

Tools to Help You Help Others

Building Stress Awareness

Discussing Stress

Discussing Self-Care and Motivating Others

Understanding Barriers to Seeking Help

Connecting with Help and Resources

Stress is a natural reaction to demands that disrupt normal life. To manage stress, we must be aware of its sources and effects. Stress may briefly impact how we feel, think and act, but this should improve with time. When the reaction lingers or interferes with daily functioning, more support may be needed.

People react to stress differently. Knowing the possible signs and symptoms of stress is an important part of helping others. Talking about stress with community members who reach out to you offering suggestions and resources to help them to take charge of stress that may seem overwhelming can make a real difference.

Building Stress Awareness

Types and Sources of Stress

Types of Stress

Managing stress can be complicated because there are different types of stress, each with its own characteristics, duration and treatment approaches:

Basic stress is a part of our daily personal and professional lives. This is the unavoidable stress we feel, for example, when getting cranky children ready for school, when stuck in traffic or when loud construction goes on for weeks next to our home.

Cumulative stress occurs when we experience multiple stressors, or events that cause a stress reaction, at the same time and/or are frequently or constantly exposed to one or more stressors over time. Examples of cumulative stress include joblessness, economic instability, disability and chronic disease. This ongoing stress can negatively affect our health and interfere with our ability to carry out daily functions. It is more dangerous to health and well-being than basic stress.

Traumatic stress can result from one or more events that threaten the life and/or well-being of an individual or the community. Traumatic stress can be caused by violent attacks or natural disasters, losing a loved one, losing a job or going through a divorce. Domestic violence, physical and emotional abuse and sexual assault can also cause traumatic stress. If unmanaged, this stress can lead to other serious mental health problems such as depression, PTSD and alcohol and substance use disorders.

Sources of Stress

Stress can come from one or more sources that can sometimes be difficult to identify. However it is important to try and identify sources of stress in our lives and eliminate them whenever possible.

Certain sources of stress are thought to be more socially acceptable, and therefore easier to discuss, than others. For example, people feel more comfortable talking about work-related stress than the stress of abuse or racism.

The sources of stress in our lives are multi-leveled. The stress we experience can be caused by something that is specific to us and who we are (individual level); from our relationships with family and friends (relationship level); from where we live, work and study (community level); or from the society in which we live (society level).

- **Individual:** An individual's biological or personal history
- **Relationship:** Relationships and social networks
- **Community:** Settings such as schools, workplaces and neighborhoods
- **Society:** Social and cultural norms, access to health, discrimination, racism, and education.



Sources of stress generally fall into five categories:

Health and Health Care

- Access to health care
- Access to primary care
- Health literacy

Economic Stability

- Poverty
- Employment
- Food security
- Housing stability

Education

- Early childhood education and development
- High school graduation
- Enrollment in higher education

- Language and literacy

Social Context

- Relationships
- Public safety
- Social cohesion
- Civic participation
- Discrimination
- Incarceration

Physical Environment

- Access to things we need
- Housing quality
- Crime and violence
- Environmental conditions

The Health and Mental Health Impact of Acute and Chronic Stress

Acute Stress

Acute stress occurs after a specific, stressful, event. Symptoms develop quickly but do not last long, typically going away within a few hours to one month after the event. Acute stress may not require treatment, but talking about the event can be helpful. The events that cause acute stress can be severe and create intense fear, horror or helplessness. Examples include serious accidents, the sudden death of a loved one, terrorist incidents or major disasters.

Chronic Stress

Chronic stress occurs over an extended period in response to everyday stressors that are ignored or poorly managed, or in response to traumatic events. Small amounts of stress can be managed with coping mechanisms, but chronic stress can significantly impact the mind and body. If not treated, this stress can lead to serious health conditions, including anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system.¹

Signs and Symptoms of Stress

Stressful situations can affect the body and mind in many ways: physically, emotionally, cognitively, spiritually and behaviorally. Each person is different and there is no right or wrong way to react to stress.

Knowing the signs of stress (what others can see) and symptoms of stress (what the affected person experiences) is the first step to managing stress. This is not always easy. People often become so used to stress that they do not notice its many negative effects. Others may feel that acknowledging their stress would be a sign of weakness.

Here are few common signs and symptoms of stress:

| | Signs and Symptoms of Stress |
|---|---|
| Physical Stress affects how our bodies function | Body aches, headaches, muscle tension or pain, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, weight loss or weight gain, loss of sleep or change in sleeping habits, nightmares, disturbing dreams, frequent colds and infections, change in sex drive, nervousness, shaking, clenched jaw, grinding teeth, tremors, trembling of lips, light-headedness, faintness, dizziness |
| Emotional Stress affects our emotions | Feeling powerless, depressed, anxious, sad, worried, irritable, overwhelmed or angry; mood changes, lack of motivation, low self-esteem, self-harm |
| Cognitive Stress affects how we think | Trouble concentrating, racing thoughts, forgetfulness, disorganization, poor judgment, pessimism |
| Spiritual Stress can affect our spirituality | Loss or questioning of beliefs or faith |
| Behavioral Stress affects how we behave | Social withdrawal, isolation from others, impatience or easily “snapping” at others, causing physical harm to others, excessive drinking, drug use, smoking, overeating or undereating, changes in physical activity |

Age-Specific Stress Reactions

When helping others identify the stress in their lives remember that sources of stress change as they age:

- **Infancy to Early Childhood (0 to 4 years):** Rapid physical and emotional growth, attachment to parents or caregivers, reliance on others to provide basic needs and learning basic skills
- **Preschool and School Age (4 to 12 years):** Navigating the world outside of home or school, relationship building, bullying, family environment, learning about self-confidence and feelings of inferiority
- **Adolescence (13 to 19 years):** Separation from family and moving toward peers and external supports; navigating school, jobs and higher education; exposure to alcohol and

drugs; exploration of self-, sexual and gender identity and expression; and transition to adulthood

- **Early Adulthood (20 to 39 years):** Taking on new responsibilities, taking on work and work-related goals and ambitions, understanding self-identity, developing independent relationships and committing to long-term relationships
- **Adulthood (40 to 64 years):** Reflecting on contributions to society; thoughts about the next generation; family, relationships, work and social connections, responsibilities and pressures
- **Maturity/Older Adulthood (65 and older):** Loss of family members, friends and support systems; uncertain health and economic stability; ageism.

Discussing Stress

Starting the Conversation about Stress

Consider the following factors when beginning a conversation with someone who is stressed:

- **Choose a comfortable location and environment:** Choose a private location that will put the person at ease.
- **Start with an open-ended question:** Some examples include:
 - “Tell me about what is happening right now.”
 - “Tell me how you are feeling right now.”
 - “I see that you are faced with many challenges right now, do you want to talk about that?”
- **Acknowledge the person’s experience:** For example, you could say, “I hear how difficult this is and I appreciate that we can talk about this together.” Use minimal prompts while they are speaking, such as “I see” and “ah.”
- **Give them your full attention:** Maintain comfortable eye contact and an open body position throughout the conversation.
- **Listen without judgment:** Listen and acknowledge the person’s thoughts and feelings before expressing your own point of view.

Cultural Awareness and Discussing Stress

A person's cultural background influences how they express emotions. Members of a cultural community often share certain ideas, beliefs, expectations and behaviors. Acknowledging cultural differences can help you determine whether a person's response to stress is unhealthy.

A person's culture may affect:

- **Types of stressors:** People may experience different types of stress because of their values or cultural context.
- **How stressors are understood:** Cultural norms can influence whether an event is seen as stressful or not.
- **Coping mechanisms:** Culture may influence how people make sense of stress and how they cope with it.²

The Risk of Stress

Some people are more prone to stress and its effects because of their personal or medical history, or occupation. For example, certain occupations, such as law enforcement or emergency room staff, are more stressful than others.

A person's risk for stress is influenced by many factors and changes over time. Individuals at a higher risk for stress include:

- People with a personal or family history of mental illness
- Older adults because of their decreased ability to relax after a stressful event
- Women in general and working mothers specifically
- Caregivers of family members
- People dealing with difficult life events, hardships, racism or discrimination

Self-Care: Discussing and Motivating Others

Explaining Self-care

Self-care involves taking simple, practical actions that support the health of their emotional, physical, social and spiritual well-being. This makes people more resilient to the negative effects of stress.

Commonly Used Self-Care Strategies

- Eating nutritious and healthy foods
- Being physically active
- Having restful and regular sleeping habits
- Taking time to reflect; keeping a journal
- Using simple relaxation techniques, like deep breathing
- Building and nurturing social connections and shared action
- Building and utilizing religious or spiritual connections
- Engaging in activities that bring joy
- Taking time to enjoy nature
- Listening to music

Building Wellness

Wellness involves seeking health and balance in all aspects of life:

Emotional

- Understanding one's feelings and managing the challenges of life in a healthy way

Spiritual

- Seeking meaning and purpose in life; staying true to one's beliefs and values

Intellectual

- Developing a lifelong interest in learning and an openness to the world beyond one's own experiences

Physical

- Staying physically active, eating well and getting enough rest; caring for and developing an awareness of one's body

Financial

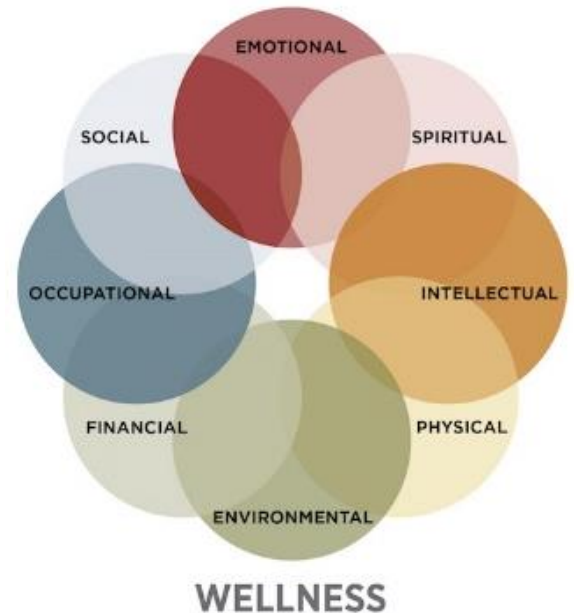
- Developing a healthy relationship with money, including managing one's finances well and setting realistic goals.

Occupational

- Finding a sense of personal pride in one's efforts at work

Social

- Forming and maintaining relationships and meaningful connections within and outside of one's community



Teaching Simple Strategies

Practicing self-care can be challenging. Many people feel guilty about taking time for themselves and think self-care requires spending money, or they don't know how to start. Encourage your community members to:

- Start a little bit at a time then slowly make a bigger commitment – even small acts of self-care will have benefits.
- Create a self-care plan. Jot down some ideas, reflect on them and then put them into action.
- Stay positive and challenge negative beliefs.
- When possible, try to include time in a busy schedule to practice self-care.
- Share a self-care plan with trusted family and friends to remain accountable.
- Practice self-care daily – the more practice, the more natural it becomes.
- Talk to others and share ideas about practicing self-care.

Relaxation techniques can help with the physical symptoms of stress. For tips on deep breathing and full body relaxation, visit nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/coping-wellness-tips/

As a leader in your community, you can teach others the importance of self-care. There are many ways to incorporate this into your work:

- Hold small group discussions about stress management and self-care.
- Encourage others to learn about self-care – and provide information and tools for practicing self-care – in discussions, sermons, presentations.
- Host events that promote healthy living (nutritional workshops, exercise classes, guided meditation, etc.).
- Host events that promote social support, ties or shared action, even if without a stress or mental health “theme”.
- Support programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous to make them accessible to community members.

Understanding the Barriers to Seeking Help

Stigma

People often avoid seeking professional help because of cultural or personal stigma that surrounds mental health topics. You may hear the following when discussing mental health services with others:

- “I feel guilty; I don’t deserve help or others deserve it more than me.”
- “It’s too difficult; I’m not interested in seeking mental health services.”
- “I feel helpless/hopeless.”
- “I can’t seek professional help because of cultural/familial/religious reasons.”
- “Mental health services won’t help me; I can handle it on my own.”
- “This is just temporary; these challenges will just go away with time.”

Lack of Support and Resources

There are also a number of exterior influences that may stop someone from getting help. You may hear the following from members of your community:

- “I have limited/no access to health care.”
- “How will I get help/pay for it?”
- “It’s too time-consuming to seek professional help.”
- “I’m too overwhelmed to seek professional help.”
- “I’ve seen a mental health professional in the past and it was a negative/unhelpful experience.”
- “Treatment won’t change my situation.”

Overcoming Barriers

To help others overcome these barriers, be sure to highlight pre-existing resources (the supports someone already has), while encouraging the use of new or professional resources. Pre-existing resources include inner supports such as one’s personal strengths and past efforts, as well as external supports such as social connections and caring relationships.

Acknowledging Inner Resources, Strengths and Past Efforts

In conversations with people in your community, encourage them to reflect on times when they successfully managed emotional distress in the past. This can help them meet new challenges with determination.

Reflection can include asking questions such as:

- How did you react?
- What did you feel?
- Were you able to count on yourself?
- What were you able to accomplish?

- What was most challenging?
- What was most helpful?
- Who did you reach out to for support? Who else may have been available?

Remind others that, while each stressful circumstance is unique, you can approach a new situation by using supports that were effective in the past.

Highlighting Social Support, Social Connections and Caring Relationships

Social support is important for individuals and communities after significant stress, trauma or loss. Examples of social support include:

- Having the support of friends and relatives when getting through the loss of a loved one
- Attending support groups and visiting with friends while taking care of a parent with dementia
- Connecting with neighbors and attending meetings with fellow tenants when dealing with an eviction
- Having the support of one's spiritual community and/or neighborhood when recovering from a hate crime

Connecting With Help and Resources

When to Suggest Seeking Professional Help

Even with your support, community members may benefit from accessing other resources. You can help identify the need for additional help, connect them to appropriate resources and support them as they take this often difficult step.

Below are some signs that a person may need mental health services:

- Excessive stress that lasts for weeks or months
- Ongoing sadness, depression or anxiety that lasts for weeks or months
- Showing signs of isolating behavior such as pushing away friends, family and others who want to help
- Confused thinking or problems concentrating and learning
- Extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable "highs" or feelings of euphoria
- Prolonged or strong feelings of irritability or anger



- Difficulty understanding or relating to other people
- Changes in sleeping habits or feeling tired and low energy
- Significant and lasting changes in eating habits (e.g., increased hunger or lack of appetite)
- Changes in sex drive
- Difficulty perceiving reality (e.g., delusions or hallucinations, in which a person experiences and senses things that don't exist), or appearance of odd behavior that reflect this.
- Trouble detecting changes in one's own feelings, behavior or personality
- Problematic alcohol or drug use
- Multiple physical ailments without obvious causes (headaches, stomachaches, vague and ongoing aches and pains)
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Inability to carry out daily activities or manage problems and stress
- An intense fear of weight gain or concern with appearance (especially in adolescents)

GET IMMEDIATE HELP

If the person you are working with needs additional support, encourage them to seek help from a doctor, certified peer specialist, counselor, psychologist or friend.

For free, confidential mental health support, 24/7:

Call 1-888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355)
Text WELL to 65173
Visit nyc.gov/nycwell

If the person is in danger of harming him- or herself or others, call 911.

Emotional Emergencies: Recognizing the Threat of Suicide and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury

Early intervention is important. If you think someone is in need of help, voice your concerns in a private location and at an appropriate time so they feel comfortable. Allow the person to choose the moment to open up; if they do not initiate, you can start a discussion. Be sure to respect the person's privacy and confidentiality unless you are concerned that they are at risk of harming him or herself or others.

People may show a variety of signs such as:

- Trouble functioning and performing daily tasks (getting dressed, eating, simple chores, going to work or school, etc.)
- Threatening to hurt or kill him- or herself
- Looking for ways to kill him- or herself (seeking access to pills, weapons, etc.)

- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide, such as wishing they were dead
- Expressing hopelessness and seeing no future for themselves or point in being alive
- Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Experiencing anxiety or agitation, inability to sleep or sleeping all the time

Non-suicidal self-injury refers to situations where self-injury is not meant as a way to end their life. It is not easy to tell the difference between non-suicidal self-injury and a suicide attempt, and people who injure themselves are at increased risk of suicide. The only way to know is to ask the person directly, “Are you suicidal?” or “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”

Different types of non-suicidal self-injury include³:

- Cutting, scratching or pinching skin enough to cause bleeding or mark the skin
- Banging or punching objects to the point of bleeding or bruising
- Carving words or patterns into skin
- Burning skin with cigarettes, matches or hot water
- Pulling out large amounts of hair
- Deliberately overdosing on medications without suicidal intent

It may be difficult to distinguish acts of self-harm from the risk for suicide. If you are concerned about the person’s mental health and safety, encourage them to speak with a medical provider. In an emergency, call 911.

For non-emergent crisis and suicide prevention counseling, contact NYC Well at 1-888-NYC-WELL, text “WELL” to 65173 or visit nyc.gov/nycwell.

Emotional Emergencies: What to Do When a Person Is Suicidal

If you think a person is at risk of suicide, talk to them about your observations. Do not avoid using the word “suicide.” It is important to be direct without expressing judgment. For example, you could ask:

- “Are you having thoughts of suicide?”
- “Are you thinking about killing yourself?”

Remember that talking about suicide may be a way for the person to express how badly they feel.

If you have serious concerns, call 911.

For non-emergent crisis and suicide prevention counseling, contact NYC Well at 1-888-NYC-Well, text “WELL” to 65173 or visit nyc.gov/nycwell.

You can give a “warm referral” by placing a call to NYC Well on behalf of the person. Let the person know you are concerned and that you are calling a help hotline. Call NYC Well while the person is present. After the intake counselor has an understanding of the situation, hand the phone to the person for them to discuss in private.

Resources: General Mental Health Support, Suicide, Substance and Alcohol Abuse, Physical and Emotional Abuse, Domestic Violence, Bullying, etc.

There are many types of care supports for stress and mental health needs. A few general examples include:

- Community programs
- Community activities
- Peer groups
- Medical and psychosocial support services (medical doctors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.)
- Community and religious support programs

¹ American Psychological Association, <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/understanding-chronic-stress.aspx/>

² Psychotron Teaching Resource Bank, http://www.psychotron.org.uk/resources/physiological/aqa_as_stress_culturearticle.pdf

³ Whitlock, J., Eckenrode, J., and Silverman, D. Self-injuring behaviors in a college population. 2006. *Pediatrics*, 117, 1939-1948.