3.1 Building Stress Awareness

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Stress Management & Resiliency Training (SMART) Program

3. Building Resiliency through Cognitive Reappraisal and Lifestyle Modification

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# Building STRESS Awareness

##### Building Stress Awareness on how we Feel, Think, and Behave when Stressed.

Awareness of those physical, emotional feelings, behavioral, and cognitive signals when exposed to stress is the 1st step in recognizing our habituated responses that do not serve us well. Once we are aware of our responses, we can then decide to counter those that are negative with effective coping responses.

There Stress Awareness Exercises are for building awareness of your stress triggers and personal negative or positive reactions to stressors.

More on this topic see the Examen in Ignatian Spiritualty Section.

# Energy Battery Exercise

This Energy Battery Exercise is to gain awareness of what experiences you find regenerative (ones that relax or refreshes you, in other words, builds up your resilience) and what you find depleting (ones that contribute to your stress).

Using the handout with its reference take about 10 minutes to list what recharges you (deposits that charge your battery) and what depletes you (withdrawals drain your battery).

# Common Stress-Warning Signals

**Stress-Warning Signals** differ from individual to individual; yet there are many common ones which are listed on the Stress Warning Signs Handout. Try filling out your own after reviewing this section..

For the purpose of easily identifying stress-warning signals, there you will see them grouped them into primary types:

1. Physical
2. Emotional
3. Cognitive
4. Behavioral
5. Relational & Spiritual

You will likely notice that your warning signals fall into more than one category. It is fine to include the same signals in multiple categories. To begin, here’s a definition of each category:

**The Physical Component** of the stress response refers to those bodily sensations most noticeable type of stress warning signals include headache, back pain, gastrointestinal difficulties, muscle tension, changes in appetite, and or disrupted sleep patterns.

**Emotional/Feelings Signals** of threat are influenced by the other stress warning signals, where all emotions are derived from their own unique beliefs.

For example, negative emotions such as anger from the belief of injustice done, anxiety from a lack of feeling safe or out of control where these are embedded in the lower part of our brains.

Since we are wired and have a propensity for negativity - the survival mechanism that no longer serves us – we need to work on adding positive thoughts to overcome automatic reactions.

**Cognitive Signals** include negative thoughts, so focusing on a past threat or an anticipated threat will engage our stress system just as effectively as focusing on a present threat. Stress activates our bottom-up cerebral network, thereby diminishing our ability to engage our top-down executive functioning that is often experienced as deficits in working memory, concentration, and regulation of mood and behaviors.

**Behavioral Signals** of stress that are common are related to Food where there is a desire to eat simple carbohydrates. This craving is driven by two biologic forces:

(1) These foods provide available energy needed during the heightened metabolic and neural activity of stress

(2) They offset stress through the top-down experience of pleasure. Another, although less common stress response is the loss of appetite. This also makes sense given the shift in the body’s activity from digestion during stress

We’re often driven towards behaviors that provide immediate gratification such as smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol.

**Relational & Spiritual Component** in our stress response is our general outlook with respect to the meaning and purpose of life, and connection to God, our world, and others.

* **Relational Signals**category refers to our sense of connectedness to self and others. In the stress response, we tend to isolate ourselves from others, and feel disconnected from our own or others’ feelings. We may find ourselves distrusting or avoiding others.
* **Spiritual Signals**One can lose a sense of being part of a larger whole and the feeling that you are of benefit to others. Spiritual warning signals may include cynical thinking or depressed mood. One example is losing a sense of fulfillment or service from work or career or even not loved. ( More on this in the Ignatian Spirituality Section)

## Habitual Negative Responses: Warning

It’s important to note that over time if one continues on a path of not altering one’s habitual negative responses, the flight and fight response becomes easily activated (hyperactive).

Both the magnitude and chronicity of these responses lead to pathogenic processes within the stress system that are both causal and contributory to many diseases such as atherosclerosis, obesity, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, and depression.

Eventually, the brain changes to which perpetuate a cycle that maintains the body in a constant state of stress response, thus wearing down the nervous system, leading to further emotional, behavioral, and physical disturbances.

## The key

The key is to become attuned to the activation and impact of our own *negative stress response* and to *use it as a trigger to change it to a positive adaptive response*.

With this knowledge in mind, one can learn to stop indulging in a negative stress response by shifting time and attention towards effective positive coping.

# Stress Level Log Exercise

Stress Level Log Exercise is for identifying activities that create negative emotional feelings and negative physical sensations and level – score 1-10 or as in a stoplight – green, amber, red can be sued. This can help to build awareness of how you feel physically and emotionally, when you're relaxed and when you're tense.

As stress triggers negative thinking that can become habituated, we need to offset this by practicing purposeful positivity.

# Identifying Emotions & Positive Physical Sensations Exercise

In the left column, spend five minutes listing any emotion you can think of (positive, negative, or neutral). In the right column, spend five minutes writing all positive physical sensations you can think of.

Upon review of the **emotions**, place a “plus” next to any positive emotion, and a “minus” next to any negative emotion.

* What do you notice about the balance between positive and negative emotions? We have found that most identify negative emotions at a 3:1 ratio over positives.

Now, look at your list of **positive physical sensations**.

* What did you notice?
* Was this a more difficult list to generate?
* Did you begin to run out of descriptors soon after identifying commonly-referred-to sensations such as cool, warm, kissed, and tickled?

The take-away learning here is that language helps us focus, and since there is a dearth of language for positive physical sensations, our experience of them can be compromised.

However, if we pay closer mindful attention to **positive physical sensations,** we can increase our experience of them.

**Example:**

* The taste of vanilla ice-cream
* Feel of your child’s hand
* The sound of a flute.

# list of Positive Emotions/Feelings

Review the list of Positive Emotions / Feelings. This list you will use in other exercises.

If we can remember a time experiencing positive thoughts in a similar circumstance, we can increase our experience of them in the future, thus renewing the positive physical sensations, thereby changing our brain to be more effective in coping.

# Coping Log Exercise - (Think-Feel-Do Circle)

Its important to become aware of the many signals with our stress responses. Use this Coping Log Handout or just a simple plain paper to start.

To begin write down a recent stressful event:

* It is best to identify the stressful event in a sentence or two. Since stress is triggered by recognition of a threat (either real or imagined), be sure your description represents that threat.
  + For example: You wouldn’t say, “My father-in-law called.” You’d say, “My father-in-law called to complain about my party planning.”

Next:

* Recall how you felt physically as a result of this stress.
  + What Physical Signals did you experience?
  + Physical sensations are the signals/signs that you were stressed. Recall how you felt physically as a result of this stress. Write that down.
* Recall how you felt and what you thought as a result of this stress.
  + If you can, try to recall as many Emotions/Feelings and Thoughts as you can. Working with a minimum of five (5) thoughts will give you a good sample to work with later on when we explore their underlying beliefs.
* Recall your Behavior?

##### Note: the Impact of Thinking on Mood and Behavior

Now let’s shift our attention to looking at how thinking impacts mood and behavior.

Thoughts are shaped by an underlying foundation of beliefs. These beliefs can be positive or negative, adaptive, or maladaptive.

Negative thoughts arise from perceptions of threat, whether the threat is real or imagined. These thoughts are deeply conditioned, and as such, they arise automatically without the benefit of thoughtful reasoning.

Another characteristic of these negative thoughts is that they are often exaggerations of the threat, and as such, they exacerbate our negative moods and feelings, making it more difficult to cope.

As a result, we get stuck in their negativity like a ‘circular pattern’ that can be fueled by maladaptive behaviors.

##### Example

As an example of a ‘*circular pattern’,* let’s say you lose your job. Your negative automatic thoughts might be: “I’m never going to find another job”, “I’m a loser,” “I never succeed at anything I do,” or “My life is ruined.”

These negative automatic thoughts are distorted and might lead to negative behaviors, such as staying home or not talking to anyone about the situation, which creates even more motivation-stealing negative emotions such as fear of failure and depressed mood.

Such negative distorted thoughts can set us up for a spiraling cycle of negative emotions (‘circular pattern’), stress-induced physical sensations and potentially negative behaviors.

While the initial negative thoughts in this situation signaled stress – we can choose for it to be a trigger to spur us towards adaptive (positive) responses.

# Summary

You will develop skills by use of these Stress Awareness Exercises, for they represent a critical first step toward your ability to regulate your automatic reaction to a stressor and develop positive adaptive coping mechanisms.

At the next session, we’ll delve more deeply into associations among our deeply held beliefs, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors; and will have several examples to guide you in the use of the Coping Log.