

Responding to Stress: Session 3

Script for Recorded Webinar - Fall 2020

Slide 16:

Welcome back to the final session 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? If not, what happened instead? How did you change? What awareness have you gained in the process?

Pause here if you'd like to take some more time with this reflection.

Slide 17: Biosychosocial Model

This third session is all about bringing things together. In the therapy world we often consider individuals from a biopsychosocial perspective. This is a starting point for how we consider who we are, how we interact with our environment, and how that matters for our wellbeing. This may be a new concept for some folks, so let's break it down into its three parts.

Bio is about your biology or your body, the function of what's going on inside.

The psycho part is for psychological, what's going on in your mind – your thoughts and your feelings.

And the social part is about your connections, your relationships, the people and things around you that influence you.

Putting these three areas together helps us to see ourselves holistically, noting that body, mind, and relationships all impact your wellbeing, how you experience stress, and how you respond to that stress.

The other concept I'd like to share with you is person-in-environment. This means that you are a person in an environment. As the icon suggests with a fish in an aquarium. That fish is impacted by the water around it – the fish may not notice it, but the water is supporting its life, and when contaminated or dirty may be making it harder for the fish to thrive.

In the same way, we live in a context that influences us – the people, structures, and geographical location impacts who we are. At the same time, we influence the context around us. There is a give and take between us and the environment that shapes one another.

The last concept I'll share here is the Iceberg Principle. This is a way that I like to conceptualize what's going on for people. What we see and experience from other people is just the tip of their iceberg – what is visible from the surface. These may be behaviors, statements, or the ways that others are seeing you. There's often so much more underneath than we are aware of or certainly that we are putting out to the world around us.

The symptoms or details that others can observe about you often become the focus of our attention, even when the source of the concern or issue can be below the surface. Icebergs have much more mass below the water than they do above. This metaphor is a reminder that there's more going on than we perceive from others, or than we see of ourselves at times.

We can cultivate compassion, we can broaden our understanding of what's a problem or a concern and we can also better take action toward addressing the root of a problem rather than just the surface that we are seeing.

The other aspect of an iceberg that applies to this metaphor is that icebergs are unstable, and can flip at any time. If you're kayaking near an iceberg they tell you to keep some distance from them because they may move, roll, or flip at any time. Anything that changes the iceberg's shape or dynamic can make the whole thing shift and change. This can feel again really unstable, and at the same time it's also an invitation to think about hope, about change, to think about the possibility of what could happen or be different. By changing just one piece of the structure, you can flip the entire system on its head. When I work with individuals, I think about what might be in their iceberg: alcohol use, childhood trauma, or interpersonal conflict. If you address one of those things, you may actually change how you experience the others and the people around you. By addressing something, you'll change the whole system just like we learned in the person in environment section.

If this metaphor isn't working for you, consider other metaphors that could be more appropriate for the way you think or the things you know about. Maybe for you it's being in a forest, not able to see the edge or the path forward. Maybe it's you as the captain of a ship in the ocean, able to adjust levers that change the direction or harness the wind. Are you on your own? Are there people or tools around you for support?

Considering all of these concepts, the take home point here is that being able to see yourself as a holistic being with body, mind, context, and tools can help you identify what's happening for you, and what you can do to influence your experience of the world when you're feeling overwhelmed.

Next, we'll review some strategies to avoid burnout and that overwhelming stress we've been discussing.

Slide 18: Avoiding Burnout

We have already discussed how to identify stress, and how to respond to being overwhelmed. I'd like us to take a step back now, and consider how we can be proactive about upcoming stressors and making space in our lives so that burnout doesn't come in as strong or as intensely. As we've mentioned before, some things in our lives are unavoidable so this won't make burnout never happen, but applying these ideas may help to avoid burnout, or at least mitigate the impact of burnout and prepare you to manage it when it does come.

First, talk it out. Talk with other people about what you're feeling, thinking and experiencing. Even if nothing changes, having others know what you're experiencing can help you feel less alone and increase your capacity to hold difficulty as well. Another metaphor for you – if you're trying to move a grand piano by yourself, it's pretty overwhelming and basically impossible. However, with friends and the

right tools, it becomes possible! Sharing the burdens doesn't overwhelm others, but it does allow you to hold the heaviness together and therefore not feel as stuck or isolated.

Additionally, values play a role in burnout. When you recognize that your values are different from friends, your partner, or the institution you are a part of, it can lead to burnout because you're having to hold onto the differences between what you believe and what you perceive those around you to believe. This can be difficult because you feel misunderstood, or you feel unseen or unheard, or you feel like what's important is being ignored or not addressed. Noticing what your values are and how they play with the values demonstrated around you can help you to see the differences. Just noticing the differences can help bring it to the surface, or to the top of your awareness to define why it feels so off or like it's not working. You're noticing that there's a difference and you can expect that difference. By expecting that difference, you can then actually engage in a different way, not expecting it to be something other than it is.

If you find there is a significant discrepancy between what you value and your environment, you may consider whether you can change contexts – by changing jobs or departments or by pursuing new friends more aligned with you. However, we may also be set in the contexts we have, not allowing us to make a change to a new environment. In these cases, after accepting that there is a difference, you may consider exploring what influence you have over the structures around you – could you bring up the values that are important to you at a staff meeting, or over dinner with a friend? Even if nothing changes, this can lead to a rich discussion about values and mission for an organization or a relationship.

Finally, getting back to basics. Thinking about the ways that you can practice regular self-care and consistency can help reduce the likelihood of landing on the distressed side of the stress curve, the overwhelm and breakdown. Think about sleep, how much sleep are you getting? Is it enough to sustain your thinking and doing during the day? Are there practices that could improve your sleep like limiting electronics or waking up at the same time each day? Also, move your body in a way that feels good to you. If you hate running, don't run! Play tennis instead. Think about ways that you can move your body that works for you. Also, fuel your body effectively – what foods are you eating and how do they make your body feel? Think about what you want to be doing throughout the day and how your choice of nourishment can fuel those activities.

Additionally, time away is something that can be beneficial when you're burning out. This can be counterintuitive because burnout arises when there's a lot of work to be done, and taking time away doesn't seem possible. Taking time away allows time to reset, give space to your creativity, and re-engage with more energy. Keep in mind the point of diminishing returns, that there's a point in work where you are putting more effort in than product you are getting out. Pay attention to this. Where am I in relationship to this point of diminishing returns? Am I nearing it, am I over it, is the energy I'm putting in helping me or not. And then evaluate whether stepping back might help you to reclaim that energy so you can then be more effective in your work upon returning.

Finally, establish good boundaries between work, home, and recreation time. Having time away helps to refresh and reset your attention and engagement. Depending on your job and your role, you may need to be more available than others outside of regular work hours. But think about boundaries within that. How can you set boundaries that are firm, but also flexible when necessary or appropriate.

Slide 19: Values Clarification

In order to center in on the values that drive and guide us, I'd like us to engage in a practice of values clarification. This is intended to help you focus on what is important to you and is built on the work of Brene Brown from her book *Dare to Lead*. We are going to use the list of values she has put together as a starting point for our engagement with this concept, but also feel free to spin off from here to make it more applicable to your life and values. You may have done this before, or already have a clear understanding of your core values. Take this opportunity to open yourself to the possibility of a new focus or additional value, or to reinforce your connection to those values that are important to you.

I invite you to engage in a brief relaxation practice, and then join me on this journey of identifying your core values.

I'll give you several opportunities to pause if you need more time of reflection, so feel free to do that throughout this exercise.

[CLICK] Here is the list of values provided by Brene Brown as a starting point for us.

Join me in this practice.

I invite you to take a deep breath. To maybe engage in one of the practices we learned in previous sessions to still your mind and body. Whether that's breathing, doing a body scan, or just settling into your chair and this space here today.

Take another deep breath in and out. When you're ready, begin reading the list of values on the screen. They're listed alphabetically, and by no means do they cover all the values in the world, so I encourage you to consider what might be missing from this list or values that you hold that aren't reflected here.

In the first pass, write down up to 10 values that resonate with you. They might spark something in you or that you get excited about. You may end up with 20 or 30 that feel connective to you, but this first round is about identifying 10 that match your heart and the things that are important to you. If you need more time here, feel free to pause.

In the second pass, circle 5 of the values you wrote down – the ones that are most important. The top half of the original 10. What rises to the top of what's important to you, what you want to see manifested in your life by your actions and words, or in your thoughts.

Again you can pause here for as long as you need to for this part of the exercise.

Then I want you to take the top 2 of those 5. These are the two that are essential or core to who you are. Regardless of the situation you're in or the thing you're facing, these are the two that will rise to the top. Brene Brown shares in her book that you really can't have more than 2-3 that you're focusing on at a time, so even though it might be difficult to let go of 4 or 5, take the step to do so here. Pause here if you'd like more time in this section.

Now I invite you to reflect on these values. Focusing mostly on the top 2, but considering all the values you've written down today. Are these values identifiable in your life? If people saw you, met you, talked to you, would they be able to tell that these are the values that are most important to you?

Then maybe ask yourself how you could be more connected to your values in your actions and in your words. How might you bring these values to life in your day to day experience.

Pause here to reflect on this experience. How was it to say yes to some value and no to others. What values aren't represented here in this list that are important to you? Have a conversation with a friend, partner, or colleague about your values and this experience. Maybe ask for feedback about the way they see you or these values in your life. Deepen your conversation about values so you can get to know yourself more, and by sharing more about yourself, you also will get to know them more as well, building a space of support and connection to navigate stress and burnout all together.

Slide 20: 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 lived out the values in your life? What have you done that's been effective at mitigating or avoiding burnout or overwhelm? Pause here if you'd like to take time now to reflect.

I encourage you to take some time for self-reflection or maybe connection with a friend or a colleague to discuss your values, how they are aligned with or different from your contexts, and how you might engage in consideration of values and self-care 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 21: Commitment to Action

We are now arriving at our last commitment to action of this series. What steps do you want to take this week to better understand how your values relate to your stress?

Some ideas I'll suggest are to complete the values clarification exercise for different contexts of your life. Maybe focus on what you're like at home, or at work, or on vacation. Notice if there are differences in these contexts of your life and what values rise to the top. What do you think about that? Is that okay with you?

Maybe talk to a friend about what's important to you and how your responsibilities can enhance these values. These may be home, work, volunteer, or other responsibilities – do they reflect your values?

Even though I've also suggested looking separately at different compartments of your life, consider looking at them as a whole. What would it be like if your home, work, vacation, or volunteer selves talked to one another? Would there be different values that would come to the top if you were thinking holistically about yourself?

Finally, you could consider continuing a practice of exercises to better breathe, notice, and change your experience of distress over time.

Slide 22: Thank you

Thank you for participating in this Responding to Stress series!

I wish you well and I hope you have learned more about stress, how you experience stress, the difference between eustress and distress, how you can take action to make changes in your life, and how to accept the parts of life that you can't change as well. And I hope you will live into your values and the things that are most important to you.

I invite you to reach out to the Employee Assistance Office to discuss any of these concepts further, or to explore another aspect of your life in which consultation and support would be beneficial. We can also provide a referral to another resource in the community when indicated. Our contact information is here on the slide with more information available on our website or by calling us directly.

We are here to support you and to help you as you engage in work here at UW. And if you have a few minutes, please provide feedback about your experience with this series to EAO. Thanks so much.