

Engaging with Stress

Definition

Stress has been defined as the “*relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being*” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984:p19). I.e. stress is what you feel when you believe that you do not have the personal and/or social resources to deal with a situation.

Stress is very personal

The experience of stress varies between different people. Also, what may stress you at one time, may not stress you at another time. You can choose how you engage with a situation that you feel is stressful.

Steps to engage with stress

1. Signals: *How* do you know when you are stressed? What are your particular warning signals? E.g. body signs (rapid breathing, sweating, muscle tightening), behavioural changes (e.g. changes in sleep, eating ... your usual tempo), mood changes (e.g. more irritable, or quieter). You may want to check with others, as they may know some of your stress-signs before, or better than, you do.
2. Triggers: *What* makes you stressed? It helps to know what these are in order to prepare better for when they occur. Consider your working or living context. What are the things in these contexts that those around you also need to know make you stressed? Remember different people experience different things as stressful because we all perceive things differently.
3. Strategies: What works for you in terms of *managing* stress? If you, and those around you, know what is quick and effective in reducing your stress, it will be easier to limit the extent of the impact of the stressful situation(s). Consider having a relationship with your thoughts and feelings where you acknowledge but don't get caught up in them. Remember: there are many ways to cope with stress. Some are more effective than others. It is worth discussing with others what will be the most effective for you.
4. Motivation: Whatever the context, how prepared are you to do something about how you are reacting to the stress? It is highly likely that you know most of your stress signals and triggers, and even your strategies to cope with your stress. Often, the most toxic, stressful situations are those arising from interpersonal interactions. However, whether it is someone or something else that is causing you to experience stress, a key factor in reducing the experience of stress is *your motivation and confidence* to do so. Consider referring to your core values to direct your motivation.
5. Most important step: Take a fraction of a second – perhaps by taking a breath, or looking away – and tell yourself that you are able and that you deserve to take this most important step of applying your best strategy to engage positively with your situation. Below are some suggestions to support your motivation and confidence.

REMEMBER: Avoiding stressful situations can be appropriate if you never have to return to them (like fleeing from earthquakes or war zones). However, stress is often as a result of unresolved personal or interpersonal difficulties. It is common to use **SEX, DRUGS** (inc. alcohol and prescription drugs), **ROCK-a-bye** (sleep) **and/or ROLL** (food) in such situations. However, reliance upon these – or upon a limited number of strategies – will not alleviate stress in the long-term. It is therefore important that you develop a wide range of strategies to help your resilience in engaging with things that stress you.

<p style="text-align: center;">MAIN FOCUS for MANAGING STRESSFUL EMOTION</p> <p>COPING STRATEGIES</p>	Physical Activity	Thinking	Visualising	Changing focus	Social	Sound	Spiritual
ACCEPT yourself, your situation, notice 3 positive things each day		✓					✓
CREATE a comfortable space with your own: pictures, pillows/cushions, nic-nacs, drapes, lighting, music	✓	✓		✓		✓	
DEVELOP a hobby	✓	✓		✓	(✓)	(✓)	
DO something new, or for someone else, or TREAT yourself	(✓)	✓		✓	(✓)	(✓)	
DRAW a (crazy) picture of your stressors: deal with the result as you wish!	✓	✓	✓	✓			
EXERCISE	✓	(✓)		✓	(✓)	✓	
LISTEN to: Music; Waves; Children playing; Market sounds; Rain				✓		✓	
LOOK at an easily accessible picture (e.g. peaceful scene, significant others)		✓		✓			
MEDITATION : Imagine a psychologically safe place		✓	✓	✓		(✓)	✓
MINDFULNESS : Focus on right now and accept it as it is, with self-compassion		✓				(✓)	✓
“MOD COMMS” : Skype, Facebook, Email, Phone, Tweet, Blog, Text someone		(✓)		(✓)	✓	(✓)	
PLAN your next holiday, job, training, social event, escape!		✓	✓	✓	(✓)		
PLAY cards, ping-pong, charades ...	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	(✓)	(✓)	
READ		✓	✓	✓			(✓)
REFLECT : How did you cope before? How do others cope? What are you learning?		✓	✓				
SLEEP at regular times; c7.5 hrs; develop routines; no stimulants or heavy meals just before bed; wind down before bed		✓		✓			
SMILE in the mirror and/or at those around you				✓	✓		
TALK to those who listen and/or give: empathy, ideas, comfort, fun, support	(✓)	✓	(✓)	(✓)	✓		
THANK those who deserve to be thanked, including YOU		✓			✓		
TIME OUT from stressful contexts, inc “restful” places where stuff still needs “doing”	(✓)			✓			(✓)
VISUALISE : Yourself, or someone you respect, coping and dealing with the situation		✓	✓				
WALK amongst calming natural (parkland, woodland, waterscape) or human (museum, market) scenery	✓			✓		✓	(✓)
WATCH Movies; Plays; TV; Ballet; YouTube; Children play				✓	(✓)	✓	
WRITE your stressors down, then either/or: keep reading them until bored; throw the paper away; acknowledge and prioritise them for a later time		✓					