

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Support And Family Education



Session Twelve – Skills for Managing Stress Effectively as a Family Member

Materials Needed:

Handout V: My Coping Skills Toolbox

Handout W: Everyday Survival and Stress-Busting Kit

“Survival kits”

Brochures on local treatment options for veterans with stress-management difficulties

I. Definition of stress

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Discussion Question: The term *stress* is used loosely in our culture. What does it really mean?

- A. One definition = “physical, mental and emotional reactions that occur as the result of changes in one’s life and demands in life.”
- B. Stressors can be classified in three different categories:
 1. Major life events
 - a. Examples may include divorce, death of a loved one, loss of job, marriage, etc.
 - b. Other events are specific to living with mental illness, such as a hospital admission, suicide attempt, psychotic episode, etc.
 - c. Both seemingly positive and negative events can produce stress. Eustress = “positive stress” and distress = “negative stress.”

2. Daily hassles

- a. Daily hassles can include such events as traffic congestion, parking difficulties, petty arguments, etc.
- b. They can also be specific to living with mental illness, such as struggling with your loved one to maintain appropriate hygiene and grooming, monitoring medication issues, feeling burdened by household responsibilities, etc.
- c. Small hassles can accumulate and result in significant stress.
- d. Sometimes coping with these daily issues can consume more energy than dealing with the major, intermittent problems.

3. Chronic life situations

- a. These include situations such as single parenting, racism, discrimination, major physical health problems, etc.
- b. Because of the long-term nature of mental illness, caring about or living with someone with a mental illness can also be a chronic stressor. Research has found that caring for an ill or disabled spouse has been associated with increased risk of coronary heart disease (Lee, Colditz, Berkamn & Kawachi, 2003), depression, and other physical health problems. Therefore, finding ways of taking care of yourself physically and emotionally is very important!

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Discussion Question: What are greatest sources of stress for you?

II. How you experience stress

Activity: List on the board the following four major categories, and ask participants to discuss these common manifestations of stress:

- A. Physical: Chemicals are released by glands in the brain when stress occurs, often resulting in the following symptoms:

Headaches, changes in sleep, indigestion, neck/shoulder tension, sweaty palms, increased risk for becoming physically ill, increased blood pressure, rapid heart rate, rapid respiration, heavy perspiration, dilation of pupils, slowing of digestion, feeling a rush of strength, etc.

- B. Emotional: Stress takes an additional toll on human beings, which can be evident in changes in emotional states:

Irritability, impatience, yelling, being jumpy, inability to concentrate, feeling on edge, loneliness, feeling isolated

- C. Behavioral: Behaviors may also change when a person is under stress. People tend to be more:

Demanding, controlling, impatient, overly critical, prone to procrastination, withdrawn, likely to engage in overeating or abuse of alcohol (or other addictive behaviors), etc. than they would normally be.

- D. Cognitive: Although the connection may not be readily apparent, a person's thinking may also change when experiencing a great deal of stress. Individuals tend to be more:

Forgetful, distractible, mistake-prone, unable to remember things, serious (loss of humor or creativity), etc.

III. Vulnerability to stress

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Discussion Questions:

- How vulnerable are you to stress?
 - When do you feel more vulnerable to being overwhelmed by stress?
- A. All people have times when they are more vulnerable to stress, such as when they are physically ill or tired, have had a long day, experience extended periods of bad weather, etc.
- B. Chronic conditions (e.g., chronic pain, inadequate social support, family problems, etc.) can make people more “on edge” than usual and more likely to feel stress.
- C. Poor health habits and choices (e.g., getting insufficient sleep, drinking too much caffeine, abusing alcohol or illicit drugs, having poor nutrition, not getting regular exercise) can also make people more vulnerable to stress.
- D. People can do preventive maintenance (just as with a car) to be more resilient to the stress that is an inevitable part of life.

IV. Skills for managing stress effectively

Activity: Brainstorm and write on the board various coping skills.

Examples: Writing or journaling, engaging in crafts or hobbies, exercising, crying, talking to trusted friend or family member, doing spiritual practices (prayer, meditation), etc.

Distribute Handout V: My Coping Skills Toolbox. Have each participant list five existing tools and five new tools he/she plans to try.

Activity: Teach progressive muscle relaxation exercise, and practice in session. Discuss the importance of regular practice of skill for it to be effective.

Activity: Teach breathing exercise.

1. ***Breathe in to count of eight – slowly breathe out to count of eight. Repeat several times.***
2. ***Discuss the importance of regular practice of skill for it to be effective.***

Distribute Handout W: Everyday Survival and Stress-busting Kit and have participants read aloud what each item represents.

V. Local treatment options for stress management

Example: Oklahoma City VA Medical Center

- A. Anxiety/stress-management skills class – this eight-session class addresses both the cognitive (e.g., self-talk, mistaken beliefs) and behavioral (e.g., relaxation, imagery) components of anxiety.
- B. Biofeedback program – this treatment option involves providing immediate feedback on several bodily functions, with the goal of enhancing one’s ability to exert control over these processes and to relax.
- C. Coping skills/crisis intervention groups – the Crisis Intervention Program provides daily group therapy sessions for veterans who are psychiatrically stable but are experiencing a distressing major life event (e.g., divorce, loss of job).