

TEAM WELLNESS SERIES

PART 2 OF 5 – UNDERSTANDING & CONQUERING STRESS

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We used to be told the only two things guaranteed in life were death and taxes. We need to add a third item – **stress**. There is no way you can live without some level of stress. However, all stress is not bad. It's when we have too much stress at any one time or that stress is high for prolonged periods that we begin to suffer negative consequences. There are emotional stress reactions such as anxiety, anger, and depression as well as physical effects including gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, and muscular symptoms.

What is this powerful force that will be with us throughout our lives? Stress is often simply defined as the physical and psychological reactions we experience when we have any type of demand or pressure placed upon us. These normal and automatic stress reactions are sometimes called the **fight-or-flight** response because we might want to attack it or run away from it in order to protect ourselves. Most of the time we cannot or should not attack or run away from stressors. Most often stress is not a life or death issue but is caused by real problems such as relationship or family conflicts, financial difficulties, medical problems, or job pressures. However, our worries, fears, and some beliefs can also cause a great deal of stress.

Whether we realize it or not, all of us have ways to manage stress when it is bothering us. Some methods work temporarily, but can cause other problems (e.g., using too much alcohol, drugs, or food to relieve our stress). Similarly, acting out aggressively can diffuse stressful tension in the short term, but leads to other problems. Because these methods are not effective in the long run, we need more adaptive skills to manage stress. Research over the past 40 years indicates that there are a few basic “core” skills that we can use to manage stress effectively.

The first core skill is improving your **self-awareness**. In essence we need to fine-tune our sensitivity to our level of stress which fluctuates throughout the day. Typically, we have learned to ignore stress until it passes some higher threshold where we are noticeably upset. The first simple step in self-awareness is learning how to gauge your stress on a scale of 1–10, where 1 is very relaxed and 10 is the maximum stress you could experience. To do this, try to rate your stress several times throughout the day until you have good awareness of when you need to take action to reduce it. You also want to learn what level of stress is good for you to perform at your best. Over time you hopefully will learn where your **effective stress zone** is. That zone, which is likely to be in the mid-range, becomes your target or goal when you are trying to cope with a stressful situation. Improving your awareness allows you to react to stress before it gets out of hand.

The second skill is a quick way to **relax physically**. A detailed method for deeper relaxation is in on our website, but for now you can try a simplified procedure. When you notice when your stress is increasing, get in the habit of taking a few “cleansing breaths.” Inhale very slowly and deeply to increase your oxygen intake, pause for a moment then slowly exhale. Do this two or three times to try to relax just a little. This will not get you deeply relaxed, but this practice can help take the immediate edge off the stress. You want to do this many times a day whenever you feel tension building on your stress scale. You will learn in our series some other mindful meditation methods that are also powerful coping skills.

The third and possibly most difficult skill is psychological in nature. Books are written on this method, so I can only give a rough description here and we will go into more detail in one of our future sessions and on our website. This skill, called “**cognitive restructuring**” or simply “**talking rationally to yourself**,” means eliminating unreasonable or irrational beliefs or mental habits that cause you to over-react to a situation. For example, if you are a perfectionist and upset about a mistake, you might need to remind yourself that “no one is perfect” and “it’s okay to be less than perfect and I will work to improve those things that are important to me.” Here you try to be reasonable, flexible, and rational so that you do not over-react to stressful events. Breaking up negative mental habits takes considerable practice but is a powerful tool.

Finally, **problem solving skills** are needed to look for creative ways to eliminate a stressor or to find a way to cope with the problem if it cannot be resolved. Here, you want to avoid at all costs saying “there is nothing I can do” which only creates a sense of helplessness. Even when you cannot resolve a problem, there are always adaptive ways to cope with the situation. The so-called **Serenity Prayer** captures this philosophy:

“ God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference.”

This proactive coping style is not only mentally helpful, but research has shown this actually improves your immune system. These four skills and other stress management topics will be discussed in more detail in future sessions. However, during the interim you can read additional material and listen to some audio segments throughout our website.

IN SUMMARY, THE FOUR CORE STRESS CONTROL SKILLS TO BUILD RESILIENCE ARE:

1. IMPROVED SELF-AWARENESS
2. PHYSICAL RELAXATION and/or MINDFUL MEDITATION
3. PSYCHOLOGICAL/COGNITIVE SKILLS (to minimize stress)
4. CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING / PROACTIVE COPING

For more in-depth description of these skills, check the Blog section of our free website: iCopeWithStress.com

REMEMBER:

- Tune into your stress rather than ignore it
- Pay attention to when your body is telling you the stress is getting high
- Rate your stress level on our 1-10 Scale at least a few times a day
- When stress gets high use the deep breathing exercise – 2-3 slow deep breaths
- Remind yourself of things you can do to help you cope at this time
- Practice makes this easier to do and will help you physically and emotionally