breathing and stretching
- Do the things you enjoy the most
- Build a good support system
- Avoid negative people and situations
- Lighten up—keep your sense of humor
- Look for the positive lessons in the bad things that happen to you
- Trust your own ability to heal yourself
- RELAX