Stress Management
For Resilient Living

Laura C. Flynn, Ph.D.
James D. Martin Employee Work/Life Center
The Nature of Stress

• What is Stress?

• Stress is a medical term for a wide range of physiological and psychological stimuli

• “You can’t stop the waves but you can learn to surf”

• Leaning into the difficulty

• Art of Stress Management
Mind/Body Wellness

• “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav’n of Hell and a Hell of Heav’n” – Milton, Paradise Lost
• Descartes: soul (mind) are separate entities
• A reductionistic approach to the body and health
• Nesting and Connectedness
  • well mind, well body
General Adaptation Syndrome

- Selye’s Research in 1936
- 3 stages
- Alarm Reaction: the organism detects the external stimuli
  - adrenaline
  - Muscles tense, heart beats faster, breathing becomes shallow and quick, perspiration increases, eyes dilate, the stomach may clench
- Flight or fight response
- Return to homeostasis
General Adaptation Syndrome

- Adaptation: the body engages defensive countermeasures against the stressor
  - The body’s response to long-term arousal
  - Further secretion of hormones that increase blood sugar levels to sustain energy and raise blood pressure (e.g. Corticosteroids)
  - Over time, prolonged periods in this stage lead to disease of various kinds
    - Without periods of rest and relaxation to counterbalance the stress response, sufferers begin to exhibit fatigue, concentration lapses, irritability
General Adaptation Syndrome

• Exhaustion: the body begins to run out of defenses
  • As prolonged stressors continue, the body enters the exhaustion stage
  • In this stage, the body has run out of energy and immunity
  • The body experiences “adrenal exhaustion” and blood sugar levels decrease as the adrenals become depleted
    • This leads to decreased resilience, progressive mental and physical exhaustion, illness and collapse
    • Damaging “stress hormones”
General Adaptation Syndrome

• Stress and Mental Health
  • Continual stress disrupts the repair cycle
  • Instead of shutting off once the stressor is removed, chronically high cortisol can lead to fatigue and depression
  • Cortisol interferes with serotonin activity

• Stress and Physical Health
  • Chronically high cortisol leads to a suppression of the immune system
    • Increased production of interleukin-6, an immune system messenger

• The Good News
Resilience Theory

• Growth Under Stress: Resilience
• Resilience is one’s innate ability to thrive despite uncontrollable threats to wellbeing
• Growth in response to stress occurs in 3 main domains:
  • Perceptions of self
  • Relationships with others
  • Cognitive approach to life of greater appreciation, seeking, and new priorities
The Continuum of Adjustment

Homeostasis
- Routine
- Low Arousal
- Low need for service
  - Automatic Pilot

Transition
- Moderate Change
- Moderate Arousal
- Moderate need for service
  - Marriage
  - School
  - Occupational

Trauma
- High Change
- High Arousal
- High Need
  - Abuse
  - Crime
  - Disaster
• Research Based Models for Growth Under Stress
  • The Injury Metaphor
  • Risk/Protective model: risk and protective factors interact
  • Enhanced recovery potential: repeated exposure to stressor forces development of internal resources
  • Resilience-Process Model: disruptive events catalyze a reorganization of self and beliefs that facilitate coping with the stressor
    • Successful episodes of disruption and reorganization lead to enhanced internal resources and coping
A Process Model

Homeostasis > Confrontation > Search > Reorganization of Self and Meaning
How Do We Become Resilient?

• Active Reorganization
  • Active attempts to restructure aspects of self, feelings, self-concepts, relationships, and meaning systems

• Transforming the Inner World: Inner Work
  • Moving toward new aspects of self and experience

• 1. Creating New Layers of Self
  • New aspects to oneself that provided wellbeing ⇒
    Madeline: “Breaking down of that person, building it bigger and better . . . That’s when healing, teaching, wisdom comes in, is when you’re pliable like that.”
  • For example: Ethnic Identity, A New Self Role (such as, “I am a Tai Chi student”)

• 2. Solidifying and Developing Resources
  • Acquiring new skills for self-regulation
  • Self-care
  • Social Support, Trusted Advisors
  • Giving Back to Community
"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." ~ World Health Organization, 1948
The Relaxation Response

- Herbert Benson, MD @ Harvard Medical School
- A counterbalancing mechanism to the stress response
- Relaxation Response: physical state of deep rest with changes in physiology and emotions
  - Metabolism decreases
  - Heart beats slower and muscles relax
  - Breathing slows
  - Blood pressure decreases
- Techniques: imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, prayer, mindfulness meditation, exercise, breath focus
Stress Thoughts: How to Diffuse

• Positive Thinking
  • How did we get so stressed?
  • Mind/Body Connection: much of our stress and emotional suffering comes from our mind
    • The way we think about a situation has emotional and physiological consequences

• Cognitive/behavioral Techniques
  • All or Nothing Thinking
    • Black-and-white categories
      • “I didn’t do a great job on the project I was working on. I guess I’m bad at what I do.”
    • Cultivating Shades of Grey
      • “My performance wasn’t the best that it could have been. But there were good aspects that I can be proud of.”
• **Magnification (Catastropizing) or Minimization**
  - You exaggerate the importance of things or shrink things until they appear tiny
  - “My friend is smart, accomplished, attractive. Next to her, I just don’t seem that great.”
  - Removing the Filter!
  - Ask: How would someone else beside me see this?
    - “I am a giving person to my family and many people see me as unique and accomplished.”
Experiential Work

• Progressive Muscle Relaxation

"Diseases of the soul are more dangerous and more numerous than those of the body." – Cicero
Thanks for Attending Our Seminar!
Please be in Attendance for our Next Offering:
Building Self Confidence
May 16, 2006.

Employee Work/Life Center 301.713.9456
Worklife.Center@noaa.gov