

Well-Youth!

MODULE 1

UNDERSTANDING STRESS AND COPING MECHANISMS

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TOPIC 1. INTRODUCTION TO STRESS AND ITS IMPACT

Stress is a complex state of mind and body that results under demanding circumstances. According to Taylor (2015), stress is "a negative emotional experience accompanied by predictable biochemical, physiological, cognitive, and behavioral changes that are directed either toward altering the stressful event or accommodating to its effects".

In other words, stress is our body's natural response to a challenge or threat. It can be caused by a variety of factors, including work, relationships, money, and health problems.

When we experience stress, our bodies release hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones prepare us to fight or flight. They increase our heart rate, breathing rate, and blood pressure. They also divert blood flow away from our digestive system and towards our muscles.

While stress can be helpful in some situations, such as when it helps us meet a deadline, chronic stress can have a negative impact on our physical and mental health.

In the following text, we will discuss the causes and effects of stress, and we will explore some healthy ways to manage stress.

A stressor is "anything in the outside world that knocks you out of homeostatic balance, and the stress response is what your body does to reestablish homeostasis [...]. a stressor can also be the anticipation of that happening" (Sapolsky, 2004).

Homeostasis is a state of balance in the body. When a stressor disrupts this balance, our body goes into fight-or-flight mode to try to re-establish it. This can be caused by physical threats, but also by anticipated threats.

In other words, anything that makes you feel overwhelmed, stressed, or anxious can be a stressor. Stressors can be:

- Physical, such as illness, injury, or pain
- Emotional, such as job loss, relationship problems, or financial difficulties
- Psychological, such as worry, self-doubt, or negative thinking

Even positive events can be stressors, such as getting married, having a baby, or getting a new job. This is because they require us to adapt to change.

Negative events: These are events that we perceive as threats or challenges, such as illness, injury, loss of a loved one, or financial problems.

Uncontrollable events: These are events that are outside of our control, such as natural disasters, job loss, or economic downturns.

Ambiguous events: These are events that are uncertain or unpredictable, such as a new job, moving to a new home, or starting a new relationship.



Overload: This can be caused by having too much to do, not having enough time to do it all, or feeling like you are constantly under pressure.

Stressful life events: These are major life changes that can be stressful, even if they are positive events, such as getting married, having a baby, or graduating from school.

Early experiences with stress can have lasting consequences. Chronic stress, when our bodies are constantly on high alert, can negatively impact our physical and mental health. It can also increase our risk of adopting unhealthy coping mechanisms.

Stress can alter brain development in ways that make dealing with future stress more difficult. Chronic stress can also weaken our immune system, leaving us more susceptible to illness.

People who experience chronic stress as children are more likely to develop mental health problems like anxiety and depression later in life.

When we experience stress, our bodies release hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones prepare us to fight or flight by increasing our heart rate, breathing rate, and blood pressure. They also divert blood flow away from our digestive system and towards our muscles.

Chronic stress can lead to a number of physiological and psychological problems, including:

- Increased blood pressure
- Decreased immune system function
- Changes in cholesterol and lipid levels
- Increased hormonal activity
- Psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, stomachaches, and muscle tension
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Difficulty sleeping
- Lower self-esteem
- Social withdrawal

Our next topic is types of stress and types of stressors!

TOPIC 2 . TYPES OF STRESSORS

Acute stress is a short-term physiological response to a sudden challenge or threat. It's our body's natural fight-or-flight response, which helps us to cope with immediate danger.

- Acute stress can be caused by a variety of events, such as:
- Deadlines
- Public speaking
- Arguments
- Traffic jams



- Injury
- Illness

While acute stress can be unpleasant, it can also be motivating. It can help us to focus our attention and energy on the task at hand.

Chronic stress is long-term stress that you can't seem to shake. It's often caused by ongoing problems in our lives, such as work pressure, financial difficulties, relationship problems, or health problems.

Unlike acute stress, which is short-lived, chronic stress can last for weeks, months, or even years. This constant state of stress can have serious negative effects on our physical and mental health.

Episodic acute stress is a pattern of experiencing acute stress repeatedly, often due to ongoing demands or pressures. Unlike chronic stress, episodic acute stress is not constant, but these frequent stressful events can add up and take a toll on our well-being over time.

For instance, if you have a job with a lot of deadlines, or you're a student juggling multiple exams, you might experience episodic acute stress. While each stressor may only cause short-term stress, the repeated nature of these challenges can lead to negative consequences for our physical and mental health.

Eustress is a term used to describe positive stress, or stress that can be beneficial. It is caused by challenges that we find exciting or stimulating, rather than threatening or overwhelming.

Eustress can help us to feel motivated, engaged, and focused. It can also help us to learn and grow. For example, the stress of training for a race can motivate us to push ourselves and reach our goals. Or, the stress of starting a new business can help us to be creative and innovative.

The key to differentiating between eustress and negative stress is perception. If the stress is helping you to feel motivated and engaged, it is likely eustress. However, if the stress is making you feel overwhelmed or anxious, it is likely negative stress.

As we discussed in the previous unit, homeostasis is a state of balance in the body. When a stressor disrupts this balance, our body goes into fight-or-flight mode to try to re-establish it. This can be caused by physical threats, but also by anticipated threats.

In other words, anything that makes you feel overwhelmed, stressed, or anxious can be a stressor. Stressors can be:

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Even positive events can be stressors, such as getting married, having a baby, or getting a new job. This is because they require us to adapt to change.



Work overload and tight deadlines can lead to feelings of pressure and anxiety. Unclear expectations can make it difficult to know what is expected of you, which can also be stressful. Lack of control over your work can make you feel like you're not in charge of your own destiny, which can be disempowering.

Feeling undervalued can make it difficult to feel motivated and engaged in your work. A toxic work environment can be one that is hostile, abusive, or discriminatory. This can lead to a great deal of stress.

Poor work-life balance can make it difficult to relax and de-stress outside of work. When you're constantly thinking about work, it can be difficult to enjoy your personal life.

Financial stress can take a toll on your physical and mental health. It can lead to problems such as anxiety, depression, and even physical health problems.

Relationships are a vital part of our lives, but they can also be a source of significant stress. Communication problems can lead to misunderstandings and resentment. Arguments, while normal, can become stressful if not handled constructively. Feeling unsupported by your partner can be a major burden. Infidelity or jealousy can shatter trust and cause immense stress. Caregiving for loved ones, while rewarding, can be emotionally and physically draining. Difficult family members can add unnecessary tension to our lives.

Health-related stress can be caused by a chronic illness, a serious medical diagnosis, pain, mental health problems, or concerns about a loved one's health. These challenges can make it difficult to cope with daily activities, increase anxiety and depression, and lead to changes in sleep patterns. You might also find yourself neglecting other parts of your life due to health concerns.

Change, as the quote says, is inevitable. But growth? That's entirely optional.

Major life changes, even the positive ones, can be a significant source of stress. Getting married, having a baby, moving to a new home, starting a new job - these exciting events can also disrupt our routines, force us to adapt to unfamiliar circumstances, and challenge our sense of security.

Losing a loved one or going through a divorce can be even more emotionally taxing. These experiences can leave us feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and uncertain about the future.

The key is to remember that stress, while normal in these situations, doesn't have to control you.

Our modern world throws a unique set of challenges our way. Information overload is a major culprit. Constant notifications pinging on our devices, the pressure to stay connected on social media 24/7 – it's no wonder we feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information bombarding us every day. This constant influx can make it difficult to focus on what truly matters, leading to decision fatigue and contributing to anxiety and sleep problems.



Our next topic is recognising and managing stress!

TOPIC 3. RECOGNISING AND MANAGING STRESS

Stress is a common part of life. It's the body's natural response to a challenge or threat. While acute stress, like the jolt you get before a presentation, can be helpful in the short term, chronic stress can have a negative impact on our physical and mental health.

The good news is that we can learn to recognize the signs of stress and develop healthy coping mechanisms. In this presentation, we'll explore techniques for identifying stress in our lives and discuss strategies for managing it effectively.

Stress doesn't just manifest in our minds; it has a profound impact on our bodies as well. When we're stressed, our bodies go into fight-or-flight mode, releasing hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. This surge can cause a variety of physical symptoms.

You might experience muscle tension or pain, especially in the neck, shoulders, and back. Headaches, fatigue, and sleep problems are also common signs of stress. Changes in appetite can occur, with some people experiencing increased hunger or cravings, while others lose their appetite altogether.

Upset stomach issues like diarrhea, constipation, or nausea can also be triggered by stress. In some cases, you might experience chest pain, increased heart rate, or difficulty breathing. Feeling sick, dizzy, or faint are other potential signs.

Sudden weight gain or weight loss can be a result of stress-induced changes in eating habits. Sexual problems can also arise due to stress.

It's important to remember that experiencing one or two of these symptoms doesn't necessarily mean you're stressed. However, if you're experiencing several of these symptoms and they're interfering with your daily life, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor. They can help you determine if stress is the culprit and recommend strategies for managing it.

You might find yourself feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or constantly on edge. Irritability, anger, or impatience might become more frequent companions. Feeling down, sad, or even depressed can also be a sign of stress.

Losing interest in activities you once enjoyed is another common emotional consequence of stress. Difficulty concentrating, remembering things, or making decisions can also cloud your thinking. Feeling restless and wired, or conversely, sluggish and fatigued, are both signs that stress is affecting your mood.

Sleep can become disrupted by stress, leading to difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep at night. Some people might sleep more than usual to try and escape their worries. As a way to cope with stress, you might find yourself turning to alcohol or drugs more frequently.



The good news is that stress doesn't have to control us. There are a number of proactive steps we can take to prevent stress from taking hold in the first place. These preventive methods are like building a sturdy defence system against stress.

Maintaining a healthy diet is a great example. Eating nutritious foods provides your body with the energy and resilience it needs to cope with challenges. Regular exercise is another powerful preventive measure. Physical activity is a fantastic stress reliever and mood booster.

Getting enough quality sleep is also crucial for stress prevention. When you're well-rested, you're better equipped to handle the inevitable stressors that come our way.

Imagine you're clutching a stress ball, squeezing it tightly. That feeling of release and tension melting away is exactly what effective acute stress management techniques aim to achieve.

Acute stress, that short-term burst we experience in response to a pressure cooker situation, can be a double-edged sword. While unpleasant, it can also motivate us to rise to the challenge.

While acute stress comes and goes, managing long-term stress requires ongoing methods. These follow-up methods can be like building blocks to a stronger, more stress-resistant you. Consider professional help, support groups, or online communities for encouragement. Remember, healthy habits like exercise, diet, and sleep are your allies. Practice relaxation techniques, cut back on stimulants, and connect with loved ones for support. Don't be afraid to set boundaries and protect your well-being.

One of the preventive methods is called implementation intentions. Feeling overwhelmed by that to-do list? This technique will help you bridge the gap between intention and action.

Imagine you set a goal to exercise more. Implementation intentions take it a step further. You'd identify a specific situation (like feeling stressed after work) and pair it with a pre-planned action (like putting on your gym shoes and heading straight for a 20-minute run). By linking situations to specific behaviours, implementation intentions make it easier to follow through on your goals and reduce stress in the long run.

Another technique you can use is the **ABCDE technique**. Feeling stuck in a cycle of negative thoughts and emotions? The ABCDE technique, developed by Albert Ellis, can help you break free.

A stands for the Adversity - the situation that triggers your stress.

B is your Belief about that situation. Are your thoughts helpful or hurtful?

C represents the Consequences - how your beliefs make you feel and behave.



D is for Disputation - challenge those unhelpful beliefs and replace them with more realistic ones.

E is the Energisation - the positive shift in your emotions and actions when you adopt healthier beliefs.

The ABCDE technique empowers you to take control of your thoughts and break the chain reaction between stressful events and negative reactions. By challenging unhelpful beliefs, you can cultivate a more positive outlook and manage stress more effectively.

Feeling tense? Take a deep breath with respiration for relaxation. This technique focuses on slowing down your breathing to activate your body's natural relaxation response. Find a comfortable position, close your eyes if you like, and focus on slow, deep breaths through your nose and out through your mouth. Feel your belly rise and fall with each breath. With each exhale, imagine releasing tension and stress. Repeat for a few minutes and feel the calm wash over you.

Need a quick way to de-stress? Try the 4-7-8 breathing technique. It's simple and effective. Inhale deeply through your nose for a count of four, hold your breath for a count of seven, and then exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of eight. Repeat this cycle for several minutes. The rhythmic breathing pattern helps to calm your mind and body, promoting relaxation and stress reduction.

Stress may be inevitable, but positive emotions can act as a shield, buffering its impact. Cultivating gratitude, joy, and optimism can boost your resilience and help you cope with challenges more effectively.

Here's a simple exercise called "Three Good Things." Before bed each night, take a few minutes to reflect on three positive things that happened during your day. These can be big wins or small moments of joy. Savour these experiences and let the positive emotions wash over you. By consciously focusing on the good, you can build a stronger emotional foundation to handle stress.

Remember, stress management isn't just about calming down; it's also about building up your emotional strength. So, fill your life with positive experiences and practices like "Three Good Things" to create a buffer against stress and promote overall well-being.

The most powerful protective factor for stress is building strong, meaningful relationships with other people. Our family can protect us from the adversities that we face, and they can provide us with a protective shield against stress.

Our next topic is building resilience!

TOPIC 4. BUILDING RESILIENCE

Life is not always easy, sometimes it throws us lemons. Sometimes they're small setbacks, and sometimes they're major challenges. But what sets some people apart is their ability to bounce back, to adapt, and to keep moving forward. This ability is called resilience.



Resilience isn't about avoiding stress or difficulty; it's about having the tools and resources to navigate them effectively. In this presentation, we'll explore the key factors that contribute to building resilience and discuss strategies to help you develop this powerful quality.

Imagine yourself as a magnificent tree, strong and resilient, weathering any storm. That's the essence of building resilience. An exercise called "The Tree of My Life" can be a powerful tool to cultivate your inner strength. Grab a pen and paper, or find a digital tool if you prefer. Let's grow resilience together!

Setting goals is a fantastic way to build resilience. But let's face it, the path to achieving them isn't always smooth sailing. Here's a goal-setting exercise that incorporates obstacles and the strengths you can leverage to overcome them:

First, you need to define Your goal:

Imagine a mountain you want to climb – that's your goal. Be specific and write it down. What do you want to achieve?

Next, identify the steps:

Visualise a path leading up the mountain. These are the steps you'll take to reach your goal. Break down your goal into smaller, achievable milestones. Write down each step on your path.

Now you need to anticipate possible obstacles:

Mountains can be treacherous. As you map your steps, consider the potential obstacles you might encounter for each step. Maybe it's a lack of time, self-doubt, or a lack of resources. Write down these potential hurdles next to each step.

Next, identify your strengths:

But mountains also reveal hidden valleys of strength. Now, for each obstacle, identify the inner strength you possess that can help you overcome it. Maybe it's your perseverance, your resourcefulness, or your ability to learn from setbacks. Write down these strengths next to their corresponding obstacles.

By completing this exercise, you're essentially creating a roadmap to your goals, equipped with the tools to navigate any obstacles along the way. Remember, resilience isn't about avoiding challenges; it's about having the self-awareness and strength to overcome them.



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