

Responding to Stress: Session 1

Script for Recorded Webinar - Fall 2020

Slide 1:

Hello and welcome to **Responding to Stress**. We are glad to have you here with us today. This is brought to you by the Employee Assistance Office at UW Madison.

Slide 2:

Over three sessions, we will focus on identifying, responding to and managing stress. We'll consider the origins of stress, the sensations that you feel related to stress, and differentiate between eustress and distress. We'll also do some skill-building to help you recognize and respond more effectively to the stress you experience. You'll have opportunities in each session to pause, reflect, or interact with the material.

As we get started, take some time to reflect on why you're here. Writing things down may help you to reflect on these questions:

What brought you here?

Why is this topic important to you at this time?

What do you hope to gain from these sessions?

I invite you to pause here for as long as you need to reflect and to write down your answers.

Slide 3: What is stress?

I want to start by talking about what stress is. Stress is your body's response to the world around it. This response may be felt in our bodies, in our feelings or emotions, or in our sense of motivation or activation.

First, the **physiological** (or body) response:

You might be familiar with the concept "fight, flight or freeze" when confronted by an attack or by something that was unexpected or causes you fear. It's our bodies' way of ensuring our safety against threat. It does so by fighting back, by running away, or by freezing, by not moving.

Your body is responding to this threat or possible uncertainty in this way to protect itself. This developed in humans when life was different than it is now: when wild animals may have been more present day-to-day and managing our physiological responses could mean the difference in survival.

Yet our bodies still hold on to this response because it can be effective in life-threatening situations or to signal to us that something is wrong. At the same time, it can be difficult for us to quickly assess whether a threat is in fact life-threatening.

For example, if you see a rope coiled in a dark room, your body might make the assumption that it's a snake – your heart rate might increase, or you may slow your breathing. Or you might run as fast as you can out of the room! Quick responses before you've been able to process all the details of a situation would be life-saving if it were to have been a snake, but it also means you might miss the detail that the rope not a threat at all.

Your body is ready to respond and focuses intently on ensuring your safety at the expense of gathering all the relevant data in a situation. In the workplace, you may be anticipating a difficult conversation with a coworker or supervisor, or worried about a change in your job or expectations. When there is a constant or persistent threat, you may find yourself unable to concentrate, having difficulty remembering things, or feeling disconnected from others. Being in a hyper-aroused state for long periods of time can lead to increased feelings of stress, and continually feeling the need to fight, flee, or freeze. And in a time of heightened anxiety, you may find this readiness to be exhausting or overwhelming.

This leads us to the **feeling** response to stress:

Stress can be felt in many ways. One of the ways stress shows up is through feeling overwhelmed emotionally. This may happen if you're experiencing several emotions at once – you may be feeling sad, scared, or overwhelmed – or may be unable to identify any of the specific feelings you're having. Often when people describe being "frustrated" it's because they're feeling many feelings at once, sometimes even conflicting feelings, and it's too hard to define the feelings they're actually having. This could be a cue that you are experiencing stress.

Another way you might feel your stress response is having one intense emotion that builds up or persists over a long period of time. One example of this may be systemic racism. An impact of being the target of persistent racism could be feeling overwhelmed or unseen, or the other signs of stress we've talked about already. Additionally, you may feel helpless to make this stressor stop or overcome by the intensity of it. When this type of ongoing stress persists, it can also be referred to as chronic stress.

Finally, stress can feel like an **activation**. Activation can be what gets you going, like when a deadline is coming up. It can motivate you to get things done or to feel productive like when you're studying for a test. Or it can motivate you to worry about a tough conversation. Stress can also be the thing that drives you to train for a half marathon or another goal you have. When I ran my first (and only) marathon, the worry about not finishing motivated me to check off all my training runs to be more prepared. I share these examples as a reminder that stress can act in ways that help or support you and ways that deactivate or make things more difficult for you.

Slide 4: How does stress feel?

Now that you know a bit about stress and how you might feel it, take a minute to reflect.

What stressors are you feeling right now, and how does that stress show up for you?

Do you feel it in your body? In your thoughts, or your feelings?

Feel free to pause the session if you'd like to take more time in reflection here or throughout the following section.

The ABCs are a simple way to review and understand your experience of stress: Affect, Behavior or Body, and Cognition. This mnemonic device is easy to remember, and helps you tap into 3 different spheres of how you might experience stress. One aspect may be more dominant for you, but it is a good practice to check in with the other aspects when you're noticing stress in your life to see how it might be impacting you.

First, affect. Affect is just another word for feelings, or the emotional content you experience or bring to a situation. Stress can show up across the range of feelings from feeling blank or empty to feeling angry or irritable, or it can be felt as a general malaise or sadness.

When you are stressed, what do you feel? [PAUSE]

Second, behavior or body. Stress can show up in tightness of your shoulders, or a stomach ache. It can impact your sleep and eating patterns, or lead to difficulty breathing. Many people experience headaches as a result of stress too.

When you are stressed, how does your body show it? [PAUSE]

Third, cognition. This is what you're thinking. Your mind might be so full of thoughts you can't focus, or you may not know what or if you're thinking at all. Some people experience thought loops where you play through a scenario or a sentence over and over, or perseveration which means you can't stop thinking about a certain topic, person, or situation.

When you are stressed, what are you thinking? [PAUSE]

And, a note that these all interplay with one another – this is the foundation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy – that thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all connected and that influencing one area can affect the others. Better understanding these experiences may help you find the places where you have control or can exert control over an aspect of your stress. It reminds me of the serenity prayer, often used in AA: serenity to accept the things you can't change, courage to change the things you can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Reviewing each of these aspects will help you to differentiate what's actually going on for you and why, so you can choose what to influence, change, or give less energy to.

In order to tune into the ABCs, you may need to slow down and connect with yourself. We will next outline two strategies you can use to tune in.

Slide 5: Body Scan

The first tool is a body scan. This mindfulness practice can help you to feel more grounded, to pay attention to your embodied self, and to connect with your breath. We each have different experiences of ourselves, different feelings toward our bodies, and different mobilities and abilities. All are welcome to this experience. I invite you to embrace yourself and your body for what it is at this moment, not what it was or what you want it to be. Join me.

Start by finding a comfortable position.

I invite you to close your eyes, or to soften your gaze. Taking three slow deep breaths.

Once you've settled into this space with your breath, as you are able, I invite you to bring your attention to your toes. Notice how they feel, maybe wiggle or move them to tune into their presence. Continue your deeper breathing as you bring attention to this part of your body. As you breathe out, imagine you are releasing any tension or stress in the area of your body you are focusing on in that moment.

Now continue this process to bring your awareness to each part of your body as you scan up all the way to the top of your head. If you have trouble attending to or are unable to move parts of your body, that's okay – move through your body as you are able, continuing to breathe in focus and breathe out release.

You may return to areas of your body that continue to feel tense or tight. Breathe again with those parts, in and out, further releasing that tension.

Pause the session to spend as much time as you need here.

Finish with three slow, deep breaths, returning your attention to the room, and opening your eyes when you are ready.

Slide 6: Square Breathing

Another activity to help you ground in your experience of stress and to notice what's going on in your body is square breathing.

This is a technique to help you slow down and ground, using just your breath.

It's very straightforward. You breathe in for 4, hold for 4, breathe out for 4, and hold for 4. And you repeat as long as you need to. It's called square breathing because of the 4 phases of this breath, each representing one side of a square, setting you up to start back at the beginning and repeat it again. You may find as you practice that you want to shorten or lengthen one of the sides of the square – that's okay! Personalize the breathing patterns to match your needs. We'll start together with square, even sided breathing.

Breathe with me.

Breathe in 2 3 4

Hold 2 3 4

Breathe out 2 3 4

Hold 2 3 4

Repeat that pattern again.

Pause here to spend more time with this exercise.

Slide 7: Reflection

I encourage you to have a discussion with a friend or a loved one, or even just with yourself. What do you think so far? What are you learning about stress? Does this fit with your experience – with how your body or mind works? If you don't have someone to talk with, maybe take some time to journal to write down your reactions and responses, to reflect on your experiences. How are you feeling, what are you learning?

Slide 8: Commitment to Action

As a final step of this first session, I encourage you to commit to an action. Considering what you've learned, how do you want to be more aware of your stress response this week?

Some ideas may be to practice the body scan or square breathing 5 times this week.

Maybe you want to further that discussion with a friend, partner, or colleague about how you feel stressed.

Maybe you'll make a list of how you physically, emotionally or cognitively have a stress response. Write it down so you can become familiar with these cues and better identify when stress might be increasing for you so you can then take action toward decreasing it.

Take a minute to write down your commitment this week. You might also think of ways to help yourself remember this commitment and apply it throughout the week to build this commitment into a new habit. Consider writing it on a sticky note by your desk, or with a dry erase marker on your bathroom mirror for easy access.

Thanks for joining us for session 1 of Responding to Stress. The next session will explore different types of stress, how stress can be a positive force in your life, and in what ways you can reduce your distress.