

Stress Management

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When I lived in New York City back in the '70's, from time to time I would attend events led by a group called **Operation on a Shoestring** that involved learning about the unique characteristics of the City. Without a doubt, the best turnout of all the events I ever went to featured a talk on Stress Management. In my private practice, stress has been a key issue with many of my clients.

The prevalence of stress with so many of my clients led me to the question: Why more stress now than in the past? Woolfolk and Lehrer (1984) provided some answers to this question that remain relevant today. In their article, they identified four points of modern living that have increased the amount of stress, we human beings encounter on a regular basis. The first point is that **modernization** is the ordering of life by the clock, a fact that increases time-pressured work. The second point is that inasmuch as modern society is undergoing continuous change, the **rate** of that change is ever increasing (see Alvin Toffler, 1970) and, even more so, today. An example of this rapidity of change is how the women's liberation movement changed the way men and women perceived their respective roles in society. A third point made by these authors was that industrialization and modernization in enhancing freedom and material well-being of the individual, certainly a positive outcome, created a situation where numerous **choices** were available. However, too much choice also can be the root of immobilization. With the expansion of our personal freedoms, the extended family disappeared resulting in individual social

isolation. Thus, whereas the **premodern** world was communal and spiritual, contemporary times have brought a greater individualistic and materialistic conscious.

To deal with the stress of modern life, the following are some of the techniques I have used in my private practice: 1) **Cognitive restructuring**, 2) **Assertive training**, 3) **Conflict resolution** and 4) **Progressive relaxation**. I will briefly discuss how I employ these techniques in assisting clients in overcoming their stressors.

Cognitive restructuring is often the treatment of choice when a client is not handling his/her **life situation** in the best of all ways. The principal intervention with these clients is to help them better cope with the negative aspects of life, such as job or marital difficulties. For example, acknowledging and increasing their tolerance and forgiveness toward others such as spouses, coworkers and/or bosses or supervisors can very much relieve stress.

In an earlier article ("*The Four Point Rule of Assertive Behavior*" also available on RealPsychSolutions.com), I defined the characteristics of assertive behavior. I have found in my private practice that clients with a variety of presenting problems improve when they become more assertive in their daily lives. Furthermore, this increase in assertiveness assists them in combating the stress they may face at home or in the workplace. Assertiveness means being the primary and ultimate judge of your own behavior, feelings and actions such as being able to say "No" even under pressure. This ability allows one to reduce the stress of the ever increasing burdens brought on by modernization.

The third technique I may employ is conflict resolution in which I find the most important ingredient to be **active listening**. Active listening can be extremely helpful in

alleviating conflicts, the stress between partners in a relationship by having each member defer his/her own needs and desires by paying better attention to those of one's partner. The shift from what I want from you to how can I give you what you want, reduces the antagonistic behavior of each member by allowing the partners to feel more empathy toward one other.

Finally, techniques such as **relaxation training and meditation** help to induce a relaxed state. Many are unaware of how the ways we breathe can impact our ability to move from a stress response to a more relaxed one. The importance of facilitating relaxation is that this state is incompatible with other emotional states such as anxiety, one of the principal underlying emotions of stress.

After explaining the process, I often tape the session in my office; this allows the client to return home and play the tape at his/her convenience in a quiet and comfortable setting at home. I encourage clients to play the tape at least daily, and if they have time, to play it two times per day as a means of reducing the impact of the stressful events of their lives. Finally, I encourage an exercise program that will assist clients in monitoring when they decide to commit to such a program.

The value of exercise has been consistently reported in both medical and psychological journals to have a beneficial effect on both the physical and psychological health of individuals.

References:

Woolfolk, Robert and Lehrer, Paul. Clinical Applications. In Robert Woolfolk & Paul Lehrer (Eds.), **Principles and practice of stress management**. New York: Guilford Press, 1984

Toffler, A. **Future shock**. New York: Random House, 1970