

Managing Stress

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Stress can set off the “fight or flight” response of the nervous system. This response, which relies on animal instinct instead of thought-out decisions, is helpful in a sudden emergency when a person needs to react quickly by running away or fighting back. But when the fight or flight response stays with people all of the time, these feelings can be destructive. When people with diabetes have trouble coping with stress, it might cause them to stop managing their condition or to use unhealthy behaviors to cope. Sometimes this is called “diabetes distress.” Support for coping with stress and emotions is part of the services that people with diabetes can receive through accredited or recognized programs that offer diabetes self-management education and support (DSMES) services.

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify at least two signs of stress.
- Discuss three strategies for managing stress.
- Name three examples of healthy actions for managing stress.

MODULE 5

🕒 **DISCUSSION TIME**
45-60 minutes

📋 **OUTLINE**

1. Stress reactions
2. Stress management

☆ KEY MESSAGES

1. Stress is a normal part of life. People can learn to manage stress so that it does not cause them health problems.

 2. Being aware (mindful) of the signs of stress in yourself is part of the process of learning to manage stress.

 3. Strategies for managing stress include:
 - Reducing or eliminating the source of stress
 - Changing how you respond to stress
 - Taking a time out
-

🔗 CONNECTING THREADS

Connecting Threads are topics that can be incorporated into *New Beginnings* sessions depending on the goals and needs of your participants.

Recommended Connecting Threads:

- [Facilitating *New Beginnings* Online](#)
- [Commit to Quit: Stopping Smoking](#)
- [Diabetes Self-Management Education and Support Services](#)
- [Spirituality as a Guide and Support](#)

🖱️ GOING VIRTUAL TIPS

- Instead of partnering and role playing during the activity, ask participants to share one at a time with the whole group. Use the virtual whiteboard to brainstorm healthy ways to manage stress. See the [Connecting Thread: Facilitating *New Beginnings* Online](#) for ideas on how to adapt activities.
- Text-only stories that you might have handed out to the participants can be put on a slide in the [New Beginnings PowerPoint template](#). Or you could record yourself, a colleague, or a participant volunteer reading the story before the session.



MATERIALS

Suggested stories for this module:

- [Yvonne's Story A](#): Yvonne talks about how she learned she had type 2 diabetes and overcame denial to make the lifestyle choices to manage her diabetes. (Audio: about 4 minutes)
- [Setting Goals to Improve Your Health](#): Experts share tips for setting achievable goals to manage diabetes. (Video: about 3 minutes)

Handouts:

- [Be Your Own Best Friend Worksheet](#)
- [Making a Plan Worksheet](#)

Group Discussion

This discussion focuses on reactions to stress and stress management.

Stress Reactions Discussion

GROUP LEADER INSTRUCTIONS

TALKING POINTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



SAY:

It is important to learn healthy ways to manage stress. Stress that is not well managed can cause people to make choices that are bad for their health.

Stress is a physical or mental reaction to an event or experience. These events can be good, like planning a wedding or starting a new job. They can also be bad, such as the loss of a loved one or dealing with financial problems.

Stress can be short-term, like the stress you feel when you are running late. Or it can be long term, like the stress you feel when dealing with job problems. Little stresses can also build up to a point where you have a bad reaction to a minor issue.

Stress is a normal and natural response to life events. It is the way a person manages stress that is important. A person can make choices that are not healthy and add to the stress. Or they can make choices that help them take care of their health and cope with the situation.



SAY:

Let me read you a story.

Sydney's story:

Sydney stays up late watching a movie on television. As soon as it's over, she heads for bed knowing that she will have to get up early the next morning for work. Five hours later, Sydney hears her 10-month-old baby crying in the next room. With her eyes half shut, she glares at the alarm clock, which reads 4:38 a.m. As she crawls out of bed, she thinks how nice it would be if her husband would get up to care for the baby, especially since he sets his own hours at his company and can sleep in.

As soon as Sydney gets the baby calmed down, it's time for her other two children to get up for school. As usual, they get up late, and Sydney rushes to fix their breakfast, pack their lunches, and get them out the door. Because the kids are running late, they miss their bus. It's 7:30 a.m., and Sydney must be across town at her job by 8:00 a.m. She dumps her full cup of coffee into the sink and quickly loads the kids and baby into the car. They stop first at the babysitter, then move on to school. Sydney finally pulls up at work at 8:05 a.m. Her heart racing, she walks briskly to her office building. As she gets to her office, her boss meets her with a stack of reports that he needs reviewed by 10:00 am. She takes the box of reports and places them on top of the other stacks of paper on her desk. She thinks to herself, "Who does he think he is handing me these reports to read at the last minute? I have other urgent projects I'm working on. Now, I'll never get out of here on time to pick up the kids." Sydney sits down, closes her eyes, and puts her head in her hands.



ASK:

Now imagine you are Sydney's coworker, and you walk by and see her head in her hands. You ask her if she is okay, and she says she is overwhelmed. She knows you juggle a lot too and wants to know what suggestions you have for her.



ACTIVITY:

Let's get together with a partner and take turns role-playing some ideas you could share with Sydney.



ASK:

- How is Sydney dealing with her stress?
- How could her reaction(s) to the stress be working against her?
- How could her reaction(s) be helping?
- Can you relate to this character? Why or why not?



SAY:

Everyone responds to stress in different ways.
Some people view stressful situations as a challenge to be overcome. Others experience a brain shutdown or emotional short circuit.



ASK:

Think back to your childhood. Were you ever suddenly called on in class to answer a question or do a math problem, and your mind went blank? What is going on in a situation like that?



SAY:

Your brain, in a sense, can short circuit when you are experiencing stress. It is hard to think clearly, make decisions, and deal with things that you could normally handle when your brain short circuits and shuts down. You may have to let your emotions out and work through them to get your brain back on track.



ASK:

Have you ever had the feeling of a lump in your throat, a feeling of tightness as if you were closed in, or a feeling that you couldn't think straight because you were upset and were holding in your emotions? What did you do that helped?

Examples: Yelling, having a good cry, talking to someone, praying.



ASK:

What are some other reactions you have that are a signal you are "stressing out"? Do you take the time to pause and get a sense of your stress level? That can be a great place to start.



SAY:

Some people experience stress as a feeling, such as anger, frustration, panic, or overwhelming sadness. Other people have a physical reaction, such as sweating, skin breakouts, clenched teeth, or a racing heart. Many people will have both—for example, overwhelming sadness that leads to crying.



ASK:

What are some things people do to try to get rid of the feelings that come from stress that are not healthy?

Examples:

- *Overeating or bingeing, especially on junk food.*
- *Skipping meals.*
- *Drinking alcohol or taking drugs.*
- *Yelling at your children, your spouse, or your friends.*
- *Hitting someone or something.*
- *Staring at the television.*



ASK:

What are some healthy things a person can do to deal with these feelings?

Make sure that the discussion brings out positive actions that people can take to calm their reactions and increase their decision-making ability.

Examples might include:

- *Being physically active. Physical activity has a calming effect that helps you think clearly.*
- *Writing in a diary or journal or writing a letter to yourself.*
- *Praying or engaging in other spiritual or mindful activities.*
- *Talking with others in a support group.*
- *Giving yourself permission to cry. You may feel much better after you let those tears flow, and you may then be able to do what you need to do to help safeguard your health.*
- *Sharing your emotions with your family. Your family members are the most important people in your life, so don't shut them out!*
- *Learning to manage stress.*

Stress Management Discussion

GROUP LEADER INSTRUCTIONS

TALKING POINTS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



SAY:

People can manage stress by:

- Removing or reducing the source of stress.
- Changing how they respond to stress.
- Taking a time out.



SAY:

- A person can sometimes remove or reduce the source of stress.
- For example, if reading or listening to the news is causing you stress, you can choose to take a few minutes of quiet reflection or to find a story, song, or podcast to listen to instead.
- The challenge here is identifying what is really causing the stress and understanding the difference between the source of the stress and your reaction to it.



ASK:

For example, you might feel an emotional short circuit every time you have to deal with a certain coworker. Is she the source of your stress?

Maybe the real source of your stress is the fact that your boss gives you more work than you can handle. This is an issue with your boss, not your coworker. The frustration you feel with your coworker is how you are reacting to the situation, but the solution might come from talking to your boss.

You cannot always remove the things that cause you stress. But you can change how you respond to them. For example, your boss may feel that she cannot reassign work to your coworker because you are more qualified. Since you cannot reduce your workload, what can you do to change how you respond to it?



SAY:

Follow these steps when you start to feel a brain shutdown or emotional short circuit:

- Stop before you say or do anything.
- Breathe. Take a few deep breaths. Say a prayer or count to five if that helps.
- Think. What would happen if you reacted with anger or ate something out of frustration? What other actions could you take? Think about the consequences of your actions on your health and on the people around you.
- Choose how you will respond.



SAY:

- Then act. You are now in control of your behavior. Even if you decide to react with your original feeling, you have thought about your choice and are aware of the consequences. For example, you might still be angry with your coworker, but by pausing and thinking you can express your anger in a more controlled way, which might be more productive than flying off the handle.



ASK:

- What are some other ways you can change how you respond to stress?
- What might have been different for the character if he or she had changed how he or she responded to the stressful situation?



ASK:

You can also take a time out.

What does it mean to take a time out in a game? Why do you do it?

Responses: You pause to decide what to do next, you pause to buy yourself some time, you pause to take care of a problem, you pause to pump up the team or break the other team's scoring streak.



ASK:

What happens in a game when the time out is over?

Response: You get back in the game, you try a new strategy, you go back into the game and play harder.



SAY

Sometimes when you are dealing with a stressful situation, you need a time out. This is especially true when you are dealing with a long-term stressor like managing diabetes or supporting a loved one with diabetes.

Do things that give you time for yourself and temporarily take your mind off of the situation.

This does not mean you are getting out of the game. But if you can take some time away from the stressful situation, you can come back to it more focused or with a calmer attitude.

You break the power the stressor has over you. This can help you focus on problem solving and positive steps to manage stress.

Some ways you might take a time out include participating in a hobby, doing some physical activity you enjoy, going to church, or volunteering for community service.



ACTIVITY:

Think-Pair-Share: Emotional Short Circuits and Brain Shutdowns

The goal of this activity is for participants to identify the situations that cause them stress, how they usually respond to stress, and some healthy ways to manage stress.

- Give each participant a 3 x 5-inch memo pad. Ask them to write down a brief description of at least one time when they experienced brain shutdown, an emotional short circuit, or some other reaction caused by stress. Ask them to write down one positive action they could take if this situation were to happen again.
- Ask participants to pair up with another member of the group and talk about what they wrote. Ask them to discuss healthy ways they can respond to stress in the future.
- Ask one member of the pair to share their stress management ideas with the rest of the group.
- Ask participants to write their names on their pads. Emphasize that this book now belongs to them, and it is small enough to keep with them all the time in a purse, or in the pocket of a shirt or jacket. Tell participants that they may also use the memo pad as a personal journal or diary, or to write a letter to themselves.

They can keep the notebook with them and write down:

- Any situations in which they experienced brain shutdown, emotional short circuit, or some other stress response.
- What they did (or were tempted to do) in that situation, such as yelling, overeating, or hiding from others.
- What they plan to do to deal more positively with strong emotions in the future.



SAY:

Talk to your doctor if you feel overwhelmed by stress, or if you have stress symptoms that do not go away after you have tried the stress management skills.

Your doctor can help rule out any physical causes of your symptoms and refer you to specialists if you need more help.

Your doctor can also help you figure out if you are experiencing stress or depression and anxiety, which can be treated with counseling, medication, or both.

CLOSE THE SESSION

- Take final questions.
- Thank the group for their participation.
- Explain the at-home activity, if applicable.
- Remind participants about the next session. Ask if they have specific questions or issues they would like addressed.
- Ask participants to do the session evaluation.

AT-HOME ACTIVITY

- Ask participants to do the [Be Your Own Best Friend Worksheet](#) if they did not do it during the session.
- Ask participants to do the goal-setting activity or review their goals if they did not do it during the session.

RESOURCES

Use these resources to learn more about stress management, expand the discussion, or provide additional resources to participants.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- [Diabetes Kickstart](#)
- [Diabetes and Mental Health](#)
- [Ten Tips for Coping with Diabetes Distress](#)
- [Your Diabetes Compass](#)

[National Institute of Mental Health](#)

REFERENCES

- Lloyd C, Smith J, & Weigner K. (2005). Stress and diabetes: A review of the links. *Diabetes Spectrum*, 18(2), 121-127.
- Murdock K, LeRoy A, Lacourt T, Duke D, Heijnen C, Fagundes C. (2016). Executive functioning and diabetes: The role of anxious arousal and inflammation. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 71: 102-109.