

LSE Student Counselling Service

Stress Management Workshop Handout

A. Introduction to Stress

B. Ways of managing stress

Escape...

Physical relaxation through activity

Self care

Time management skills

Build a support network

C. Challenging Negative Thinking

1. Identifying your negative thoughts

2. Changing negative thoughts

What is the evidence?

What alternative views are there?

What is the effect of thinking the way that I do?

What thinking errors am I making?

What action can I take?

3. Positive coping talk

D. Family of Origin and Assertiveness Skills

LSE Student Counselling Service

Stress Management Workshop

A. Introduction to Stress

Study itself is potentially very stressful with many different and sometimes conflicting pressures – reading complex technical or theoretical material, writing assignments for deadlines, working part time, having a ‘successful’ social life, family demands.....perhaps peaking near the exams.....which themselves explicitly test your performance under pressure by setting strict time conditions and removing potential resources such as books, colleagues, notes etc.

Study can also challenge your ideas of who you are, who you think you are or who you want to be, lead you to compare yourself with others, who maybe look like they have everything under control (not always the case by any means).

Any change or transition, even a welcome one is stressful and study involves lots of transitions in addition to other life events: for example, moving to another country, or another part of the country, meeting new people, different expectations from teachers – and each academic year brings changes – different topics, lecturers, perhaps new housemates – changes which should not be underestimated.

B. Ways of managing stress

You probably already have a number of ways of managing stressful situations so some of what follows will be familiar. Or you may know some of the ways in theory, but haven’t ever put them into practice. Here are some examples, but don’t get into the habit of thinking there is a ‘right’ way to manage stress, otherwise you might end up stressing yourself over this as well!

i) Escape...

Sometimes it is helpful to remove yourself physically or mentally from the situation. This is likely to be a temporary rather than a long term solution. Its success depends on genuinely switching off and as a result feeling refreshed eg

A warm scented bath

Guided visualisations eg close your eyes and imagine yourself on a remote tropical island, away from it all

Going for a walk

Going out with friends

Cinema, TV, listening to music

Meditation

A regular ‘escape’ activity can restore some balance into your pressured life

ii) **Physical relaxation through activity**

This can work by releasing pent up energy, boosting confidence, increasing levels of 'feel good' hormones in your system eg

Running, jogging or walking

Yoga or Martial arts eg tai kwondo, tai chi, judo

Dancing

Team sports

Swimming

Progressive muscle relaxation techniques

Importantly, find something you enjoy doing and perhaps persuade someone to join you so you can encourage each other

iii) **Self care**

Helps energy levels as well as self esteem eg

Adequate sleep

Balanced diet

Drinking sufficient water

Monitor caffeine, sugary foods, alcohol, nicotine, recreational drugs

Think about using breathing exercises or spending 10 minutes resting quietly at some points in the day.

iv) **Time management skills**

Much pressure is caused by feeling you have too many demands and too little time – a classic stress equation. How to reduce the demands or increase the time? eg

Prioritise ruthlessly. Cut out anything that is not important but do not cut out all escape and physical activities and do not cut out sleep. These are important! At very pressured times like exams or deadlines it may include cutting down on some social contacts, housework, shopping, cooking for a specific period.

Make lists of essential tasks but keep the list **SHORT** and **PRACTICAL** so you can tick things off easily. No task on your list should take more than 40 minutes to complete – if it does, break it down into smaller sections that will take less time.

Don't expect to concentrate for more than 30 or 40 minutes. For some, and especially if reading a dense text concentration span may be 15-20 minutes. Then take a 5 minute break and move around some.

v) **Build a support network**

In isolation pressures are likely to seem bigger. You are unlikely to be the only one feeling as you do. Find people you can talk to in person, by phone or email. Spending time with other people can be really important as a release. If you also want to use additional resources, consider what else is available through the School, such as Tutors and Supervisors, Teaching and Learning Support, LSE Student Counselling Service, Student Union, Disability Office

C. Challenging Negative Thinking

We all have thoughts continually going round in our heads. Often, these thoughts are so fleeting that we fail to notice that we are even having them. Many of these thoughts are positive, and therefore helpful to us in our lives. However, many are negative and have an adverse affect on us. Our thoughts have a great bearing on how we feel and how we behave. Once we are aware of our thinking patterns, we can work on changing them. First though, we have to learn to identify our negative thinking.

1. Identifying your negative thoughts

Negative thoughts which might make you behave in a way that is not helpful to your well-being have certain features:

They are usually automatic thoughts that seem to come out of nowhere. Often they can flash through your mind without you being aware of them. They seem reasonable at the time, and you accept them without question. They are the kind of thoughts that, if they were true, would make most people feel quite anxious or unhappy.

Next time you feel you feel particularly stressed or anxious, take time to examine what is going through your mind. Are the thoughts or pictures similar to any of the typical negative thoughts that were described above? It may be quite hard to identify your automatic thoughts at first, but it will get easier with practice. Writing your thoughts in a diary may help you get into the habit of doing this.

2. Changing negative thoughts

To help you change your thinking, use the following guidelines to reach more rational thoughts

1. What is the evidence?

What evidence do I have to support my thoughts?

What evidence do I have against them?

2. What alternative views are there?

How would someone else view this situation?

How would I have viewed this situation if I were not so anxious about eating?

3. What is the effect of thinking the way that I do?

Does this way of thinking help me, or hold me back? How?

4. What thinking errors am I making?

A basic factor in how we respond to a situation is the way in which we interpret the situation. Our five senses are capable of taking in much more information than our brains are able to compute, so we need to simplify the information streaming in through our eyes and ears before we can use it. We cut corners and take shortcuts in our thinking to handle the sensory load better.

Doing this means that we are not getting a direct readout on the world, so our thoughts and beliefs about the world are vulnerable to error. When we are stressed or feeling low, our thoughts are particularly prone to distortions or errors.

These Thinking Errors are common – everyone has them to some degree – but they do make us feel worse. The good news is that **by changing our automatic thoughts, we can change our feelings and our energy levels, and improve how we handle the setbacks and stresses in our daily lives.**

Normally, we each have our ‘favourite’ Thinking Errors - that is, a few that we tend to use. Review the list below¹ to identify yours:

1) **All or Nothing Thinking**

If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure: *“I didn’t get top marks in one test – I’m useless.”* All or nothing thinking forms the basis of perfectionism and frequently goes hand in hand with the tendency to see things in black and white – *“I’m completely right, he’s completely wrong.”*

2) **Tunnel Vision**

Seeing only the negative (or the positive) aspects of a situation.

3) **Overgeneralisation**

Expecting that, because something has happened in the past, it always will: *“My partners always leave me, the women I meet are all unfaithful.”*

4) **Jumping to Conclusions**

You make a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support your conclusion. Examples are:

- a) **Mind Reading** - You assume you know what other people are thinking, or that they are reacting negatively to you, without checking your hunches e.g. *“My boss / partner / colleague didn’t say hello – she is mad at me.”*
- b) **Fortune Telling** - You predict that things will turn out badly. Before a very important interview, you may tell yourself, *“I know I’m going to blow it.”* If you are depressed, you may tell yourself, *“I’ll never get better.”*

5) **Catastrophising**

You exaggerate your own problems, imperfections etc and automatically imagine the worse case scenario: *“I made a mistake. Now they’re going to sack me, and I won’t have any money, and I’ll lose my house, and end up on the streets ...”*

6) **Emotional Reasoning**

You take your emotions as evidence for the truth - I feel, therefore it must be true - e.g. *"I feel guilty, therefore I must have done something bad"* or *"I feel anxious, so something bad must be about to happen."*

7) **Should Statements**

You try to motivate yourself with shoulds and shouldn'ts as if you had to be whipped and punished before you could be expected to do anything. 'Musts' and 'Oughts' are also offenders e.g. *"I should do this"* or *"I must do that"* The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct 'should' statements towards others, you feel anger, frustration and resentment e.g. *"He shouldn't be so self-centred and thoughtless"* or *"She ought to be prompt"*

8) **Labelling and Mislabelling**

Instead of describing your effort, you attach a negative label to yourself: *"I'm a failure"* instead of *"I made a mistake"* When other people's behaviour rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label: *"She's lazy"* instead of *"She's too busy."*

9) **Personalisation and Blame**

Personalisation occurs when you hold yourself personally responsible for an event that is not entirely under your control and can lead to guilt, shame and feelings of inadequacy. The opposite is blaming other people or circumstances for your problems without considering ways that you might be contributing to the problem.

10) **Discounting the Positive:**

You shrink your strengths, resources and good points and reject positive experiences by insisting they don't count. For e.g., if you do a good job, you tell yourself that it wasn't good enough, or that anyone could have done as well.

Once you begin to recognize the thinking errors that you tend to make, you can take steps to avoid them. For example, you might check out what you do with a friend; or write down the automatic thought and write out arguments against it underneath. Or you might find it helpful to use the checklist overleaf to challenge any unhelpful thoughts.

5. What action can I take?

- What can I do to change my situation?
- Am I overlooking solutions to problems because I think they won't work?

3. Positive coping talk

After you have learned to identify and challenge your automatic negative thoughts, it can be useful to rewrite them in a more positive realistic language on paper. This can help you become aware of your thought patterns and is also a useful tool to help you change your thinking. Get a large sheet of paper or notepad and write up the following headings across the top:

- SITUATION
- AUTOMATIC THOUGHT/BELIEF (RATE 0-10)
- EVIDENCE FOR
- EVIDENCE AGAINST
- RE-RATE BELIEF (0-10)
- ALTERNATIVE THOUGHT

For example, if you find yourself thinking that you are no good at anything and a failure, rather than continuing with this, you might try to change it to something more balanced and realistic. A different thought would be to say that you are good at many things, and it's OK not to be perfect at everything. By changing your thoughts in this way, you can take some pressure off you, and this may paradoxically make it easier for you to do things that were previously causing you stress and anxiety.

Challenging your negative thoughts in this way over a period of time can make a huge difference to your levels of stress and self esteem. Rather than seeing yourself as a helpless individual with no control over our thoughts, emotions or behaviours, you might find a more balanced approach will allow you to enjoy and value your life more, and also change the way you see other people as well.

D. Family of Origin and Assertiveness Skills

It might be worth looking at a few other issues that may be relevant.

What family-of-origin issues might you be carrying? Are you under pressure to please family members, or trying to prove that you are as good or better than them? How much do you evaluate and think about the value of your own life in your own terms, rather than in response to historic childhood situations.

Developing Assertiveness skills may also be relevant. Look at the quality of your communication skills as well. There's plenty of information available on these and other related issues through <http://www.student.counselling.co.uk/guide.html>. This link can also be found through the website for the LSE Student Counselling Service.

Much of this material is adapted from the Department of Work and Pensions Effective Stress Management Handbook, 1992 and Adaptive Learning Systems, 2003, and various webpages posted on the www.student.counselling.co.uk website.

Prepared by Adam Sandelson, LSE Student Counselling Service, with thanks for assistance from other materials produced by other LSE Counsellors and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Advisor.