Stress Management
Podcast

PART 1

“Normalising”

Stress …………………… the very word can evoke an uneasy, uncomfortable feeling. Yet STRESS is normal : a physical and mental experience that is a normal part of life. Stress can be positive or negative. When it is positive it is called “eustress”. This is a motivating tension or pressure which serves the useful purpose of arousing us to take action. For instance, recall what it feels like when you first learn to drive a car.

### HERE DESCRIBE NORMAL APPREHENSION + EXCITEMENT ON FIRST FEW DRIVING ATTEMPTS …….

"You’re sitting behind the wheel for the first time ; you feel adult, in control; you’re dreaming about the freedom of movement a car can give you. You are nevertheless tense, concerned that you get it right, and avoid having a prang. You’re excited and apprehensive -- all at the same time."

When stress is negative -- called “dis-stress” – it creates tension and anxiety, and actually disrupts performance. So in the case of a Learner Driver who experiences dis-stress, the task of learning to drive becomes much more difficult. Thoughts of failing the Licence test intrude constantly; anxiety about crashing the car becomes oppressive ; the hands sweat as they grip the wheel ; finally, the Learner avoids the situation of stress by cancelling lessons, and making excuses as to why.

In our workshop today, we explore the nature of stress ; examine some situations in which each of us might experience stress; and reveal an approach to managing stress when it is actually negative, when it is disabling.

Let’s start with you :

Reflect on the past week ..... nominate 3 experiences /events in the past week that have been stressful for you…….
Take a few moments to jot them down.

[### background music here : Piazzolla, “Libertango”]

Now place each of these 3 experiences in a category. We’ll use 4 broad categories :
HOME LIFE
WORK ( employment )
UNIVERSITY ( or TAFE )
SOCIAL LIFE

Finally, rate each of the 3 on a simple scale of 1 --- 10, with 1 being very slightly uncomfortable or disturbing, and 10 being extremely painful or frightening.

Now you have a small “window of insight” into the sorts of things in your life that elicit a stress response. What is your pattern ?
Do your experiences of stress tend to cluster in one category ?
Or are they spread through many areas of your life ?
Do your levels of stress tend to the lower, or higher, end of the 1 10 spectrum ?

At this point it's important just to notice this pattern : do not judge yourself ; certainly do not blame yourself ! Remember stress is normal : you are simply exploring the areas of stress in your life.

Now we are ready for a more specific definition of stress :

STRESS IS JUST THE WAY WE RESPOND TO CHANGE ; STRESS CAN BE POSITIVE, AS WHEN YOU PERCEIVE THE CHANGE AS EXCITING, CHALLENGING, AN OPPORTUNITY ; OR STRESS CAN BE NEGATIVE, AS WHEN YOU PERCEIVE THE CHANGE AS PROBLEMATIC, THREATENING, AN OBSTACLE.

STRESS occurs when you have the perception that you do not have the resources to cope with the demands of a situation.
To introduce a new—and quite useful—term that you may not know…………….  

The “STRESSOR” = the situation, or event, or problem that is the trigger for a stress response. So “stress” generally refers to the response; “stressor” to the situation.

If you look back to the 3 experiences of stress from your past week, you will find that the stressors in your life that trigger a negative response are most likely to be:

- Seen as potentially threatening
- Seen as novel or unfamiliar
- Perceived as outside of your control, or over which you have little control
- May take a long time to resolve

Now we have more clearly DEFINED stress, and the stressor, we can notice that each person has a unique set of signs and symptoms that make up the stress response. These signs and symptoms fall into 3 broad types: PHYSICAL === EMOTIONAL === BEHAVIOURAL. The following Symptom Checklist, from Cornell University, is quite comprehensive.

### HERE READ A FEW SYMPTOMS OF EACH TYPE, EXPLAINING THAT THE SEVERITY AND INTENSITY OF THESE SYMPTOMS VARIES GREATLY FROM PERSON TO PERSON

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**PART 2**

"Realising"

How do you know when you ARE stressed?

Ever had the experience of being busy,busy,busy in your daily life, slogging on for weeks or months -- with eyes on the task that HAS to be done – and then having a vacation? Suddenly you stop; you are at rest. And then you fall ill with a really nasty flu or virus, and spend the first week of your vacation in bed! This is actually a common phenomenon for people in busy, industrialised countries.

Very likely the person did not realise that stress – in this case, work-related stress – was building over weeks and months. If the person had been more aware, and attuned, to her/his own body and mind, then the signs and symptoms of stress could have been recognised.

In Part 1 we reviewed a sample of signs and symptoms …….. PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIOURAL. What do you recognise as your typical signs? Are you attuned to signs of stress in yourself?

Let’s try a small experiment in STRESS MANAGEMENT ===

As a student, what is the MOST STRESSFUL experience you have faced? Take a few moments to recall this time in your student life ….. It may have happened quite recently………now draw a quick sketch of yourself at this time ….. it can be a sketch of your face, of just a simple stick-figure. You don’t need to be Picasso : it’s just a doodle.

### HERE BACKGROUND MUSIC : Stan Getz, “Corcovado”.

Right next to the sketch, write down a brief list of the physical changes you went through, such as fatigue, or insomnia;

# PAUSE

List the emotional changes, such as feeling irritable, or insecure;

# PAUSE

finally, list the behaviours you may not have been aware of at the time, but you recognise now, such as heavier drinking, or withdrawing from your friends, isolating yourself.

# PAUSE

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NOW LOOK AT YOUR PICTURE …………………
What you are now seeing is a profile of your most stressful student experience. What you have gained is awareness.

Remember that a moment ago I said: “Let’s try a small experiment in stress management” ; what you have just done is the crucial first step – the step of awareness. In order to manage stress, you must first become aware of the stressor [for instance, an exam for which you were not prepared] and then aware of the response in yourself – physically, emotionally, behaviourally.

CONGRATULATIONS ! YOU HAVE TAKEN THE FIRST STEP IN STRESS MANAGEMENT.

### MUSIC : “I’m Beginning to See the Light” [ Barbara Cook ]

The second step in stress management is a very practical one. “Stress-busters” are practical and healthy stress-reduction activities… many of these you will already know, and some you have probably tried.

Massage
Sport / exercise
Listening to music / dancing
Bubble bath / spa
Bushwalking
Meditation
Yoga
Tai Chi

Of course, you will have heard of these practical stress-busters before. The trick is to discover one, or two, that YOU find do in fact relieve your tension, calm your agitated mind, and revive your body.

Not everyone, for instance, finds meditation relaxing; some people need a more physically active exercise to release tension.

And the reason that these practical stress-busters do help is this : stress is a physical phenomenon, as well as a mental phenomenon. So activities that relax the body, soothe the body, and invigorate the body have an impact that is not only physical, but also have an impact on the mind. This is what we mean by the “HOLISTIC APPROACH” to human health and well-being. Body, mind and spirit are interconnected …… they cannot be separated into discrete entities or parts.

### MUSIC : Instrumental , “ Nesting Of the Cranes”
[ Riley Lee ]

So where are we now in our journey of discovery in the art of managing stress? We took the first step – the step of awareness – emphasising the critical importance of identifying the stressor, and of noticing our response . We took the second step of finding out – through trial and error – the particular stress-buster[s] that assist in relieving tension in the body, and agitation in the mind.

The THIRD STEP is the clincher !

The Third Step does require more willingness to look directly and honestly at oneself. And the Third Step is most valuable in addressing an experience of stress in your life that is more persistent, long-term, and intractable.

Here’s an example ……… you live in a shared household where most of the time there is conflict and disharmony between you and the housemates. Your home life is marred by stress.

Another example that many students can relate to ! ……… this semester you are enrolled in a Course you detest – for me it’s always been Statistics ! : can’t abide the subject – and every time you have a Statistics class, or struggle with a Statistics assignment, you feel yourself in the grip of stress.
It's at this point that you may well find that your favourite practical stress-buster – like exercise or yoga -- is not enough. It's time to address the mental component of your stress reaction more directly. This will take a little more courage.

Now you will need to develop an awareness of perception: how do you perceive the stressor?

So it is perception that we examine in more depth in PART 3.

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PART 3

Why should perception be so important when we are learning how to manage stress?

Let's illustrate this by reference to a stressor that is commonly experienced by students, especially in the under-30 age bracket: the break-up of an intimate relationship [or the absence of one]. Whether it is a break-up, or a lack, of intimacy, the result is often a sense of loss and emptiness. The first thing to notice about loss of intimacy is its universality: most people, at least once in their lives, do go through it. It is a fact of life. And this is true for people regardless of gender, of ethnic background, or of personality type. So ……. this fact of life is not going to change!

What can change?

Your perception of the relationship break-up, your perception of the lack of intimacy. If you are a human being, then you are probably going to experience the break-up as a stressor. That is understandable! But when the perception of the stressor becomes:

“I cannot cope with this loss!”

“I’ll never get over this”

“why didn’t I do … X, Y, or Z… so this break-up would never have happened?”

“everyone else has got a partner; there must be something wrong with me that no one wants me”

- then the stress reaction intensifies and becomes more debilitating.

So you see that it is not so much the break-up, the loss in and of itself that is the problem: it is your perception of the loss.

By “perception” we mean not only your thoughts and attitudes (such as I just described), but also your feelings, your emotions that are triggered by the stressor. These feelings could include: frustration, helplessness, grief, anger, fear, dread, or self-blame.

Can your perception of the stressor be changed?

Well, yes it can.

Surprisingly, changing your perception of the stressor begins with the act of ACCEPTANCE:

Accept your thoughts and attitudes about the stressor, however strange or disorganised or volatile they might be

Accept your feelings and emotions about the stressor, however uncomfortable they might be

And when I say "ACCEPT", I do not mean a superficial recognition, along the lines: " Oh yeah, man, my girlfriend freaked me out when she dumped the relationship….."

Acceptance here means fully acknowledging all the thoughts and feelings the stressor brings forth; and then befriending these thoughts and feelings. They make me uncomfortable, but they are mine! Tell yourself: "It’s OK to be miserably sad when I am dumped; it’s OK to be anxious, even afraid, of loneliness."

The worst thing you can do is run away from the thoughts and feelings associated with stress. This is the opposite of acceptance.

### MUSIC: Cleo Laine, "I’ve Got It Bad and That Ain’t Good".

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AN EXERCISE IN ACCEPTANCE

Try an exercise right now. An exercise in acceptance.
Concentrate on a stressor that is bothering you today.
It may be a financial pressure, or it may be a problem at your job. It may be a big stressor, or a small stressor………………..Have you got it in your mind…………? ……………
Now focus on all the thoughts that this stressor typically gives rise to ………………such as :

“This is awful” [A]
“Why does this happen to me?” [B]
“It’s not my fault” [C]
“I’m never going to get over this problem” [D]
“I’m too stressed to deal with this now; I’ll deal with it later” [E]

Acknowledge the thoughts, and accept that these are very often the thoughts you carry, like a burden or load you carry on your shoulders.
Do not analyse the thoughts, simply accept their presence.  ## ## PAUSE
Next focus on the emotions that are so often prompted by the stressor : maybe frustration, maybe anger, maybe a sense of helplessness. Give these emotions your kind attention, without judging them.
## PAUSE
What are you aware of now? Do you notice that when you really ACCEPT – these ARE my thoughts, these ARE my feelings – that the struggle subsides.
The element of struggle, of inner conflict, fades away. I do not mean that the troubled thoughts and painful feelings disappear. No : the added tension and discomfort caused by your struggle with these thoughts and feelings is what disappears.
### MUSIC : Riley Lee, “Distant Call of the Deer”.

You are now in a much better position to change your perception of the stressor.
Change follows acceptance.

Once again, look at the thoughts you have just identified and acknowledged. Look with an open, honest gaze. What alternative thoughts are you open to? For instance :
Instead of [A] + [B] , you can be open to the thought: “Painful things, unjust things, unpleasant things HAPPEN …… and they happen to good people !”
Instead of [C] , you can be open to the thought: “I can take responsibility for the parts of this problem that I am causing ; and let go of the parts outside my responsibility”
Instead of [D] , you can be open to the thought: “I recall – a time in my life when I overcame a problem as serious as this; so I am able to tackle this current problem”
Instead of [E] , you can be open to the thought: “The future I do not control ; I only control my thoughts and my actions in the present moment”.

Now you may be wondering , “How do these alternative thoughts – thoughts that are more self-empowering and self-liberating – arise?” “ How can I be open to them?”
There are 2 aspects to this :
External knowledge and help…….. You may find alternative thoughts and ideas in talking to friends, or to a counsellor or teacher.
Internal wisdom…….You will notice that when you have really taken the step of accepting the anxious, troubled thoughts you normally carry, then your own inner voice is freed to propose alternative thoughts.

Finally, bring the same open, unclouded attention to the emotions you identified and acknowledged. Become aware of the shift in your emotional state as the alternative ways of thinking about this problem occur to you. You may find that fear lessens, loosening its grip on you. There is still some anxiety, but it no longer has to control your actions. You can allow the anxiety, without being dominated by it.
Most important, you now give yourself permission to be sad, or angry, or scared, and you do not try to escape from these human feelings. You may come to realise that the more open and welcoming you are of all emotions – both happy emotions and uncomfortable or painful emotions – the more your perception of the stressor is open to change. What seemed like an obstacle before, can now become an opportunity.
### MUSIC : Shirley Horn, “Come A Little Closer”

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So let's summarise the process we have just moved through: the process which I have called the "THIRD STEP" of Stress Management.

FIRST  Identify the nature of the stressor — exactly what it is that induces in you a stress reaction.
SECOND Accept fully the thoughts and attitudes that are triggered by this stressor; and then accept the feelings that you experience when faced with this stressor.
THIRD Open your mind to alternative thoughts that create opportunity; that emphasise the strengths and talents you do have; that take responsibility, but avoid self-blame.
FOURTH Notice how your feelings transform as your thoughts change; welcome feelings both painful and pleasurable, for it is the range and depth of feelings that make you fully human, fully alive.

### MUSIC: STAN GETZ, Bossa Nova (uptempo) "Chega De Saudade" [No More Blues]

Thank you for your attentive curiosity in listening to this podcast. I hope you have found it helpful. And remember that there are more resources on the MAPP website, on the Counselling Service website and on the Study & Learning Centre website. And of course, you are always welcome to attend the MAPP workshops, or come and speak to a counsellor or a learning advisor in person.