



Workshops and Presentations **Written Notes and relevant material**

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The following materials are the written notes of a presentation or workshop run by Leigh Nomchong. They are provided here for the benefit of the participants of that workshop or presentation. If you have not attended the workshop/presentation you may find some of the aspects of the material a bit confusing. This is because these notes are a guideline to the event and not a full account of the event. Therefore, if you have not been a participant, you should not view this material on its own, as other relevant and significant material may have been presented verbally or visually.

Please note that we have undergone changes over the years, hence our letter head can vary at times depending on when the workshop/presentation was run.

If you would like a work shop or presentation run for your organisation, or you would like more information, you can contact us below:

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LIFE DECISIONS & STRESSES WORKSHOP

STRESS MANAGEMENT

DEFINITION?

There are a wide range of definitions of what stress is. We all have our own definitions, yet we all agree that we know what stress is. Some of these definitions relate to the emotional experience of having stress, while others relate to the physiological process involved when stress takes place. The most appropriate way to define stress, in the context it is most commonly known for, is to see it as a phenomenon that can adversely affect the quality of our lives. In other words, in today's terms it is something that has an adverse effect upon us.

Stress has a range of interesting properties. For example,

- it works on the weakest link in your system
- it is cumulative in nature
- it is an immuno/suppressant
- it will often give you a range of physiological symptoms, rather than psychological symptoms
- there is good stress and bad stress (Inverted U hypothesis)

SYMPTOMS

Stress can be very subtle in the symptoms that it produces. It can manifest itself in the strangest of ways. Let me give you an example (the patient who presented with suspected brain tumour – but actually had dissociation phenomena due to overstress). Because the body is so well designed and has a number of back up systems and methods of dealing with pressure, stress can often not be noticed, but yet it can make itself felt.

There are a number of common symptoms that most people experience when they have been under a lot of stress for a long time. Here are some typical examples:

- Mood swings
- disrupted sleep (having difficulty getting off to sleep, or waking up in the middle of the night)
- poor concentration
- poor memory performance
- tension headaches
- physical symptoms including rashes, irritable bowel syndrome, ringing in the ears
- suppression of the immune system (catching colds and flues)
- being vague
- being oversensitive
- Sensitivity to Stress – often when we are subjected to overstress, we become more sensitive to stress, and so we can get a cycle occurring.

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- Overreacting to things
- feeling lightheaded or dizzy
- anxiety
- depression

CAUSES

There are a number of environmental factors that contribute significantly to the production of overstress. Let me give you some examples:

- General stresses of life (mortgages, debts, work demands, gardening etc)
- Cognitive Dissonance
- Victimisation (being harassed by a significant other, boss or partner!)
- Domestic pressures (family issues, kids, aging parents)
- Unsolvable problems
- Burn out (its just been going on for so long)
- Illness makes us more susceptible to stress
- Learned Helplessness

TREATMENT

The treatment of stress is a very complex one and is often influenced by the individual's particular reaction to stress. This is why you get so many variations in approach to dealing with stress. However, most clinicians will agree that prevention is the most effective treatment there is. For this reason treatment is often a combination of installing preventative strategies and treating immediate symptoms. Let's discuss some of the treatment interventions available.

MEDICATION - this is a controversial area. Some clinicians argue that pharmacological treatment is a complete treatment in itself, and others suggest that is merely an aid. Antidepressants and sedatives.

ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE - another controversial area. Alternative medicine is increasingly being used by Australians every year. This may be due to its efficacy, or the cost of modern medicine.

COUNSELLING - naturally I will have a strong bias in this regard. However, psychological counselling is increasingly being shown as an effective and comprehensive treatment intervention.

COUNSELLING

Counselling involves a number of strategies and techniques aimed at teaching the individual how to reduce existing stress and how to minimise or prevent impending stress. The following are examples of some of the techniques used:

- Attitudes, values and beliefs in affecting how we see something as being stressful or not
- Support structures (relationships, friends, family)
- Exercise
- Diet
- Relaxation
- Emotional Control (locus of control)
- Self Talk (affirmations)
- The role of perception

DYSFUNCTIONAL COPING

There are a number of ways of coping with stress. Some are more productive than others. Here are some examples of dysfunctional ways of coping with stress:

Excessive drinking: This is a good short term strategy. Excessive use of alcohol will give you temporary respite. It gives you that feeling of euphoria. It numbs the system and makes it all go away for a while. Unfortunately, it is only temporary and over time this produces other problems. For example, it produces an intolerance to itself and the effect of the drug is diminished.

Recreational drug abuse: same as above.

Eating Disorders: eating too much or not eating enough to produce the same problem. A discussion way of coping with stress. When we are eating we are often stress free. This is another examples of a short term strategy that does not have long-term advantages.

Shopping: going out on a shopping spree can be a very uplifting experience, but is obviously a very short term strategy indeed. (Example - shoplifting)

Obsessions: this is where a person becomes obsessed with a thought or idea, which they use as a distraction so as not to deal with the significant problem which is causing the stress. (Example - The public servant who was referred to me for overstress because he was disgruntled with work as he had not been promoted, but was too busy to apply for promotion).

DECISION MAKING

There are many decisions that we make on many matters, but no matter what the issue – all decisions have one thing in common, the decision itself. Decision making requires the same thinking process. What differs is the subject matter and magnitude or consequence of the decision. But that still does not detract from the actual decision-making.

WHY PEOPLE MAKE THE DECISIONS THEY DO:

FEAR - Some people are avoidant of making decisions because they are fearful of the potential adverse consequences of the decision that they may make. Is it too much? What will happen? Is this what I want? These kind of questions leads one to being overwhelmed and the person vacillates and becomes immobilised.

LOGIC VS EMOTION - Decision making can be logically or emotionally driven. E.g. Logic – do this as it makes sense to do it. Whereas emotionally based decisions often defy logic. For example, the decisions that people make in property settlement issues, or murder/suicides.

NOT ENTITLED – Some people have grown up through life believing that they are not entitled to make decisions or that someone else will make decisions for them. For example, we all have gone through the school system where there is a whole institution devoted to making decisions for us, although this is now improving.

SHORT TERM VS LONG TERM DECISION MAKING – There are people who are good at making short term decisions but not very good at making long term decisions. For example, one can be focussed on the next promotion or job, but have no clear plan about their career or occupation.

INFLUENCES – Some times our decision making can be influenced by a range of factors. Cultural – where one is raised to think in a particular way. Stress – people under a lot of stress have a greater tendency to make emotional decisions rather than logical ones. Stress management has an effect on how you manage your time, and what decisions you make. Overstress impairs the human decision making system. When you are overstressed you make decisions that you regret later when you are not stressed. Education and socio/economic backgrounds affect our decision making (eg lost children avoiding police searchers). Pre learned dysfunctions, eg

MACRO VS MICRO – Some people can make micro decisions very easily, but increase the magnitude of the decision and it becomes overwhelming and they are unable to decide. In reality they are not having problems with the decision, they are having problems with the magnitude of outcome from the decision.

COMMUNICATING YOUR DECISION

Having made your decision, sometimes you will need to communicate it to another person. Just like all things in life there are varying ways of communicating. Some are more efficient than others.

- you can instruct someone of your decision (and hope that they accept it)
- you can try and force someone to comply with your decision
- you can convince someone to accept your decision

Your method of delivery can sometimes be just as important as the decision itself. Sometimes you need to question yourself as to the purpose of the decision, and what you hope to achieve.

GOALS

When we have no clear direction, that is no goals, we tend to waste a lot of time and squander resources. Goals are important as they give us direction. Yet surprisingly many people do not assign goals as they are fearful that if they assign goals they will fail to meet them, and thereby be a failure! Yet, goals clarify our direction and help us spend our time wisely.

Again, goal identification is a personal issue, but has the same factors affecting it as does Priorities. Goals can be small and short term, large and long term, AND contradictory! Long term goals often generate a series of short goals, which appear as incremental stages to achieving the long term goal. Goals are important in time management.

Formal vs Informal Goals – Formal is the stated mission statement of the organisation, and Informal is when one of the partners is sparing with one of the other partners to gain some benefit.

PRIORITIES

We all know about priorities. It is part of the human system of coping with demands upon us and meeting those demands with a finite amount of resources. Prioritisation is a way of achieving efficient utilisation of resources. This is another word for work.

Priorities are determined on a range of factors including:

- Importance of the task
- forced level priority (by superior)
- ease of completion of the task
- minimisation of later adverse problems
- prevention

The listing of priorities is a personal thing. We make judgements on the basis of our preferences, prejudices, fear (of failure) and skill. Making priorities is learnt behaviour i.e. it is a skill developed over time with practice! However, how you determine priorities is not as important as the fact that you make priorities. Many people waste time and resources because they do not prioritise. This is even more important in a situation of high workloads and competing deadlines.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

GUILT

This is a universal phenomenon that affects all human behaviour. It is very popular, and it is applied in every subtle facet of our lives. But what is its purpose? What function does it perform for you? Why is it so popular? This mechanism often provides us with the motivation to become overstressed.

PROBLEM SOLVING

What is the difference between problem solving and worry? Is there a difference? Surprisingly, both are very similar, not the subtle difference is very important. Problem solving is a normal everyday human intervention with our environment. Worry is a learnt behaviour.

EXPECTATIONS

We all have expectations. The question is our those expectations realistic? Sometimes we have expectations that we have influenced by our own personal experience, and this can bias

us. Every moment of the day we create expectations, many of which are reasonable. However, when we have an unreasonable expectation, and we do not appreciate that it is unreasonable, we are just looking for disappointment. Or worse, frustration.

An example of expectations is the concept of permanency in the public service.

FRUSTRATION

Frustration occurs when our expectations are not being met. Depending on the issue, the frustration can be quite excessive.

THE NATURE WORK

The nature of work in this country has changed. With a high unemployment rate the labour market begins to change. Suddenly it becomes even more important to be competitive. Similarly, it becomes important to be flexible and adjustable over one's entire working career. Whether we like it or not this is the future. To survive in such an environment we need to be prepared to undertake and accept change.

We need to be able to cope with fluctuating workloads, low staff levels and what seems to be "unreasonable" demands made by management.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CLIENTS

This will be an experiential exercise conducted in the workshop

Remember that what you make of your life is more determined by your own actions and reactions than any one other factor!