Neuro Nights:
Stress & Coping
Understanding Stress

Stress may come in many forms, and its impact may vary

- **Positive**: Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.
- **Tolerable**: Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.
- **Toxic**: Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.
# Common Sources of Stress and Symptoms

## Physiology, Biochemical

Some people have genetic predispositions to develop certain illnesses, such as Mood Disorders, Alcoholism, and Schizophrenia.

Health conditions affecting the immune system, the gut, or any other bodily system can affect mental health.

Vitamin deficiencies as well as other nutrient deficiencies can contribute to symptoms developing.

*Medications are often used to target these sources.*

## Stresses Due to Change, Loss, Illness, Trauma

We all experience a lot of life stress, change, losses that can be devastating, illness, or accidents/injuries. Many people experience trauma while growing up which adds to the likelihood of developing symptoms later in life.

*These sources are addressed by learning more effective coping skills and tools and by making changes to ineffective habits.*

## Beliefs

As we grow up, we learn what and how to think, what to believe, and what rules we must follow in life. We filter everything we experience every day through the lens of our belief system (schemas). Some beliefs can be inaccurate or just obsolete, like old software programs on a computer.

*Using therapy to identify and challenge thoughts, beliefs, rules, myths, assumptions, etc. for accuracy targets these sources of symptoms. We can “update our programming” and think more accurately.*
Stress and The Body

**STRESS**
SYMPATHETIC

- PUPILS EXPAND
- FAST & SHALLOW BREATHS
- HEART PUMPS FASTER
- GUT INACTIVE

**CALM**
PARASYMPATHETIC

- PUPILS SHRINK
- SLOW, DEEP BREATHS
- HEART SLOWS
- GUT ACTIVE
When Stress Becomes “The New Normal”

- Sympathetic (fight or flight) responses are meant to be short-term
- Long-term activation of the sympathetic nervous system response can have negative impacts on the body
  - Racing heart
  - Sweating
  - Shortness of breath/difficulty breathing
  - Numbness/Tingling
  - Nausea/Vomiting
  - Diarrhea/Constipation
  - Trembling/Shaking
  - Chest Pain
  - Dizziness/Lightheadedness
  - Muscle Tension
  - Heightened Startle Response
  - High Blood Pressure
When Stress Becomes “The New Normal”

- To remain healthy, we need to balance “stress” states with “rest & digest” states
- Long-term exposure to stress can lead to chronic activation of the sympathetic nervous system response
- Under normal circumstances, our bodies naturally default to return to “rest & digest” when a threat has passed
- When stress becomes chronic we have to do a little extra work to manually turn the sympathetic response “off” and give our bodies a rest
Deep Breathing To Help Your Body Reset

- Focus on breathing deeply in through your nose, and breathing out slowly through your mouth. Focus your mind on your breath.
- Put your hands on your belly and be aware of your hands moving up and down with inhalations and exhalations (diaphragmatic breathing).
- Start by exhaling any breath that you’ve been holding in due to tension.
- Next, inhale slowly and deeply for 4 seconds.
- Hold this breath for 7 seconds.
- Exhale slowly and completely for 8 seconds.
- Continue this pattern for 5-10 cycles of breath.
- Practice daily, first in a quiet, secluded place. Later, you can practice with increasing amounts of distraction, i.e. with tv on, with others around, etc.
Practice

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N02BnHwS5FE
Questions So Far?
Distress Tolerance: Surviving in a Crisis

- Distress Tolerance
  - Involves surviving in a crisis without making the problem worse
  - Involves engaging in Mindfulness skills and making use of intentional behaviors in an effort to withstand discomfort and, when possible, improve the moment
  - Involves engaging with the 5 senses, paying full attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally
    - Vision
    - Hearing
    - Smell
    - Taste
    - Touch
Healthy Distraction vs. Avoidance

**Healthy Distraction**
- Deliberately turning your mind away from a crisis until a healthy solution can be reached
- Feeling emotions and making a mindful choice to focus on something else when the feelings don’t fit the facts in the moment, or when there is no way to solve the problem in the moment

**Avoidance**
- Staying in denial
- Ignoring the problem, even when a solution is possible
- Avoiding emotions
- Escaping with the hope that the problem will resolve itself on its own
Healthy Distraction vs. Avoidance

Ask yourself, “Can I solve the problem/crisis?”

- If yes, SOLVE IT
  - Stick with it, don’t take your eye off the ball, and do what it takes
  - Focus on problem solving, developing a list of alternatives, choosing one that is likely to work and carrying it out

- If no (or not right now), STOP trying to solve it
  - Trying to solve something you can’t will often make it worse and send your emotions through the roof
  - Focus instead on tolerating the distress through use of distraction and self-soothing techniques
Ideas for Healthy Distraction

- Do an activity you enjoy
- Do something nice for someone else
- Listen to music or watch something on tv that makes you smile or laugh
- Think about something else on purpose
- Go to the freezer and get some ice—hold it tightly in your hand until your emotions start to cool off
Ideas for Self-Soothing

- Do something that brings you comfort
  - Look at something beautiful
  - Listen to music that calms you
  - Use aromatherapy
  - Taste something delicious
  - Take a bubble bath
  - Pet your dog or cat
  - Curl up on the couch with a blanket
  - Put a cold compress on your forehead
  - Ask someone you care about for a hug
THANK YOU!

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