

Managing Stress

(3 credits)

After completing this section you should be able to:

1. Describe the stress reaction and how it affects the body
 2. Discuss signs of over-stress and list symptoms of burnout
 3. Explain the benefits of a good diet
 4. Explain the benefits of regular exercise
 5. Describe how to integrate positive coping skills into your life and explain where you can turn for help in managing stress
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1. Describe the stress reaction and how it affects the body

Stress cannot be avoided. No matter what you do or what happens to you, your body demands the necessary energy required to maintain life, to resist diseases, and to adapt to constantly changing situations.

Even if you are fully relaxed and asleep, you are under some stress. For example:

- your heart is still pumping
- intestines are digesting your dinner
- muscles are moving your chest so you can breathe

Stress is your body's physical, mental, and chemical reaction to circumstances that frighten, excite, confuse, endanger, or irritate you.

Stressors are stressful events or situations that occur. These situations change constantly and you may react to them differently each time.

Stress reactions occur inside the body. These are specific physical, mental, and chemical changes in your body that may affect how you deal with stressors. Some common examples include digestive diffi-

culties, muscle tension or pain, increased heart rate, or fatigue.

The "stress reaction" is a term used to describe the way your body responds to stressors. This reaction is also known as the "fight-or-flight response," which is a popular description first coined in 1932 by a physiologist named Walter Cannon.

Every time a stressor occurs, bodies respond in many ways. The stress reaction is systemic, because it affects the entire body:

- Circulation speeds up to quickly deliver oxygen to muscles.
- Sugar is released from body stores into the bloodstream to produce quick energy.
- Blood clotting mechanisms are accelerated to ready the body in case you are wounded.
- Muscles tighten so you can "fight or flee."
- Breathing speeds up and becomes shallow to bring more oxygen into the body.
- You become more alert and aware as blood flow to the brain increases.
- Digestion slows down or stops as blood is diverted from the organs of the diges-

tive system to the large muscles of the body.

This instinctive response has developed over time; your ancestors had to fight to protect themselves or flee to prevent being dinner for a large animal. (Thus the phrase “fight-or-flight.”) In modern times people usually do not have to physically “fight or flee” in order to survive. Instead, the body is all geared up with no place to go. All of this internalized energy can actually suppress the immune system and contribute to many stress-related health problems, such as:

- heart disease
- hypertension
- common colds and flu
- nutritional deficiencies
- stomach problems
- muscle tension
- weakness and fatigue

2. Discuss signs of over-stress and list symptoms of burnout

We are not always aware of all the stress that occurs in our everyday lives. Stressors have a cumulative effect. Most people, while aware of the major life stressors, are not aware of the smaller irritants that occur daily. Because stress is a contributing factor to many health problems and physical and emotional ailments, it is important to recognize the number of stressors we encounter daily. Below are a few examples and descriptions of early warning signs of over-stress.

Digestive Disturbances

The digestion process reacts to stress by slowing down or stopping. This is because the blood supply is diverted to the large muscles of the body, in preparation

for fight or flight, and away from internal organs such as the stomach and intestines. Energy that would normally be used for digesting food can then be channeled into dealing with a stressful situation.

Unfortunately, this can cause some stomach problems, and it can also affect eating habits. Some people eat a lot more than they normally would (especially simple carbohydrates such as cookies, cake, or candy), which further increases the digestive difficulties. Others simply stop eating altogether, which deprives their bodies of much needed nutrients.



Fig. 7-1. Stress can cause stomach problems.

Sleep Disturbances

Normal sleeping patterns are also affected by over-stress. Some people react by sleeping too much, while others experience difficulty sleeping or develop insomnia.

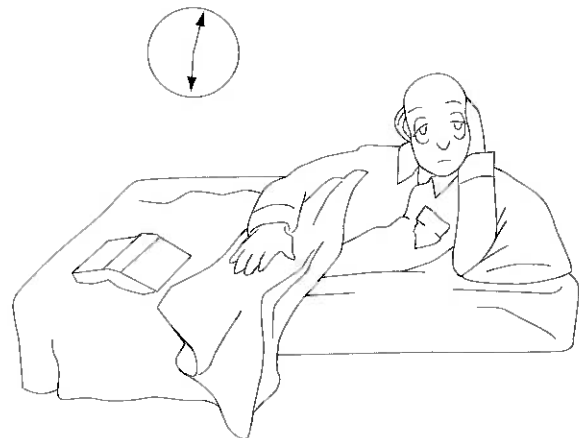


Fig. 7-2. Stress can cause a person to have difficulty sleeping.

Tension or Pain

Muscles can become very tense when the body is under stress. If the tension is not relieved by action, the neck, upper back, shoulders, and lower back will be very tight and sore. Chest pains are also common. A good massage, frequent stretching, and attention to good posture can help get rid of muscle tension and pain.

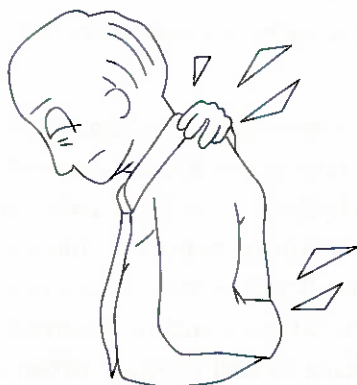


Fig. 7-3. Stress can cause neck, shoulder, and back pain.

Frequent Health Problems

Job stress can lead to hypertension, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Stress can also increase the potential risk of catching colds. However, not everyone who is under a lot of stress will experience health problems. You can reduce your chances of getting sick by taking good care of your body: eat nutritious foods, exercise regularly, and get plenty of rest.



Fig. 7-4. Stress can cause health problems.

Substance Abuse and Gratification

Substance abuse includes drinking too much alcohol and/or using drugs to alter moods, boost energy levels or lift depression. People who are abusing substances believe that this will make them feel better and think they need those substances to cope with difficult situations.

Gratification can be anything from eating a whole bag of chocolate chip cookies to buying many things at the mall. Likewise, people who indulge in excessive eating, shopping, or other over-indulgent activities are often trying to make up for all the stressful things that are happening to them. They want to make themselves feel better and mistakenly believe that this will do it.



Fig. 7-5. Stress can cause overeating and substance abuse.

However, all of these actions are a temporary “fix” and will not ultimately solve your problems. In fact, by not dealing directly with the stress in your life, you may actually make it worse.

Anger or Aggression

Some people who are over-stressed are described by their friends and family as being “on edge.” They react aggressively to any new or slightly threatening situation. This includes irritable behavior, fre-

quently taking offense, yelling for insignificant reasons, or driving recklessly.

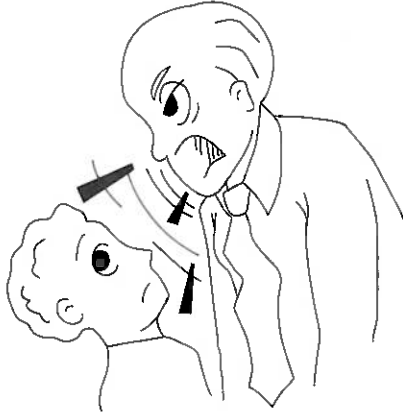


Fig. 7-6. Stress can cause aggressive behavior.

Aggressive feelings may be directed at people or events that are not to blame. Only by realizing what is frustrating you and dealing with that situation in a positive way can you hope to overcome those aggressive feelings.

When a person ignores the early warning signs of over-stress they can become “burned out.” Symptoms of burnout include:

- fatigue
- cynicism
- sadness
- forgetfulness
- disappointment
- isolation/withdrawal
- loss of humor
- apathy

Not managing stress can also cause additional problems that affect how well you do your job. Other signs that you are not managing stress include the following:

- showing anger or being abusive toward clients/residents
- arguing with your supervisor about your assignments

- having poor relationships with co-workers and clients/residents
- complaining about your job and your responsibilities
- having a difficult time focusing on clients/residents and procedures

3. Explain the benefits of a good diet

What you eat affects how your body functions, which in turn determines how well or how poorly you manage the stress in your life.

Good nutrition does not have to be complicated. Eating excessive amounts of simple carbohydrates (cookies, cake, donuts, etc.) will result in abnormal blood sugar levels, which will result in feelings of weakness, fatigue, and more stress. The convenience of fast foods is offset by the empty calories and over-abundant fat.

The key to healthy eating is to avoid the foods that aggravate the stress reaction and to increase the body’s store of needed nutrients to handle stressful situations.

Nutrition and Stress

Stress is the body’s reaction to change. When under stress, a body produces more of the hormone adrenaline to help the person deal with new situations. Adrenaline may cause your heart to beat fast, and you may feel warm or perspire. This adrenaline rush is usually described as nervous feelings, butterflies in the stomach, constant repetitive motions such as hand or foot tapping, etc.

Adrenaline provides the body with the energy to cope with new and changing situations. This needed energy is provided by the nutrients bodies store from the food eaten.

Caffeine and Alcohol

Caffeine and alcohol can have negative effects on a body, especially when you are under a lot of stress. When you over-use caffeine and alcohol you are subjecting your body to a stress see-saw.

Caffeine is a stimulant, and too much caffeine will act in the same way as too much stress. Caffeine, which is found in coffee, tea, chocolate, and many sodas, can make stress symptoms worse. For this reason, it can be very good to limit caffeine intake and to avoid caffeine when you are under stress.

Alcohol can also aggravate stress because it is a depressant. People may think that drinking alcohol makes them feel better, but it usually makes them feel worse in the long run. They may begin drinking more and more alcohol to “settle their nerves” after a stressful day.

Some people under stress may rely on caffeine as a pick-up and alcohol to bring them down.

When you learn which foods nourish your body, you can choose food and plan meals to design a diet that will nourish your physical health and emotional and mental well-being.

This is why the diet and feeding of your residents and clients is also so important. When the persons in your care are well-nourished and under less stress, they are better able to cope with their own physical, emotional, and mental problems.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has divided the foods that we eat into six groups (Fig. 7-7). A healthy diet should include enough servings from each of the following food groups:

- Grains, including cereals, bread, rice, and pasta
- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Milk and milk products
- Meat, poultry, fish, eggs, dry beans, and nuts
- Fats, oils, and sweets

These six groups have been arranged into the Food Guide Pyramid. Foods close to the bottom of the pyramid should make up most of our diet. Foods closer to the top should be eaten in smaller quantities.

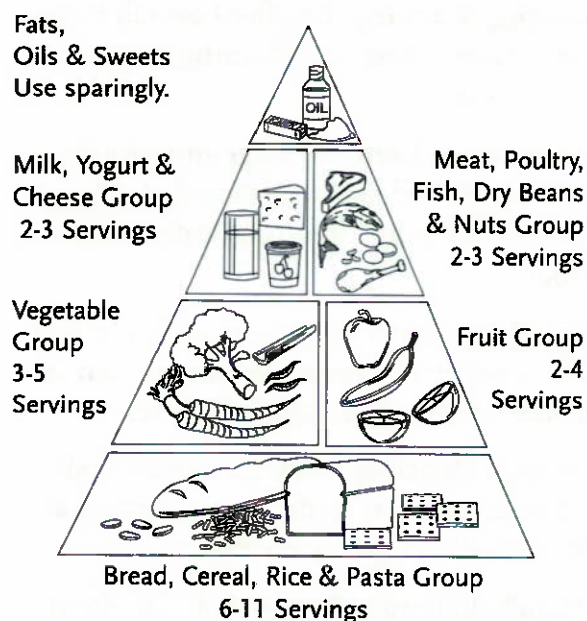


Fig. 7-7. The USDA Food Guide Pyramid.

4. Explain the benefits of regular exercise

Exercise helps counteract stress in two ways:

1. A physically fit body is better able to withstand the effects of stress and gives you the energy and endurance to handle whatever comes your way.
2. Exercise has a calming effect that lasts long after the exercise is over. Aerobic exercises like running, swim-

ming, and biking can produce a relaxed mental state because the brain releases chemicals called endorphins that reduce stress and depression. Non-aerobic exercises like yoga and stretching also produce a calming effect because they induce deep breathing and a relaxed mental state.

The benefits of specific types of activity are listed below:

Walking: Excellent overall body conditioner. Can be done by almost everyone. Requires no equipment.

Jogging/Running: Excellent overall body conditioner. Requires running shoes. Can stress joints.

Swimming: Exercises large muscles in legs, arms and chest. Does not stress bones and joints. Requires access to a pool.

Bicycling: Exercises large muscles in legs. Does not stress bones and joints. Can be done indoors on a stationary bike.

Aerobic Dancing: Excellent overall body conditioner. Can be done in a class or at home with an exercise video.

Handball/Tennis/Racquetball: Excellent overall body conditioner when done correctly. Requires equipment and a partner.

It is a good idea to consult with a healthcare professional before starting any exercise program.

Below are some short, easy stretching exercises that can be done while standing, sitting at a desk, and even while watching TV or sitting in traffic. You should do each exercise several times throughout your day for maximum benefit.

Note: If you experience pain during any of these exercises or have a history of back problems, stop immediately and consult with your healthcare professional before continuing.

Shoulder Circles: To relieve muscle tension in your neck, shoulders, and upper back. Circle your shoulders backward in a wide arc, hold for a few seconds and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

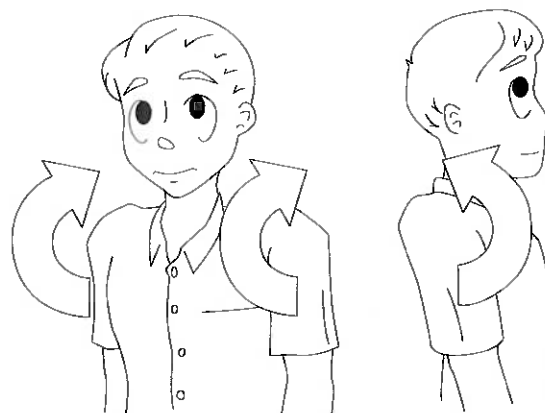


Fig. 7-8. Shoulder circles.

Neck Circles: To relieve muscle tension in your neck and upper back. Slowly bring your chin to your chest, hold for a second and bring your head back to center; slowly bring your head back and look up at the ceiling, hold for a second and bring your head back to center; slowly bend your head to the right as if you were trying to touch your right ear to your right shoulder, hold for a few seconds and bring your head back to center; repeat on the left side. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

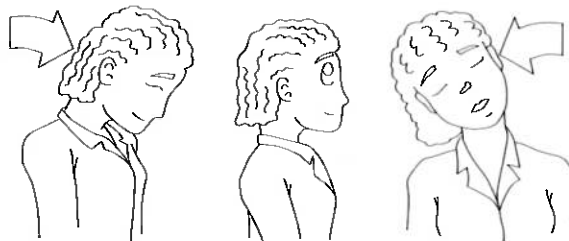


Fig. 7-9. Neck circles.

Elbow Press: To relieve muscle tension in your middle back. Bring your elbows out to the side at chest level and press them gently backward to your maximum stretch. Hold for a few seconds and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

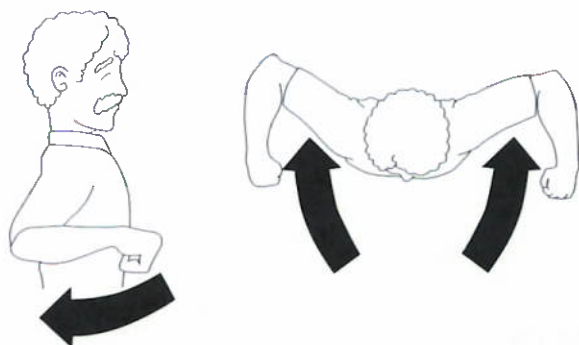


Fig. 7-10. Elbow press.

Abdominal Strengthening: To strengthen your abdominal muscles, which will help to support your lower back. Be sure you are sitting with your buttocks firmly against the back of a chair. Exhale and firmly tighten your abdominal muscles for a count of 10. (If you cannot hold for a count of 10, try for 5 and work up to 10.) Relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times. Note: This exercise can be done while standing or even while walking.

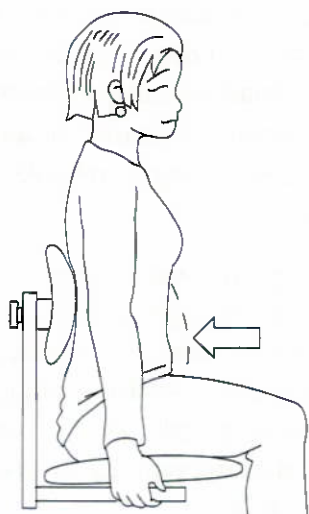


Fig. 7-11. Abdominal strengthening.

Neck Retraction: To relieve muscle tension in your neck. Slide your chin straight back, keeping your head and ears level. (You're doing the exercise correctly if it gives you the feeling of a double chin.) Hold for a few seconds and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

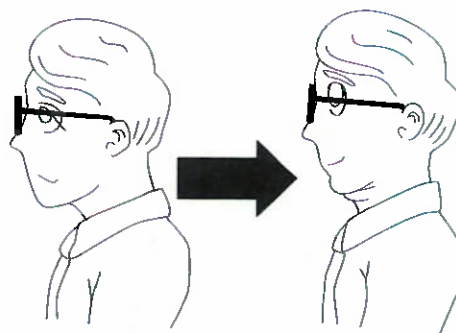


Fig. 7-12. Neck retraction.

Middle back stretch: To relieve muscle tension in your middle back. Bend both elbows and press one above you (as if you're trying to brush your ear with your elbow) and the other arm behind you. Press gently to your maximum stretch. Hold for a few seconds and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.



Fig. 7-13. Middle back stretch.

Lower back stretch: To relieve muscle tension in your lower back. Stand up and

press your palms on your lower back for support and gently bend your upper and lower back backward. Hold a few seconds and relax. Repeat 5 to 10 times.



Fig. 7-14. Lower back stretch.

5. Describe how to integrate positive coping skills into your life and explain where you can turn for help in managing stress

People are used to reacting to most life situations, including stressful situations, in exactly the same way every time the situation occurs. This is called “reactive” behavior.

Being reactive means:

- When a situation occurs, people have a tendency to simply respond without much thought. Example: getting angry and cutting other cars off when driving in heavy, slow-moving traffic.
- People believe that there is nothing new that can be done and there is no point in trying. This kind of thinking is defined as “learned helplessness.”



Fig. 7-15.

Fortunately, old habits can be broken if new and better habits are learned.

Being proactive means:

- Human beings are responsible for their own lives, and behavior is a function of decisions, not conditions.
- People can learn to have the initiative and the responsibility to change how they react to stressful situations.
- People have the freedom to choose a new and entirely different response for every situation that occurs.
- People can get “out of the rut” by finding new ways to deal with the same old stressful situations. Every stressful situation can become a chance to develop new and creative ways to solve problems.

As with everything else, people learn a strategy to use for coping with stress, and they then rely on that strategy every time they encounter a stressful situation. The strategies most people use for coping with stressful situations usually involve negative coping skills.

Most stress is unchangeable. The way people cope with stress is not!

Positive coping skills include the following:

- Give yourself credit for strengths and accomplishments.
- Plan ahead.
- Think before you act.
- Stop procrastinating.
- Be flexible.
- Get up earlier.
- Strive for excellence and not perfection.
- Set priorities.
- Visualize winning.
- Do not know all the answers.
- Set clear goals and meet them.
- Talk less and listen more.
- Avoid negative people.
- Stop negative “self-talk.”
- Think positive thoughts.
- Keep your funny-side up—laugh!
- Manage your time efficiently.
- Take a walk.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Watch a funny movie.
- Breathe deeply and slowly.
- Build a support group of friends.
- Take a bubble bath.
- Keep a journal.
- Be optimistic.
- Praise others.
- Plant flowers.
- Believe in yourself.
- Buy flowers for someone you love.
- Look at problems as challenges.
- Do stretching exercises.
- Learn a new joke.
- Listen to a relaxation tape.
- Share a smile.
- Walk in the rain.
- Ask a friend for a hug.
- Say “no” more often.
- Say “hello” to a stranger.

- Schedule play time.
- Know your limits; accept others’ limits.
- Change what you can; accept what you cannot change.
- Develop good relationships.
- Get a massage.
- Learn to play.
- Eat healthy.
- Call a friend for lunch/dinner.
- Consume less caffeine and alcohol.
- Exercise regularly.
- Stop smoking.
- Remember that stress is an attitude.
- Throw a paper airplane.
- Take up a new hobby.
- Give someone a compliment.
- Look at the stars.
- Pet a dog or a cat.
- Go fly a kite.

Can you think of any others?

You can turn to any of the following for help in managing stress:

- your supervisor or another member of the care team (for work-related stress)
- your family
- your friends
- your place of worship
- your physician
- a local mental health agency
- any phone hotline that deals with related problems (check your local yellow pages)



Fig. 7-16. Talking with friends can help relieve stress.

Remember, however, that unless you're talking to a member of the care team, you must keep the client's or resident's information confidential.

It is not appropriate to turn to your clients, residents or their family members to help you manage personal or job-related stress.

Stress cannot be avoided, nor can it be prevented. But by learning coping skills, you will be able to reduce the stress in your life and handle stress much more effectively. This can have a very positive impact on your life.