



Managing and Coping with Stress

Transcript

Presenter: Everyone gets stressed. Life-changing events, smaller daily hassles, and our own thoughts and feelings can all be stressors, sources of stress. We can't deny stress, but we can learn ways to manage it effectively. Psychologists have studied the cognitive and emotional strategies we use to cope with stress for decades. While they've analysed them in many different ways, they have consistently found two different strategies: avoidance and approach.

Avoidance strategies are based on activity that is directed away from a stressor, while approach strategies deal with the stressor directly. There are potential benefits and costs for both strategies. How well they work is heavily dependent on a person's specific personality and situation. Approach strategies have the possibility of appropriate action – activity that can positively affect or respond to the stressor. Appropriate action can be anything from speaking to someone about a problem, to reporting a crime to the police.

Approach strategies can also allow the full expression of our emotions about the situation – a process psychologists call 'ventilation'. This is a major part of some forms of psychotherapy and is often beneficial. Approach makes it possible to assimilate and resolve trauma. This means integrating the experience into our understanding of ourselves, so that we can consider it part of our past.

Healthy avoidance strategies also have several potential benefits. Avoiding the stressor can potentially be a way of quickly reducing stress and anxiety. Used intermittently, avoidance can allow engagement with a stressor in small doses, making it less overwhelming, and allowing time to learn from the experience. Avoiding the stressor in small ways, while also using approach strategies may also allow us to recover hope and courage.

Approach and avoidance strategies are not without drawbacks. Avoidance makes it difficult to take action against a stressor, and can lead to feeling numb, as a person avoids negative emotions. A person may disrupt their everyday life if they go too far in restricting themselves to avoid contact with a stressor. They may also be unaware of the psychological symptoms that are related to the stressor, as avoidance prevents them from making the connection, delaying proper treatment.

Approach strategies can also be harmful in the wrong circumstances. Encountering the stressor can increase stress and anxiety, and in cases where there is no appropriate action to be taken, provoke worry, which is time-consuming and non-productive. Avoidance strategies usually have the most impact, by giving us time to prepare for approach strategies. They are often best used together, but some people display a bias towards using one or the other.





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Presenter: Using coping strategies individually can be effective, but coping on your own is rarely easy. Our social networks form one of our most vital coping resources. Social support is care or assistance that you receive from a social network. As with stress, a person's perception of their social support is as important as how much they receive.

There are different kinds of social support. Instrumental support, also called tangible support, is direct assistance through physical acts or resources, such as money, food, or information. Emotional support occurs when others make us feel loved and cared for. It includes talking about problems, providing encouragement, and esteem support that directly improves our feeling of self-worth. Emotional support can be easy to access, since it can be conveyed by phone, email, or social media.

Social support can come from a variety of sources, from friends and family, to romantic partners, health professionals, and even pets. People who have perceived or received social support feel reduced to stress, and having an outlet to confide in someone about their feelings has many long-term health benefits. But there is still some dispute about the role of social support. Psychologists agree that social coping is very important. A lack of social support leads to much higher rates of depression, anxiety and mental disorders. Social support, while vital is rarely an answer on its own. Bad relationships do not improve mental health, and personal action is also usually required to deal with stress.

Our minds and bodies are linked, each providing feedback to the other. Some effective forms of therapy for stress take advantage of this, like exercise. Aerobic exercise, also called cardio, is exercise that improves the fitness of your heart and lungs. Research has shown that people who exercise regularly are better at handling stressful events, have improved self-confidence and are less likely to be depressed. One of the reasons for this is that exercise stimulates the production of particular neurotransmitters, natural chemicals involved in brain function. These include norepinephrine, which is also produced during stress response, and serotonin, a lack of which is linked with depression.

The body also produced endorphins during exercise. These neurotransmitters relieve pain, but they also trigger a pleasure response, giving us a natural feeling of euphoria. The effect of endorphins, as well as other benefits of exercise, like improved sleep, fitness and general health, can all contribute to a better mood and reduced stress.

A variety of drug therapies are also available for major stress and anxiety. The most prominent are the benzodiazepines. Benzodiazepines, like Valium, first became available in the 1960s. They replaced earlier drugs and are much preferred, as they have fewer unpleasant side effects. Benzodiazepines work by increasing the effectiveness of a naturally occurring brain chemical called GABA. GABA makes the neurons in the brain less excitable, calming many functions of the brain.





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Presenter: There are different kinds of benzodiazepines. Shorter-acting benzodiazepines are used to treat insomnia. While longer-acting ones are used to treat anxiety, making them a useful therapy for stress. Benzodiazepines are usually recommended for short or medium term use, as the body develops a tolerance for the drug, making it less effective. Long-term or overuse can lead to dependence, where the body experiences unpleasant withdrawal symptoms if the drug is not present. Withdrawal from benzodiazepines can include symptoms of muscle spasms, hypersensitivity to light or noise, and an increased level of anxiety. While benzodiazepines are certainly an improvement over earlier drugs, they don't work for everyone and can have unpleasant side effects. As well as dependence, side effects of benzodiazepines can include drowsiness and problems with memory and reasoning, which can make someone more likely to have an accident. It can even cause symptoms similar to depression.

Biofeedback is a system for recording and reporting on physiological states associated with stress. These states, such as blood pressure, heart rate, or muscle tension are often too subtle to be noticed consciously. Biofeedback therapy tries to train patients to develop awareness of physiological responses that indicate stress and learn ways to control those responses. Such efforts have had mixed results, but some may be effective. For example, some devices alert a wearer when their blood pressure is elevated and prompt them to begin a slow breathing exercise to calm themselves, avoiding stress. As wearable devices become much more common, it's becoming easier to record biofeedback in everyday situations. This may lead to more effective stress reduction.

No strategy or therapy works for everyone, but learning different management techniques can make you better able to recognise, prepare for, and cope with whatever stress you encounter.

