*Understanding Stress Handout*

**The nature of stress**

Stress: you know what it feels like, but what is it? Stress is your body’s natural physical and psychological response to pressure or demands. The challenge can come from inside (our expectations of ourselves) or from the external environment. In the face of demanding situations the body produces adrenaline which gives us extra energy. You experience stress when you don’t release that extra energy. Managing stress involves being able to use that extra energy in a productive and healthy manner. The right amount of stress can make you feel alive and vital, tuned in to your surroundings and energised to take action.

We often think of stress as something bad, something to be eliminated from our lives if only we could. In reality, too little stress would leave us bored and inert. Back in 1926, Hans Selye who did some of the earliest work on stress, said: “Without some stress there would be no life.” The problem arises when there is too much unrelieved stress — the adrenaline is flowing and there is no way to make good use of it.

**Cumulative stress**

Cumulative stress is the kind that builds up over time, through exposure to prolonged unrelieved factors that cause frustration or worry. It is clear that we will experience traumatic stress if we find ourselves in a crisis, but we can equally experience cumulative stress from chronic exposure to less traumatic stress factors. Stress can be induced by both external and internal sources.

**Organisational/systemic/situational factors that cause cumulative stress**

* Bureaucratic obstacles to your work
* Issues related to selection, promotion and career planning
* Unrealistic job definition or expectations
* Responsibilities not clearly defined by your supervisor
* Pressures from balancing work and private life
* Inadequate resources
* Change initiatives
* Excessive travel
* Cultural attitudes of the local people in contrast to your own
* Conditions of difficult duty stations

**Interpersonal factors that cause or worsen cumulative stress**

* Conflicts among co-workers
* A supervisor who is hard to get along with
* Incompatibility with the management style of the person to whom you report (too much direction, not enough direction, etc.)
* Colleagues who are ineffective or pessimistic
* Too few compatible colleagues for satisfying social interaction
* Dissatisfied or difficult receivers of your services
* Concern about neglecting family, family problems, or being isolated from friends and family

**Intra-personal factors that cause or worsen cumulative stress**

* Negative self-referring thoughts or talk
* Insecurity, lack of self-confidence
* Perceiving your situation as a no-win one
* A perfectionist attitude — having to do things just right and feeling bad if you cannot or holding unrealistically high self-expectations
* Feeling inadequate when faced with new, unfamiliar tasks
* Feeling emotionally disturbed by the stress of others
* Past traumatic experiences
* Acute or chronic illness
* Fatigue
* Being unfit, out of shape physically

All of us have different backgrounds, personalities and experiences which affects how we relate to stressors such as those listed above. Some people can become energised by the very factors that cause another person unbearable stress.

It’s just as important to learn to recognise the signs and symptoms of stress in one another and in ourselves. That way, we can take appropriate action. Unless we take action to relieve cumulative stress, we risk burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or cynicism, and lowered personal accomplishment and effectiveness. Once cynicism sets in, it’s really hard to change: cynicism changes how people work, how they feel about themselves and how they interact with others.

The most common signs of cumulative stress fall into five categories:

1. **Physical reactions**: sleep disturbances, aches and pains, appetite and digestive changes, high blood pressure, persistent fatigue and exhaustion, lowered resistance to colds and infections, sexual dysfunction;
2. **Emotional reactions**: feeling overwhelmed, wanting to be alone or feeling alienated from others, negativity or cynicism, anxiety, suspiciousness, depression or chronic sadness, loss of sense of humour, low self-esteem;
3. **Cognitive reactions**: difficulty concentrating, obsessive thinking, diminished tolerance for ambiguity, constricted or inflexible thinking, feeling indispensable, tired of thinking, trouble making decisions and setting priorities;
4. **Behavioural effects**: irritability, blaming others, withdrawing socially, substance abuse (smoking, alcohol, drugs, self-medication, etc.), risky behaviour or disregard for safety or security, reluctance to start or finish projects; and
5. **Spiritual reactions**: loss of trust, loss of purpose, loss of confidence, disillusionment, preoccupation with self, doubts about value system or religious beliefs, questioning of major life areas such as profession, lifestyle.

Most often, people develop reactions to stress that are unique to them. For example, some people are more likely to express stress emotionally, while others are typically more affected at the physical level.

**Strategies for managing stress**

You probably have identified actions you can take to help you cope during stressful situations. You may also be aware of other actions that you sometimes take in an attempt to cope but that are *not* helpful.

Interestingly, some of the very coping strategies that are most helpful can become *least* helpful if they are taken to an extreme. For example, adequate nutrition is critical during a crisis, but some people fight stress by constant snacking on high-fat, salty or sweet snacks. Likewise, a glass of wine or a beer may provide healthy relaxation, but overindulging can compound the problem.

Generally, you want to manage stress by doing things that:

* Allow you to stabilise the adrenaline rush,
* Allow you some sense of control,
* Help you make sense of the situation,
* Are pleasurable, enjoyable, relaxing,
* Provide social interaction and support,
* Include physical exercise,
* Include quiet, alone reflective time, and
* Are feasible in your environment.

A healthy and balanced daily routine that includes good nutrition and adequate exercise works well both as a preventive and as a cure for a stressful life. A healthy body can cope better with stress.