

Learning To Manage Stress

Target Audience: Adults

Objectives: Participants will:

1. Be able to define stress.
2. Understand the body's response to stress.
3. List the effects that stress may have on blood glucose.
4. Identify and evaluate personally stressful situations.
5. Identify ways by which they currently cope with stress.
6. Select appropriate ways to deal with stressful situations.

Equipment: Overhead projector; flip chart and marker or overhead projector and dry-erase pen

Time Required: 30–45 minutes; for shorter lesson, focus on the stress of diabetes and ways to reduce stress—have audience do stress test at home; skip Stressful Situation Activity

Handouts: “Stressful Situation Activity” handouts (Situations 1 and 2); “What’s Your Score on the Stress Test?;” “Take Action Against Stress” (1 and 2)

Lesson Plan

Life seems to get more stressful every year. We feel pressured by time and all the changes around us. For many people, long-term job security and short commutes to work are a thing of the past. Also marriages seem to break up every day, and we face more and more health issues as we get older. It’s no surprise we feel overwhelmed and have trouble coping. How many of you feel more stress now than you did a few years ago? (*Participants raise their hands appropriately.*)

Positive as well as negative events can be stressful. Too much stress, especially over a long time, can lead to health problems. It can certainly make it harder to control your blood glucose. Limiting stressful events and learning how to cope with those we can’t avoid are vital for our health and well-being.

Today we will talk about what stress is, why it occurs, how your body responds to it, and healthy ways by which you can cope with it.

What Is Stress?

Stress occurs when an event or situation causes so much strain that your body begins to feel under attack. Factors that trigger stress in one person may be different for someone else. Sources of stress may be your job, your marriage, your family, or your health. (*Show overhead entitled “Top-10 Daily Hassles.”*)

How the Body Responds to Stress

The body's response to stress is called the flight-or-fight response. During the flight-or-fight response, the body releases high levels of hormones, which increase your heart rate, blood pressure, and blood glucose levels. An increase in blood glucose provides extra energy in case you need to run away or fend off an enemy. If this energy isn't used, it can leave you feeling tired and tense, or may even cause a headache. (*Show overheads entitled "Signs of Stress [1 and 2]."*)

Stress and Diabetes

Diabetes is a physical and emotional stressor. Many people newly diagnosed with diabetes feel overwhelmed. When you were diagnosed, you might have felt bombarded with too much information to remember, too much medicine to take, and too many old habits to change. Managing your diabetes probably left you with little energy to cope with the other things in your life.

Stress can alter your blood glucose level. First, people who are under stress may exercise less, forget to monitor their blood glucose, or not take time to plan and eat healthy meals. Second, stress releases hormones that cause the blood glucose to go out of control. Each person's blood glucose responds differently to these hormones. Some people get a low blood glucose reaction called hypoglycemia, while others experience a high blood glucose reaction called hyperglycemia. Either way you can feel ill and exhausted.

Coping With Stress

When faced with stress, it's important to take positive action. To change your response to stress, you need to recognize how you respond to stress. How do you usually deal with stress? (*Have audience members list ways they handle stress on the flip chart or blank overhead.*)

Because each person responds to stress differently, we need a variety of ways to cope. There are two main ways of coping. (*Show overhead entitled "Coping Strategies."*)

1. **Problem-focused coping** means going directly to the source of the problem to fix it.
 - **Sample Problem:** Your spouse likes the volume of the television loud so that he or she can listen to it from the dining room, but this makes you tense.
 - **Solution:** You politely tell your spouse how anxious you feel when the television is too loud. You ask him or her if you can turn it down and whether he or she can move closer to the television.
2. **Emotion-focused coping** is learning to live with stress by changing the way you respond to it.
 - **Sample Problem:** Your boss often comes to work in a bad mood, which seems to affect your mood.
 - **Solution:** Change your way of responding. Tell yourself not to take it personally. Try smiling at your boss and giving him or her a kind word. It may not change your boss's mood, but you may feel better.

Other Ways To Reduce the Effects of Stress in Your Life

(Review the two overheads entitled “Stress Management [1 and 2].”) There are other ways to control stress:

- **Get organized.** Sit down and think about what you need to handle in your life. Then get organized. When you have too much to do and a lot on your mind, you tend to start worrying. Instead, organize your day with a “to-do” list or a day planner and set up priorities. You’ll be surprised how a little bit of organization can greatly reduce your anxiety.
- **Set goals but don’t expect perfection.** Break down everything you must do to control your diabetes into small steps. Don’t try to make the changes all at once or you’ll probably give up. Instead, make gradual changes and take time to celebrate any progress you make toward your final goals.
- **Banish bad thoughts.** If certain thoughts make you mad, sad, or angry, then distract yourself with more pleasant thoughts. Good ways to occupy your mind are reading a book, working on a hobby, memorizing a poem, or reciting a special prayer.
- **Keep a journal.** Recording your thoughts on paper will help you gain perspective on a situation and let you vent your feelings without worrying about how others will react.
- **Take care of the basics.** Make time to get enough sleep and to eat nutritious food. If you are tired and poorly nourished, problems may seem larger than they really are and you may respond to them unwisely.
- **Take care of your diabetes.** By watching your blood glucose closely, you will be able to tell if your symptoms of anxiety are due to stress or hypo- or hyperglycemia. The symptoms are often very similar.
- **Exercise.** Exercise is a big stress reliever. It also helps control your blood glucose, blood pressure, and weight. Before starting an exercise program, check with your doctor. If the doctor says it’s OK, you may want to try walking during your lunch break, stretching between meetings, or doing water exercise to loosen tight muscles.
- **Learn how to relax.** There are many ways to relax. Some people take a warm bath or listen to soothing music. Others watch sports, go fishing, or learn breathing exercises or muscle relaxation techniques. Each person is different and it’s smart to have a variety of ways to calm down. *(Let audience members know that at the end of the lesson they will try a relaxation technique together as a group).*
- **Try to reduce the stress in your life.** If you are having problems with a relationship, make an effort to patch things up or seek outside help. If you have made too many commitments at work or to volunteer organizations, try to gradually phase yourself out of some of them. Then don’t add new ones. Learn to say no and recommend others who may have more time to take on the responsibility.

- **Join a support group.** Some stress never goes away, no matter how hard you try. Diabetes is a good example. A diabetic support group is a great place to share your feelings with individuals dealing with the same issues you have. No one understands your struggle better than someone who also has diabetes.
- **Have fun!** One of the best ways to get rid of stress is to have some fun every day. Exploring a new interest, planning a night out with friends, going on a family picnic, spending a weekend at the beach or mountains, or going shopping can all be fun things to do. Even a small pleasure like playing with a pet can make a big difference in your attitude.

Activities

If time permits:

1. Read one of the “Stressful Situation Activity” handouts and let your group give suggestions for reducing the stress described.
2. Pass out “What’s Your Score on the Stress Test?” handout and have participants find their scores.
3. Review and practice the relaxation techniques. (*Pass out “The Action Against Stress” handouts [1 and 2]*).