

Behavior module

16-WEEK CURRICULUM

MANAGING STRESS

Are you feeling stressed out? Stress is a reaction to the demands of life. It can be caused by negative events, like illness, divorce or losing a job; positive events, like a wedding, birth of a child, or a new job; or the inconveniences of daily living, like losing the keys, being stuck in traffic, or having an argument.

How you perceive and deal with stress can impact your weight loss efforts. Overeating is a common reaction to stress. Although it may take away some of the stressful feelings temporarily, the weight gain that results from overeating can, itself, cause more stress.

People tolerate and react to stress differently, so what is stressful to you may not be stressful to someone else. Stress can affect a person's emotions, behaviors and physical well-being. Some of the physical signs of stress include a rapid pulse; pounding heart; tight facial, neck or shoulder muscles; headache or stomach ache; indigestion; and interrupted sleep.

Stress can cause anxiety, sadness, anger, forgetfulness and loss of concentration. It can also lead to overeating, drinking or smoking; increased temper; and decreased motivation and productivity.

Not all stress in life is bad. Some stress can help stimulate growth, change or creativity. But if it interferes with your ability to function, then it needs to be managed more effectively.

Steps to De-stress

If you feel overwhelmed by all you need to get done in the day, take these steps to help you de-stress:

Organize Your Day

Make a daily "To Do" list.

Set Priorities

Order your daily tasks, with the most important at the top of the list. Do these tasks first and work your way down the list, as time allows.

Delegate Responsibilities

Ask family members, colleagues or friends for their help.

Make Time for You

Plan some "downtime" so you can take a break from a stressful situation. For example, go for a walk, read a book, or relax in a warm bath or whirlpool.

Activity: Dealing with Stress

The stress reaction refers to how we respond or react to stress. Each of us responds differently to stress. Review the following list and identify how often you experience each item in response to stress.

(0 = never; 1 = sometimes; 2 = always)

I notice the following physical responses to stress:

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
| Headache | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Change in appetite | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Fatigue | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Interrupted sleep | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Indigestion | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Lower back pain | 0 | 1 | 2 |

I notice the following psychological responses to stress:

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|
| Sadness or depression | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Difficulty concentrating | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Feeling inadequate | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Feeling emotionally drained | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Forgetful | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Anxious | 0 | 1 | 2 |

In my behavior, I notice:

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Decreased productivity | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Increased irritability and anger | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Increased eating and snacking | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Increased smoking and/or drinking | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Desire not to be bothered by others | 0 | 1 | 2 |

Activity: Identify your Stress

To effectively manage stress, you first need to know what causes stress in your life and how you typically respond to it. Then you can identify ways to reduce or control the stress.

List the events or situations in your life that are sources of stress. Consider work, finances, health and weight, personal events or milestones, and daily hassles.

List the ways you respond to stress. Include your physical and emotional reactions and any changes in your behavior.

Identify strategies to help reduce or manage the stress in your life, and write them below. Consider the suggestions and techniques described below and in the *Positive Self-Affirmations* module.

Now that you know your major sources of stress and how you respond to too much stress, you can learn to manage it more effectively. Having an awareness of your personal coping methods, and a willingness to change your personal coping methods and a willingness to change ineffective or harmful ones are the most important keys to success. Steps to de-stress and relieve tension, listed on the following page, will help you identify alternative strategies for coping.

Techniques to Relieve Tension

When you know that a stress-filled situation is not going away soon, try some of these techniques to help relieve tension.

Use deep breathing

This technique will help you better manage your body's physical reaction to stress by slowing down rapid breathing.

- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Inhale slowly through your nose.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth.
- Repeat several times, until you feel relaxed.

Visual imagery

This technique brings a peaceful image to mind to help relieve tension.

- Take a couple of deep breaths, as above.
- Close your eyes and picture a scene that is relaxing to you, like watching a beautiful sunset or listening to the ocean waves as they break on the shore. Spend a few minutes imagining your scene, taking in the sights, sounds or smells that make it so peaceful.
- Take a couple more deep breaths, then open your eyes. You'll find yourself in a more relaxed state of mind.

Exercise

It's a great way to reduce stress and burn calories, too. For example, take a walk, ride a bike, dance, or work in the garden.

Think positive

Negative self-talk and setting unrealistic standards can add unnecessary stress to your life. To learn how to change weight-related negative beliefs into positive ones, refer to the *Positive Self-Affirmations* module.

Express your feelings

Sharing your feelings in an honest and fair way or writing your thoughts in a journal can improve your mood and help reduce stress.

Eat wisely

If you feel like you have to eat something when stressed, choose foods that will not hurt your weight-loss efforts. For example, try carrot or celery sticks, an apple or sugarless gum.

Meditation

Relaxation is another way to cope with stress. The oldest relaxation technique is meditation. Follow the steps noted below to learn how to meditate. Try this technique once a day for the next two weeks.

- Find a quiet place free from distraction and clutter. (Try not to eat or drink caffeine containing beverages an hour before meditating.)
- Select a 'mantra' (e.g. a word, phrase, syllable such as 'in' 'one' or 'um').
- Select a comfortable position (e.g. lie on your back, sit comfortably in a favorite chair).
- Relax your muscles. (Tighten different muscle groups for 10 seconds; then release.)
- Breathe deeply through your nose. (As you breathe out, silently repeat your mantra to yourself.)

Maintain a passive attitude

If distracting or competing thoughts occur, disregard them and let them pass.