

Responding to Stress: Session 2

Script for Recorded Webinar - Fall 2020

Slide 9: Welcome back

Welcome back to session 2 of responding to stress, brought to you by the employee assistance office.

As we get started, I invite you to take a few minutes to write about the commitment to action you made after the last session. What did you learn? Were you able to apply this commitment to action? How did you change? What awareness have you gained in the process?

If you weren't able to complete the commitment, ask yourself what got in the way? Did you increase your awareness of the task? Did you need extra self-care or did the priority of other activities outweigh this new practice? What did you learn about your needs related to changes like this? How might you change your expectations or offer more self-support for next week?

Pause here to take some more time with this reflection.

Slide 10: Calm, Eustress & Distress

We are going to start this session by talking about different types of stress, and how it can actually be beneficial for you at times to be stressed. This is not your typical approach to stress, because we often will put it in the category of only hard or difficult, or that things get worse when I feel stressed. I want to talk a little bit about what it's like to be calm, so to not have any stress in your life, what eustress – or the helpful kind of stress - is, and what distress can lead to. In the next slide we will talk about a model for considering these aspects of stress, as they are interrelated and connected to one another as well.

In what situations do you find you perform the best, or feel you are at your best. What kind of stress are you experiencing then? If you're a musician, you might find that anticipating a performance or a show coming up, you may be motivated to practice more or to use your skills in a new way. The uncertainty, anxiety or stress about that performance can actually inspire you to perform better, practice more consistently or intentionally, and be able to show up well on that performance date.

I want you to think of a time in which you experienced significant personal growth. What kind of stress were you experiencing in that scenario, or at that time? When I look back on the times of my life that I have grown the most, it's been in the context of stress, of navigating difficult circumstances, feeling like I'm performing well or sometimes not well and learning from that. The stress I've experienced has helped me to grow. Not only can you work through stress, but stress can also help you become better because of it – it's an ingredient of growth and a hallmark of resilience. Stress can be a crucible, or a shaping space, helping that growth come to fruition. Pause here to reflect on the stress you've experienced that has led to personal growth.

You may notice that when you are calm, when things are chill and settled, you might find that you're at ease, you might feel disconnected from others, you might even feel bored or sluggish. Calm sometimes leads us to not engage in our potential or in a way that we need to. You may find that you're having a

hard time getting off the couch, or there's not much activity in your mind, because things are too calm. Sometimes a little bit of stress in our lives whether that's a deadline or an interview, or something else that's coming up can activate us. Stress can help us to perform a little bit better.

That's when we get to the Eustress category. This means "good stress". You may find that when you're experiencing creativity, maybe that state of flow where you can feel very effective in what you're doing. You may be activated or motivated or on a roll of working with others toward a goal. Eustress can really motivate, activate, and engage you in the project that you're working on.

If there's too much stress, though, even of the good stress, it can tip the balance over into Distress. This is when that anticipation of the upcoming performance or challenge leads to panic or fear or anger or over-perfectionism or worry about whether you can do it. This is where it becomes less helpful to have stress in our lives and can lead to decreases in performance or ability to show up in spaces and be okay.

Slide 11: Stress Curve

Now all of this can be applied onto the stress curve. The X-Axis is the level of stress from bored and calm up through eustress to land at distress. So the amount of stress can contribute to whether stress is good or challenging (or both!). And the Y-Axis reflects performance, or how well you are able to engage in tasks or to work at your potential.

When things are too calm, performance lags a bit. It's not very engaged or nearing the peak of the curve of optimal performance. When we get into eustress, the curve peaks, and you might feel energized and effective, where your work feels effortless. Notice though that there's a time when that starts to go down, even before we get to distress. Cues of distress are fatigue or exhaustion, you might start to feel burnt out or notice health declines, or like you're going to break down. Noticing where you are on the curve can help you ground your experience of stress – how far am I from optimal performance, how far am I from distress, how am I doing, how might I move things forward?

[CLICK]

I'd like you to take a minute to reflect on where you are right now on the range from calm to distressed – 1 through 10, with 5-6 being the middle point of optimal performance. Pause here to write down the number you currently identify with related to your stress. Consider how you feel about that number? And maybe where you'd like to be on this curve instead. What could change around you that would adjust your number either up or down? Maybe now consider a previous experience you've had – think back to where your stress was at that time. How is it different than what you're feeling right now? Did you feel like you had any control over what that number was?

As we talked about last time, there are things we can change and things we can't change. We'll talk a little about ways to reduce your distress, recognizing that there are a lot of factors at play that you may not have control over. And so even if you can't change something, being more aware of where you are and what you're experiencing can help in mitigating your own reaction to it and helping you to engage more successfully with it even if you're in that distress category.

Slide 12: Reducing Distress

So how do we reduce distress? I'll go through three steps to help you consider how you can pay attention to the distress and take action toward reducing it.

The first step is to step back and observe. Last time we talked about the ABCs, your affect behavior/body and cognition. And how those are cues to how you might be experiencing stress.

Take a moment again to consider your ABCs right now, or as they may relate to stress. You might identify red flags or hot spots, some things I'm doing right now that are more challenging, or verging on the edge of distress.

A question I like to pose is "Is my stress helping me"? Is it really helping me to be activated or respond to the world this way, or do I feel like the stress I'm experiencing is reducing my capacity to respond or my ability to engage? These are some starting points to help you take an observational approach to your stress experience, so that we can then move forward with some action steps.

In order to observe, you may need to engage in one of the practices that we discussed last week, or another one that we will try out today. Consider using square breathing – breathe, hold, breathe, hold. That can be helpful to slow down and reconnect with your breath and what you are thinking and feeling in the moment. Or a body scan, to get in touch with your embodied self and check in with the parts of your body and how they're doing, if they're holding tension or stress, or if they need to be relaxed. Also, consider noticing your self-talk. What am I saying to myself today? What are the meanings of these statements? Are they helping me?

And then once you have a sense of what your ABCs are, what type of distress you're having and maybe where you are on the stress curve, you may then be able to set an intention to refocus your energy onto what's next for you. This could reduce the distress, it could be taking a break, it could be to finish off one piece of your project to see that you are chipping away at a big goal, or it may just be bringing self-compassion or understanding to yourself.

When you refocus, set an intention. When you're feeling overwhelmed, that feeling of being overwhelmed gets in the way of your ability to do what you know you need to do next or start again or do what you want to do, or even believing in yourself. Sometimes it can make a difference to say I am capable, or I can do this, or I've done this before, I can do this again. Or this isn't as bad as I thought it was, or I can trust myself.

All of these are intentions, or statements you can come back to to set the stage for being more effective afterwards. Even just stepping back, engaging a practice, and refocusing, can reduce your distress because you exerted some sense of control or agency over how you're experiencing the moment. You took a minute to step back, to breathe, to think. And now you're ready to set a directed action toward where you want to be. Setting an intention can help that directed action go the right way.

The next thing is to bring "rational mind" to the conversation. Sometimes we get stuck in our way of thinking or feeling that is unhelpful, where emotions take over, or we only think of worst case scenarios. Being able to engage a practice to step back a bit, and be more observational about what your experience is can increase your ability to tap into a more grounded, rational mindspace. What does logic tell me here? What do I know about this situation that I can apply differently going forward?

What's the evidence I see around me that can inform how I approach this issue? Grounding in what you know to be true and what you have data for can help to set the stage for that refocusing to be effective. Keep in mind that data can be inclusive of emotions – this is not about shutting off feelings, but rather about right sizing our experience of feelings to what the situation is calling for.

The last suggestion is to identify achievable goals. Sometimes we think about really big picture things that one person can't solve on their own – like the pandemic or systemic racism. At the same time, there are usually smaller things around us that we do have the capacity and ability to address or resolve. Identifying the little pieces that we can influence, and repeating that over and over can build trust in ourselves. If we accomplish something, we then feel like we are capable of accomplishment and that builds confidence in our effectiveness. We learn that we can be good to ourselves. This could be done individually, with a partner, or as a group of folks. Once we trust ourselves with smaller things, it can then be broadened out to larger goals that may take more time to achieve. The important thing here is to start small and achievable to build trust and confidence.

Reducing distress isn't so much about changing the inputs in your life, it's about changing how you're seeing it, how it feels to you and how you're responding to it. Noticing the ABCs, identifying the role of the stress, maybe stepping back from it to ground, to connect, to review or just to breathe. And then to reengage. Where do I want to go from here, how do I move forward given the realities of the situation around me. What's achievable, what's doable, and how do I move forward with that?

Slide 13: Nose Breathing

Another way to attend to your distress, is to use your body to change what you're feeling. One of the coolest things about our bodies is that we have nervous systems and automatic functions that happen whether we want them to or not. This can be of great benefit to us, and sometimes it can be really challenging for us to not feel in control of what our bodies are doing. This tool is a way to tap into one of those automatic processes, and to activate it when you need it.

Nose breathing activates your parasympathetic nervous system which initiates your bodies' calming process. It's not a magical process that will move you suddenly from really anxious to totally fine, but it signals to your body that calming down is okay to do. It lets your body slow down on its own. Breathing in through your nose is the key here, as the way the air enters your body does matter in how your body will respond.

Join me as we practice this technique.

I invite you to close your eyes, or soften your gaze.

Breathe normally for a few breaths to start settling in and bringing attention to your body.

Maybe play around with breathing a bit deeper, or more intentionally seeing how it feels to bring air into your lungs, and allowing it to leave.

Now breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose.

Feel the breath fill up your lungs.

And exhale through the mouth.

This may feel weird at first because you're not used to breathing through your nose like this. That's okay. Stick with it unless it feels painful or uncomfortable. Respond to what your body needs today.

So, let's do it again.

Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Feel the breath fill up your lungs, and exhale through the mouth.

And now we'll do it one more time together – breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Feel the breath fill your lungs, and exhale through your mouth. Good.

You can repeat this as many times as you need to.

When you are ready to move on, take a minute to set an intention.

Think about how you want to be different now that you have taken a minute to breathe, to reset, to reflect. What do you want that intention to be? How do you want to be different at this time that is achievable, that you can do, that you can apply?

And now open your eyes, and return to the room, to your work, or to your activity.

Slide 14: Reflection

This is a time for reflection. To think about what you learned here. Has anything resonated? What's sticking out? Was there anything new today that makes a difference for you? How have you experienced distress in your life? How is it showing up for you right now? Pause here if you'd like to reflect on these questions.

I encourage you to take some time for self-reflection or maybe connection with a friend or a colleague to discuss what your experience of distress is, how you like to pay attention to it, what you can do to help de-stress, and what that might look like for you in the coming week?

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 and give voice to your thoughts and hopes for new ways of being.

Slide 15: Commitment to Action

Finally, I invite you to a commitment to action. What action will you take to reduce the distress you encounter this week? Maybe you could identify where on the stress curve you are once each day. Or develop a codebook for your red-flag distress ABCs so that you can refer back to that to better identify when distress is showing up in your affect, behavior, or cognition.

Practice nose breathing or one of the other skills 5 times this week.

Maybe you express gratitude for eustress when you are creative, collaborative, efficient or excited in your work or home lives.

Take a minute to write down what action you'll take to reduce your distress this week.

Thanks again for joining us for session 2. We look forward to having you back for session 3 where we will talk about values and how to engage with stress differently and with intention.