

OVERCOMING STRESS

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This presentation will focus our attention on the topic of overcoming stress. After a brief review of our knowledge about stress, we will talk about some of the stressors that each of us face. We will conclude with some basic strategies for helping you to deal and overcome the stress in your lives.

STRESS

What do we know about stress in our society? Let's begin with some of the facts regarding the impact of stress on our lives. Stress is a major issue for just about everyone. It's a huge issue in the workplace. Almost 17 billion dollars a year is spent in loss of productivity due to stress alone.

A survey of workers shows that 80% said that they needed help in managing the stress that they experience at their job. And they would like more information about how to do that-- yet only 37% of companies offer any kind of stress management program regularly. In addition, 24% of our population says that reducing stress is their main concern for health.

What are some of our myths and misunderstandings that people have about stress? How should we deal with stress? Let's start by taking a simple true or false quiz.

- Stress is the same for everyone.

This statement is false. Your version of stress is probably different than mine. The specific stressors that impact you are probably different than the stressors that impact me.

- Stress is always bad for you.

False again. Stress is not always bad. Stress can be energizing. There is an optimum level of stress, which can help us to do better jobs in our lives.

- Stress is everywhere so you can't do anything about it.

False. Stress is not in every aspect of our lives. You CAN do something about stress.

- The most popular techniques for controlling stress are the best ones.

Many people use a variety of techniques to control stress. They believe that drinking, smoking, or excessive exercise will reduce stress. Yet most of these techniques do not work.

- Only major symptoms of stress require a your attention.

Wrong again. If you don't resolve minor stressors in your life, they may build and lead to major issues.

Given these misconceptions, it is evident that we need to talk about stress-- its symptoms and how to can deal with it.

Most theories describe stress as a bio-behavioral model. Stress has both a psychological component and a biological or physical component. Certainly we have all experienced some of the physical symptoms of stress at one point or another in our lives-- anxiety, fatigue, perhaps high blood pressure. We have also probably experienced pretty significant psychological symptoms as a result of stress.

For some people, stress results when they face external demands and excessive pressure in their lives. For others, stress is more a function of internal demands and pressures. In either case, persons feel stressed when these external or internal demands exceed their ability to cope.

What are common examples of external demands and stressors? Each of you can identify what is most problematic for you. Think about demands at work, traffic or shopping at holiday times. For individuals with hearing loss, environmental noise is especially relevant. Setting up our environment and using assistive technologies is also unique to those with hearing loss. Internal stressors include aging, illness, personal expectations, personal goals, and other pressures over which we have no control. We all face these stressors.

We differ in how well we react well to these internal or external stressors. Our reaction may vary at different times in your life on different issues. Most people talk about stress in terms of the concept of resiliency. Resiliency. What it really means is: how well can you cope? Do you have the coping skills to manage this balance between the stressors that are out there and your reaction to them?

Lets look at types of stressors in more detail. There are four primary categories of stressors. The first category is anticipatory stressors. Those are the things that you worry about--that you think it's going to happen. You think something's going to happen in your life and you worry about it, and you get stressed about it long before it happens.

At one time, I worked with a person who had difficulty traveling, flying on airplanes. She would experience significant anxiety and anticipatory stress as prepared for plane travel. She would report excessive stress as she started to approach the airport. By the time we turned off the freeway into the parking lot, her stress level increased to the point that she was very stressed. The closer she got to event, the more stressed she got because she was anticipating all the negative things that would happen.

A second category of stress is encounter stressors. These are situations that you encounter, and usually involve people. Sometimes they're in your family relationships. Sometimes they are with your friends; sometimes they are in your work.

Time is the third category of stressor. Too much to do, not enough time to do it. Too many deadlines, not enough time to get the work done. Time, whether you don't have enough or whether you have too much. What do you do with your time if you don't have anything to do?

And finally, many stressors are situational. That is they are specific reactions to a specific situation.

How do we react to stress? Many people react physiologically with an upset stomach, headache, or insomnia. Others experience high blood pressure and fatigue.

Psychologically, how do we deal with stress? We may use denial—telling ourselves there is nothing wrong. Anger may come into play, or we may seek to control our stress by zoning out with fun activities. We may become depressed or begin to overeat.

If we want to be resilient, what do we do? Well, we can become more resilient by changing our physical reactions to stressors. We monitor the physical, things we do. We can give ourselves new coping strategies based on changing our psychological reactions to that stress. We can work on our social relationships.

Overcoming Stress

To manage stress, you can eliminate the stressors. Alternatively, you can develop some strategies to increase your resiliency when dealing with stress. And the way you do that primarily is you learn ways to cope better.

If you only eliminate the stressors, you have a nice permanent change in your life situation. If you are only reactive, you try to deal with stressors as they arise. Unfortunately, it takes a real long time to do that and, unfortunately, it's probably impossible to do that. We said already that everybody experiences some degree of stress. So it's really hard to eliminate all the stressors in your life. But you can work on them. You can eliminate some of them, but not all of them. For many individuals, it is more preferable to develop resilient strategies. Thus, you have a long-term effect; you are taking a proactive strategy.

PARTICIPANT: I don't know how to word this, but how do you become aware that you can do this, that you have choices. Coping short-term, you find a book or something that works for a day or two.

How do you know that you are experiencing stress or things that you want to change? First you have to realize it's happening, and then you systematically work on those.

PARTICIPANT: The question is, how do I know inside that I can do it? How do I know there is resiliency? When I'm going through the stress, especially since this -- since the hearing loss got worse, my self-image and my self-confidence has done down the toilet.

How do you know that you can control stressors and do all these things? Well, the research literature is clear on that. You know that by learning how to do it. If you learn

how to use these strategies, by using the strategies you develop the confidence and it becomes easier to do each time you need it. There is good data that shows that.

PARTICIPANT: I'm not sure I understand the difference between developing resiliency and learning coping strategies -- and developing coping strategies.

Coping strategies give you the ability to have better resiliency. But there is also a biological component that you may not be able to change. So it's an interaction of the two.

I think this is the concept that you just asked about. Reasonable mastery. In other words, learning to cope requires that you be well prepared. You have to learn; you have to practice using strategies that work for you, and as you go along you become more resilient.

What are effective management strategies, ones that increase resiliency?

Let's begin with what I call *Mom's Good Rules For Better Behavior*.

- Exercise regularly. The healthier you are the more resiliency you are going to have in dealing with stress. It gives you better biological resiliency.
- Eat right. What does this mean? To my mom it means getting up and having a good breakfast. It would mean selecting appropriate healthy foods and not eating at McDonald's and Taco bell and all the places I go to. So eat right. That will give you better biological resiliency.
- Get enough sleep. If you're rested, properly rested, you have more resiliency.
- Don't overuse intoxicants. Many people drink or use other drugs to cope with stress. Is that a good strategy in the long run for you? No. And if you overuse intoxicants, that doesn't help you deal with the stressors. So it doesn't increase your resiliency at all.
- Don't smoke. Smoking increases arousal level. That heightens stress. It doesn't reduce it at all.

Let's discuss additional, more active strategies.

- Take a break. How many people remember to make breaks? Some cultures have a whole afternoon built around that concept. You have to take breaks. You have to give yourselves time to deal with the stuff that is building up.

PARTICIPANT: I found that my coworkers take breaks and their stress goes down, but when I take a break, stress goes up, because I have to communicate during that time with people. So sometimes it's worse to take that break, for me, than it is for them.

Okay. In his situation, when his coworkers take breaks, their stress goes down. But breaks are hard for many persons, especially if you try to communicate with co-workers during the break. So taking a break is probably not the best strategy for you in the office.

- Make a concern list. If we think about the things that bother us, sometimes if you just write those out, you realize they are not that critical. Listing our concerns also gives you the opportunity to systematically address concerns that are stressful to you

Some folks may write these things down, or you might, as I do, have a friend that you can talk to about your concerns. Instead of writing it down, you sit down with your friend and talk it out. Good, excellent strategy. That is engaging that social support that we all need. Another way is to keep a journal and you go back and look at what you used to worry about. Journals really help. You get better identifying the stuff that is really a problem for you.

- Prioritize your values. What do I mean by that? This directly relates to concerns. What are the things that are really important to you? Those are the things that you probably ought to be getting stressed about. Things that are really important to you or values that you have, you know, are really key to you, those are the bottom line—the soul of you. And that's the stuff that if it does get violated, you probably should be stressed about.

Does that make sense? Do you see what I'm trying to say? Come up with your values. Prioritize them. If you value is your family, then you focus on resolving family related stress before you address other aspects of your life.

- Money matters needn't be distasteful. Spending money is one of the key stressors that most people in our society talk about. I think I read data that suggested that a huge percentage of divorces in our country are related to the management of money. Most everybody I know worries about money at some point in time.
- We also need to look at your relationships and your commitments to other people. A major stressor for lots of folks is the quality of their relationships to others. If you examine those in terms of how they bother you and what you can do to work on those, that's a good way to reduce stress in your life.

I know this sounds like mom's good rules again, but it's true. For most of the folks in this room, where do those relationships get really strained? Most likely they are related to hearing and miscommunication. How do we deal with that? Sometimes, pretty well; other times, not as good. What is the best way to deal with that, though?

To work on the communication is one way. If something is bothering you in your relationship, it only gets worse if you don't work on it. Now, that's easier said than done. But it's only worse if you don't work on it.

PARTICIPANT: When most of your socialization is with hearing people in the hearing world and your hearing is deteriorating, you find your socialization with the hearing world is deteriorating at the same pace. And what do you do about it?

A lot of people end up isolated and not happy. But you need to be honest in telling people that your hearing is deteriorating. Telling them that you don't want to lose them as a friend. Easier said than done.

PARTICIPANT: Humor. The reason angels can fly is they take themselves lightly?

Great quote. Humor is good. And the reason they can fly is they take themselves lightly.

PARTICIPANT: In response to what he said, you may discover that you may find a different set of friends when your hearing goes down.

You may need to change your social relationship, find new friends, and make some new friends. I bet a bunch of people in this room had that experience here, right? My experience with ALDA is it's a good family and it's a lot of people supporting each other.

- Career, life and financial planning. Those are key issues that stress a lot of folks. And they are things that a lot of people are not very good at trying to plan. Do you plan your work career? Most people have three changes in their career in their life. Three career changes. That is the average. So you have to plan. And maybe you can't always plan. Your abilities change, due to hearing, or the work force changes. So you have to change with it. You have to plan that in some way.

Life plan: what are your goals? What are those concerns and priorities and how can you work toward them?

Financial planning: you talk about that as you grow older and you are planning for retirement or old age.

But most of all we need to talk out our problems-- don't stop, and don't just clam up. And not only in your personal relationships with families, there are work relationships also. Here too we cannot just clam up—though I am sure we have all done so at one time or another. Most of us would agree that never discussing problems with others is not an effective way to deal with stress.

PARTICIPANT: Sometimes working in situations I've had supervisors, and if you say we have a problem here, you know, they go on the defensive by becoming very defensive. They don't want to listen to any 50/50 kind of exchange.

Supervisors are not always willing to listen when you bring up problems. Good supervisors try to listen. But it's not always 50/50. You're right. True. But it usually does help to at least bring them up.

- Relationships; caring attachments, require continuous communication. Using whatever strategies you have to use, if that means sitting down and writing notes back and forth, that's what you've got to do. If that means getting the latest and greatest technology, that's what you should try to do.
 - Do things you enjoy. Take time from your busy day to do stuff you enjoy. It can just be reading a book or dreaming of owning a sailboat, but take the time to do that.
 - Be your own best friend. If you are your own best friend, what does that mean? It means you support yourself and think about what are the issues that you deal with, and ask yourself what are the things that are stressing me? And you try to work with that.
1. If you need help, professional help for dealing with life stressor, get it. Okay? A lot of folks are afraid to do that. It's really—oh, it's admitting I have a problem, maybe a problem you don't understand. Get help. There is nothing wrong with seeking and going for professional help. Many people, you know, avoid that like the plague. And you get more and more stressed. You see them develop poor coping strategies. You see them isolating themselves more. All the negative things, to the point that they don't have a clue of what to do to get out of that hole, and then they have to have professional help. If you think you need it, go get it. Don't wait. It's not a big deal.

PARTICIPANT: I heard a statistic that half the professional helpers out there are incompetent. How do you find somebody that is good?

That's an excellent question. Where do you look? Where do you start?

Our friends are one place to start. Word of mouth helps you find somebody better than just opening up the phone book. I would talk to people that you know, that you trust, and I would ask them if they have heard of anybody –a psychologist or a minister or whatever it is the professional person that you want to use, that they would recommend.

PARTICIPANT: It's also real important to be able to find a person appropriate for you. A good marriage counselor may know nothing about hearing loss.

Exactly. Do comparison-shopping. Find out if the person understands your needs and the issues that are stressing you. This is a good way to use your ALDA group or SHHH or National Association of the Deaf. Ask folks with similar experiences to you who they use.

I would also recommend that you go to service agencies that specialize in hearing loss if they are available where you live.

PARTICIPANT: Your physician should be able to refer you to a competent, certified person.

Yes, your physician should be a good source of appropriate referrals. But not all

physicians are equally well-trained, especially with respect to problems you face due to hearing loss. So that's not always the best place. But physicians are certainly a good resource to ask.

PARTICIPANT: Professional societies are another good source. They have members that are located throughout the country.

Look for people that are certified or members of professional organizations. If I wanted to find a psychologist, I'd find a state directory. That wouldn't tell me if they are all good for me, but it's a starting place.

PARTICIPANT: I have dealt with a lot of war stories about professionals. The certification is a good indicator, but you can't base the selection on certification and professional membership. You have to really case out all the variables.

Certification from my perspective is only a starting point. And I probably wouldn't go to somebody who wasn't certified, but I wouldn't use that as the only reason I went, either. I would want the additional information from other folks that know that person. Key information would be knowledge of hearing loss. Many times I'm asked if you should look for a professional who works with culturally deaf folks? I don't have an answer to that one, honestly. I think that people who work with culturally deaf folks are knowledgeable about culturally deaf persons. But they have their own biases about people with other types of hearing loss. These biases may be good or they may be bad. So, I really don't have the answer to that one.

PARTICIPANT: One good source is to ask deaf service centers. These agencies are often employ persons with experience with deaf, hard-of-hearing, or late-deafened individuals

PARTICIPANT: I would prefer persons with experience with deaf individuals even if I couldn't sign. At least they have a better idea of what we're going through because of their experience. And if I needed professional help, I would also look at the financial issue. Could I really afford it? And if I can't afford it, that would be a stress. So I think that would hold people back because they can't afford to seek professional help.

Sometimes you can't afford it, so that's even more stressful. But a lot of times remember insurance will cover those costs. And if you can't go to professionals that way, you should know that there are other agencies are out there that can help you and don't charge. Many ministers are well trained these days as counselors. They can help. It may not be their primary job, but they can help. And there are other professionals out there. Many agencies have sliding scale fees. Therefore, if you can't afford it, they will serve you anyway.

PARTICIPANT: I worked in deaf services agencies before, and we had what we called peer counseling. The peer counselors were not certified, but they're people that have experienced the same thing that is going on. I think that connection is probably better than professional help.

Yes, peer counseling can be an effective strategy. You have someone that has some shared experience with you. They have practical experience that is hard to learn in professional training programs. So yes, peer counselors are very viable. Whether they are ones that work for a formal program or they are from your social support network like ALDA. That's what ALDA is, at one level, support. It's peer counseling.

There are several different ways you can find a peer counselor? It depends on where you live, but I'd start again trying to look at the service delivery network. A lot of independent living programs and rehabilitation programs employ peer counselors. A lot of programs use that strategy. It's good and it's cost effective. I'd just start calling the state service delivery programs. And you could also ask our friends in ALDA or SHHH.

PARTICIPANT: Most states have services in different regions. Even though there may not be an office in your town, you can call and find out where the closest agency is located.

Okay. So look for support, social support, and professional help if you need it. Don't wait. There is no reason to do that. There is nothing negative or pejorative about getting help from the professional community. I understand that is easier said than done, but it's true.

Relaxation Techniques

Let's talk about a couple things quickly that you can do today and practice over time. One of the key strategies that a lot of people use to deal with situational or even broad level stress is they teach themselves to relax.

Do you ever sit down and relax-- where you try to make yourself learn what we call a relaxation response. Rather than define this response, lets practice. There are four key components to a relaxation response. You can try this now. It's simple. There are four components.

Get yourself into a quiet environment.

- Just sit and relax.
- Put yourself in a comfortable position. What is comfortable for you may be different for me. But get yourself in a comfortable position.
- Find a point of focus. And what I mean by that is think about something. Look at something. You don't have to close your eyes. But you need to focus on something.

PARTICIPANT: That's a problem. A lot of times you go to the class or whatever, and they tell you to close your eyes and then you can't read their lips.

I understand. That's a very big problem. That's why I didn't tell you to close your eyes this morning. After you learn the steps, it would be very appropriate for you to close your eyes when you are trying to practice this response, right? But until you have learned the response, you should not close your eyes. You don't have to close your eyes to do this. We teach people to do that because it helps them focus, it helps them find a point of focus. It could be internal. It doesn't have to be external. It doesn't have to be something internal.

- Assume a passive attitude. What is a passive attitude to you?

PARTICIPANT: Soft.

Soft. Yes. That's a good way to describe it. To me, it means to simply relax your body. If you can do that, you have started to learn the relaxation response, that's what we're working for. You should try to practice that response, and most of the literature says you want to practice it between 7 and 20 minutes per day.

PARTICIPANT: It doesn't work. I need more time.

Maybe, but most people can physiologically relax their body in 20 minutes.

PARTICIPANT: If you fall asleep, isn't that good?

Well, it won't hurt. But it also keeps you from going back to the other things that you have to do. So when you teach people to relax, you generally don't want them to go to sleep. Going to sleep will not affect the stressor you are attempting to work on. So, sit down and assume a passive attitude. Go to a quiet place and after you have learned the technique, close your eyes, get some cognitive point of focus, and concentrate on your breathing. Slowly breathe deeply in and out. Every time you breathe out, think about something positive.

I want you to focus in on how you feel while you do this. If your mind wanders a bit, that's okay. Bring yourself back by focusing on breathing in slowly and exhaling slowly. Let's try that for a couple seconds. Everybody give it a try.

Okay. Do you feel a difference in the stress level in your body? Do you feel a difference in any anxiety that you're experiencing? Can you focus in on that slowness of your breath, to where it helps you calm yourself? Anybody feel that? Have you ever done that before? It's very simple.

It's hard to get really good at it. You've got to practice. But if you learn this response, it's a very helpful technique. When I become stressed, I feel my hands and then my whole body becoming tense. When I feel this tension, I consciously practice this relaxation technique.

Let's look at a second relaxation strategy called Progressive muscle relaxation. Many people use this strategy. Some of you said you have used this technique before. We don't have time to practice today, but we will go through it quickly. I'll tell you how you know it's working.

The concept behind this technique is that your body is composed of many muscle groups and you can learn to recognize the stress in each of these groups. Here is the easiest way. We will pick an easy one. Take your hand and hold it out like this. Tense your hand up as much as you can. Feel all that stress. Feel all that tension? Now let it go. Feel the difference. Feel how that muscle changes? Feel how much nicer the relaxed version of your hand is?

Do it again and feel the difference. That change is the response that you want to learn. You can learn to selectively identify this response in different muscle groups in your body. When you feel the stress in these muscle groups, you can relax them. If you use this strategy, it will help you deal with stressors better.

Progressive muscle relaxation, some start at the tip of your toes and work up. Others start at top of your head and work down. Most people go with 12 to 15 muscle groups. But once you are comfortable in recognizing tension in these groups, you can learn to relax them and that will help you deal with stressors.

Because of time limitations, I want to conclude with a Four Minute Relaxation Exercise (Bernd Harmsen, 1996-2000). It takes only 4 minutes and it helps you reduce stress, once you learn to do it.

- Start by putting yourself in a resting position. Hold that position, breathing slowly in and out for 30 seconds.
- Then, you want to begin to work on your hands and your forearms. Feeling the stress and letting it go. You do that progressively, slowly, for 40 seconds.
- Next, work on your feet. Do it slowly for about 40 seconds.
- Focus on the muscles in your face and jaw (40 seconds).
- Finally, focus on the rest of your body, your inside journey (50 seconds). See if you can identify other sources of stressful tension like that.

Obviously, we have just touched the surface of the many techniques that are available to you. Overcoming stress is something that each and every one of us can do. Understanding and identifying stressors and their impact on resiliency is the initial step. Use the simple strategies that we have discussed to empower yourself to overcome stressors that you face. In addition to professional service providers, there are many resources available to you for your individual use. Let me refer you to a number of web resources for additional information.

Web Resources on Stress

- www.thepsych.com/category/fl.htm
- <http://imt.net/~randolfi/StressLinks.html>
- www.chic.org.uk/stress/frame/frame.htm
- <http://stress.jrn.columbia.edu/site/index>
- www.sympatico.ca/cmha.toronto/sindex.htm
- www.psywww.com/mtsite/smpage.html
- www.ivf.com/stress.html

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