

Therapeutic Recreation Protocol: Stress Management

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General Purpose

- **To increase optimism**
- **To facilitate the management of emotional distress**
- **To increase capacity for happiness**
- To improve problem-solving and goal-setting
- To increase perceptions of control
- To increase self-awareness
- To increase self-esteem

Program Description

Participants will learn to better identify their own cues of stress, recognize past coping skills, and identify a number of new methods for coping with stress.

Materials Needed

- Big white board or large paper flip tablet—plan to use several sheets
- Dry-erase markers for whiteboard or markers for flip tablet
- Sensory items that are easily accessible—inexpensive or already in the house. Some suggestions are...
 - **Physical:** Exercise band, hand squeeze ball
 - **Smell:** Lavender soap, **scented oils or candles, spices, hand lotions**
 - **Touch:** **Soft pillow, stuffed animal (representing a pet), a touchstone, a piece of clothing with a soothing texture**
 - **Hearing:** **Music, meditation music, nature sounds**
 - **Sight:** **Photos of calming scenes, color/fabric swatches, screen savers**
 - **Taste:** **Chewing gum, an orange, calming teas**
 - **Spiritual/Intellectual:** **Bible, book of poetry or essays**
- **Small boxes to be decorated**
- **Collage materials of calming images and colors (flowers, sunsets, water, seasonal landscapes, etc) for decorating outside of boxes**
- **Small items or images representing stressors that will fit in the small boxes**
- **Small cards (business card size) on which to write stressors (for higher functioning)**
- **Scissors**
- **Glue sticks**
- **Colored markers**
- **Printed handouts of referenced or related articles, poems, aromatherapy, etc.**

Populations

Targeted primarily at high-functioning participants who will be returning to their homes after rehab, this activity may also be adapted for residents in long-term residential care with higher cognitive function.

Contraindicated Criteria

Participants with limited arm and hand abilities may need assistance.

Cautions

Participants may feel inclined to over-share the details of their stressors. A facilitator needs to recognize when to refer a participant to a more qualified professional such as a staff social worker. Additionally, such participants may derail the effectiveness of the activity and upset others in the group. Encourage participants to discuss their stressors in more detail with other participants after class or with clergy or friends—which is a coping skill in itself.

Therapeutic Recreation Protocol: Stress Management

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Setting Up the Environment

Participants will sit at tables where they can see each other and the facilitator and have access to a surface to create their “stress box.”

Intervention Activity

What is stress? Point to stress? Where does stress exist? Can you control stress? Can you be stressed and not know it?

“The components of anxiety, stress, fear, and anger do not exist independently of you in the world. They simply do not exist in the physical world, even though we talk about them as if they do.” — Wayne Dyer, American Psychologist

“In order to escape the symptoms of <stress>, you must admit to being scared...Assume that whenever you're upset or unhappy, there is fear underneath. There are only two basic fears: One is that you're not worthwhile or good enough...and the other is that you're going to lose control..” — Robert Maurer, *Why Stress Doesn't Exist*, *Men's Health*, May 7, 2003

How can you tell if you (or someone else) is stressed? Draw two crossing lines on an oversized flip tablet to create 4 quadrants and label each quadrant as shown below. Write answers in appropriate quadrant.

Mental Cues

Examples: Bad memory, can't concentrate, racing thoughts, dwelling on negative, can't make simple decisions

Emotional Cues

Examples: Short temper, moodiness, loneliness, general unhappiness, overwhelmed, can't relax

Physical Cues (Can someone show me a physical cue —what might it look like? Have someone demonstrate a clenched jaw, pursed lips, wrinkled forehead,

Examples: Tummy troubles, headaches or other aches, frequent colds or flu, rapid heartbeat or breathing, clenched jaw, tight muscles, pursed lips, wrinkled forehead, skin rashes, “beaten down” or defeated posture, rigid or defensive posture

Behavioral Cues

Examples: Eating too much or too little, sleeping too much or too little, isolating from activities and relationships, neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol or drugs to relax, smoking more (or again), persistent sighing, nervous habits such as nail biting, pacing, excessive tidying, repetitive fidgeting like tapping fingers, loss of self-control such as hitting or throwing objects

What do you do to manage stress now? Do they work? Are they appropriate and constructive? Itemize participants' ideas on flip tablet. Examples may be...

- Breathe.
- Turn away from a situation for a few minutes.
- Tell a joke.
- Hide in the bathroom.
- Go for a walk.
- Stand up and stretch.
- Rub your eyes.

Therapeutic Recreation Protocol: Stress Management

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- Drink heavily.
- Go on drive.
- Curse and swear.
- Throw things.
- Spend time with a pet.
- Talk to a friend.
- Do a crossword puzzle.
- Hum or sing or whistle.
- Read something spiritual or inspirational.
- Pray.
- Meditate.
- Draw or doodle.
- Play a game.
- Go outside.
- Take a shower or bath
- Watch nature—birds, an aquarium, weather, trees, flowers.
- Garden.
- Take time with a pet.
- Ask for what you need.
- Make a list.
- Write in a diary.
- Do a repetitive motion like rubbing a coin in your pocket.
- Get a massage.

Think back to what you did as a child to calm down. Note on flip tablet. Examples may be...

- Did you cling to a blanket or stuffed toy? (tactile)
- Did you get a hug or snuggle from **someone? (tactile)**
- **Did you go outside? (visual, touch, multi-sensory)**
- **Did you make something? Drawing? (physical, intellectual)**
- **Did you play with a pet? (tactile, physical)**
- **Did you lay in the grass and smell the outdoors? (smell, tactile)**
- **Did you eat a cookie? (taste, tactile)**
- **Did you run around or play fast and furious until you felt better? (physical)**
- **Did you sing yourself a song or listen to music? (auditory)**
- **Did you pray? (spiritual)**
- **Did you ask for help? (social)**
- **Did you talk to a sibling, friend, parent, or other adult? (social)**

During times of stress, we sometimes give up some healthy stress-busting habits because “we don’t have the time.” We don’t have time to visit with a potentially helpful friend, or take a calming bath or walk the dog—because we are so busy rushing or overthinking things beyond our control. For example, how many people give up doing their regular exercise during the stressful (and fattening) holiday season? And yet that’s the time we may need to manage stress most. By taking time to manage our stress, we are more productive in the other parts of our life.

Using Senses to De-fuse Stress

Let’s look at the stress management techniques we have come up with. Many of them are sensory. With participants’ input, mark each technique they just brainstormed in a different color to represent touch, smell, sight, hearing, taste, physical/movement, or spiritual/social.

Therapeutic Recreation Protocol: Stress Management

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Let's look for things you can do quickly or in a short period of time, as well as things that may take a bit longer. Think of these as "smoke breaks" minus the cigarettes and a whole lot healthier. It's a pause in your day- or your life—to re-set your mind. You will likely find that you can combine some of these—for instance, combining a calming scent (smell) on a soft pillowcase (tactile).

Physical/Movement

Breathe; stretch with a large rubber band/exercise tube; roll your neck and shoulders; sit up straight and look up—research shows that a confident posture makes a person feel better; roll your wrists and ankles; walk; pretend to box; work out; lift weights; squeeze a stress ball.

Scent/Olfactory

Open up a spice jar—cinnamon or sage; peel an orange; smell flowers or plants—tomato leaves, lilacs, lavender, garden herbs, cut grass. Bake or cook something that fills the house with a comforting scent—apple pie, roast chicken. Wipe something with a cleaning product that has a scent you associate with something good. Use a scented lotion or soap that pleases you. Put a pleasant scent in your pillowcase. Re-create the scent of a comforting person (lavender perfume, Ivory soap, Aqua Velva aftershave). Use calming oils or candles scented with lavender, bergamot, or other calming scents.

Touch/Tactile

Rub a touchstone or coin; sit in the sun; wear a comforting and comfortable fabric; cuddle a stuffed animal or blanket; pet a cat or dog; take a shower or bath; swim or sit in a hot tub.

Sight

Gaze at a picture that brings you peace. Stare at a color that calms you as a meditational exercise. Watch animals or nature—pets, aquariums, backyard birds, weather, trees. Grab some colored pens or pencils and doodle in color. Gaze into the distance letting your vision go fuzzy and mind go blank.

Taste

Chewing gum or sucking on mints or candy. Make a conscious choice and don't grab the first thing at hand. If you associate a sugar cookie with good times during the holidays, have a sugar cookie and eat it slow—imagining yourself as a child eating the cookie. Teas have wonderful scents and flavors—some specifically designed to calm or energize you. Eat a piece of fruit with your hands and enjoy the whole sensory experience—smell, stickiness, texture, temperature and taste. Be present.

Hearing/Auditory

Listen to music. Hum. Sing. Whistle. Play an instrument. Talk with a friend.

Spiritual/Intellectual Options

Meditate. Pray. Create a private ritual for letting go of stress and those things that create stress—especially if you have no or little control. Talk to someone positive on the outside of your situation like a clergyman. See a professional therapist. Read scriptures.

Compartmentalizing and Letting Go of Stress: Using a Worry Box

We are going to box up your stress—your worries. Think of it as a 'dirty laundry chute' for your mind. We are going to make a place where all the things that stress you out are going to reside. This is the receptacle that holds the stuff that overwhelms us and things we can't control.

Therapeutic Recreation Protocol: Stress Management

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Show an example of a worry box and what the outside decoration represents and what is contained on the inside. If you use a personal stress box, be sure not to let the activity devolve into a discussion of your own personal worries.

I don't want to discuss my stressors in depth, but I do want you to see my examples so that you can get the hang of how this works.

On the outside of my box are images and colors that calm me. (Briefly discuss a few of the images. For lower cognitive participants, you can ask them what they see on the outside of the box).

So what goes in the box? Examples might be...

- A penny to symbolize money worries.
- A photo of a woman hiking to represent a troublesome relationship with a friend.
- A photo of eyeglasses to represent worries about vision problems.
- A photo of a non-running, yucky car to represent a neighbor who won't get ride of this eyesore.
- A card with the words "see an attorney to get my personal documents in order."

*How does the box 'work'? Whenever you start to stress out over something that is in the box—your mind is going around and around about it—tell yourself that you have put that stressor away for the moment and you are not going to give it time right now. Later, pull that stressor out of the box and look at it. If you can't do anything about it ever—it is totally beyond your control (like what another person might say or do or not do), then put it back in the box and let the universe take care of it forever or throw it away or draw a big black X through it. Do something to symbolically "throw it out" of your life. If you determine that you have some control over the stressor, write down the very first baby step you need to do to change that stressor. Make it concrete and time sensitive—and think no further than that first step. For instance, in my case, I might write down "call my insurance before Friday at 5PM to find out which knee doctors are on my insurance plan." Put the stressor (photo of knees) back in the box. *In a way, what you are doing is making an appointment with your stress. You are controlling how you interact with your stress rather than it controlling you.**

You could even make another box or an area of your box where you put a few de-stressing "tools" such as a scented oil, an object that you like to look at, or a poem or scripture. The trick is to make it work for you. And because it is only for you, it can be messy or pretty or weird or just practical.

Make a Stress Box

Read the poem and hand out small copies that can be used in or on the boxes.

*Worries are a nuisance.
They rob us of our day.
So tuck your worries in this box
And send them on their way.
For when the time has come,
When you take them out you'll see,
They weren't really quite as bad
As you thought that they would be.
Enjoy each day and know
That they are safely tucked away*

Therapeutic Recreation Protocol: Stress Management

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Within this Worry Box..and soon will go away.

Hand out boxes, photos, markers, symbolic objects that might go inside boxes. Participants decorate and/or fill their boxes.

Closure

Each participant tells one thing about their box. It can be what they put on the outside of their box that calms or uplift them. Or it might be two sentences about something that they put on the inside. *Tell them that what they put on the inside of their box is private so they should only say one or two general sentences if they chose to share about one thing inside their box. Encourage participants to have longer conversations with each other after the activity about what is inside their boxes.*

Distribute supplemental poems and quotes about stress for them to take with them. Read one or two out loud as a final, optimistic send-off.

Extending or Supplementing the Protocol

Managing Stress Keeps Your Life in Balance: Making a Stable Jenga Tower

Create a Jenga tower. The tower represents a stable, healthy state of mind. Label the blocks with a mental, physical, emotional or behavioral cue. Participants extract one block and read the cue. As the blocks are placed on the top of the tower and it becomes more unstable. Point out that if we can recognize these cues and de-fuse them as they arise, then we are not placing stress on top of stress until the tower (our stable, healthy state of mind) topples over completely. Re-stack the Jenga tower, and have participants pull out a block, read the stress cue and suggest a way to de-fuse it. When they suggest a good stress management technique, replace the block where it was and maintain the structure of the tower. This portion of the activity can be short just to illustrate the metaphorical concept of getting overloaded with stress—or it can be expanded and potentially replace the portion of the activity of making “Stress Box.”