

Specific Techniques of Coping with Stress

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WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson is going to cover techniques for managing stress. Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Stress Management Techniques
 - a. Meditation
 - b. Guided Imagery
 - c. Progressive Relaxation
2. Stress Inoculation

1. Stress Management Techniques

Stress is a body's reaction to changes within a person's environment. It is a helpful reaction in the short term because it can lead to reactions like a fight or flight response, which can help a person escape from situations that are harmful or dangerous.

However, stress can also lead to mental or physical problems in the long term like fatigue, irritability, decreased mental functioning, heart disease from increased blood pressure, ulcers, and decreased immunological functioning. Because of these responses, it is important for people to learn stress management techniques to better cope. Stress management is what we refer to as any cognitive or behavioral strategy that a person can learn to reduce their stress and its harmful effects.

1a. Meditation

The most popular, and historically the longest-used stress management technique, is **meditation**. Meditation can take many different forms and is a trained relaxation technique in which a person focuses on something else like their breathing, bodily sensation, or surroundings to gain an increased awareness. This is often considered an altered sense of consciousness. Meditation can help to reduce psychological stress by removing anxious thoughts from the mind, and it can also help to calm the body's excitatory stress reactions.



TERM TO KNOW

Meditation

A trained relaxation technique in which a person focuses on something (like breathing, body sensations, imagery, surroundings, etc.) to gain an increased awareness

1b. Guided Imagery

A related technique is called **guided imagery**. This is a coping strategy where a person, instead of trying to relax the mind or trying to think of nothing, purposefully thinks of things that are both positive and calming to that person. These are mental images that help to relax the body, as well as reduce a person's stress. This technique can positively affect the body in the same way that meditation does.

A person using guided imagery will often envision themselves in a calming place, like being alone on a tropical beach or out in the middle of the woods. While a person is doing this, they try to use all of their senses.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** For example, someone picturing a beach will try to incorporate sounds, like the waves crashing on the beach, or the smells, like the salt in the air.



TERM TO KNOW

Guided Imagery

A coping strategy related to meditation, where a person, instead of relaxing the mind, instead thinks of things that are positive and calming

1c. Progressive Relaxation

Another technique that people use is called **progressive relaxation**. This technique is where a person intentionally tenses up, then relaxes specific muscles in their body in succession. They will start with one particular part of their body, like their shoulders, back, or legs, and they will tense it up, and then release it. The person focuses on that feeling of relaxation when they release that tension, which helps to reduce that person's stress. This technique controls the mind by first controlling the body, and was developed by an American physician in the 1920s. It has been proven to be very effective against stress-related illnesses, and is still very popular today.



TRY IT

Try out this technique right now! First, focus on one part of your body. Tense it up for a few seconds, and then focus on the release as you relax it.



TERM TO KNOW

Progressive Relaxation

A technique where a person intentionally tenses, then relaxes specific muscles of the body in succession

2. Stress Inoculation

One of the biggest factors that leads to ongoing and long-term stress are the negative thoughts caused by a

person themselves. Some event might initiate the stress, but a person dwelling on it, or the bad feelings that are caused by the stress, will cause that stress to continue or worsen over time.

Psychologist Donald Meichenbaum proposed a technique called **stress inoculation**, which is when a person, instead of focusing on those negative thoughts, focuses instead on positive thoughts and feelings to reduce anxiety. Meichenbaum said that **negative self-statements** were a reflection of these negative thoughts and emotions. These are critical thoughts that a person has that increase the stress, particularly in anticipation of an upcoming event.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** A person might say to themselves, “I can't do this” or “I'm terrible at this.” These kinds of self-statements can serve to make them feel defeated or increase their stress over time.

His technique involves countering these thoughts with what he called **coping statements**. Coping statements are positive, reassuring statements that help to stop negative self-statements. Simply put, it's a way of talking yourself up. These statements might include phrases like, “I'll do this one step at a time,” to enable a person to talk themselves through a situation, or “I've done this before,” to remind themselves that a situation isn't a big deal. A person might remind themselves to stay focused, or that a situation will be over soon.



TERMS TO KNOW

Stress Inoculation

Where a person focuses on positive thoughts and feelings to reduce anxiety

Negative Self-Statements

Critical thoughts a person has that increase stress, particularly in anticipation of an event

Coping Statements

Positive, reassuring statements to stop negative self-statements



SUMMARY

Stress management techniques are any cognitive or behavioral strategies that a person can learn to help cope with stress and its harmful effects. Meditation is one of the most popular techniques for stress management. It is a trained relaxation technique that involves focusing on something else, like breathing, body sensations, imagery, surroundings, etc., to gain an increased awareness and remove anxious thoughts from the mind.

Another technique is called guided imagery, and involves visualizing things that are positive and calming. With this technique, a person tries to incorporate other senses as well. Progressive relaxation is where a person intentionally tenses a part of their body and then relaxes it. Focusing on the sensation of relaxing that body part will help ease stress. **Stress inoculation** is a way to counteract negative self-statements a person might have, by focusing on positive thoughts and feelings to reduce anxiety.

Good luck!



TERMS TO KNOW

Coping Statements

Positive, reassuring statements to stop negative self-statements.

Guided Imagery

A coping strategy related to meditation, where a person, instead of relaxing the mind, instead thinks of things that are positive and calming.

Meditation

A trained relaxation technique in which a person focuses on something (like breathing, body sensations, imagery, surroundings, etc.) to gain an increased awareness.

Negative Self-Statements

Critical thoughts a person has that increase stress, particularly in anticipation of an event.

Progressive Relaxation

A technique where a person intentionally tenses, then relaxes, specific muscles of the body in succession.

Stress Inoculation

Where a person focuses on positive thoughts and feelings to reduce anxiety.