

coping with distress

– handout two



How we cope with distress is very much a matter of individual preference and action. One person may find that bungee jumping is a perfect tension reliever, whilst another would feel ill at the thought. Each of us has to find ideas that work. This handout contains brief details of different strategies that you may find useful. Even if some of them sound a little strange, it might be worth trying them out for a while to see if they work for you.

Avoiding and changing the situation

Many of us adopt an almost masochistic streak by deliberately putting ourselves into situations that we know will cause us distress. Avoiding distressful situations means that we have to know what causes us to feel most distressed. It is helpful to spend time thinking about the things, situations and events that personally distress us. Anything that causes us to feel anxious, frightened, angry or frustrated is a potential distressor and should be included in the list.

Once we have listed the potential distressors in our lives, we can examine them dispassionately to see if there are any we can actively avoid and/or change. For example, if catching a crowded train to and from work is a problem we might be able to avoid it by catching an earlier or a later one. Or we could change our method of transport, perhaps to cycling or car sharing. All of us have the power to organise our lives to minimise distress - all it takes is a little forethought *and the will to do so*.

Affirmations

An affirmation is a brief, powerful statement of something good and positive about ourselves - even though things may not be that way at the time. The idea is to replace habitual, negative thought patterns.

Affirmations can be used to relax, energise, comfort, enthuse, inspire, strengthen and so on.

Here are some examples:

- I am healthy.
- I love my life.
- I sleep easily.
- I am strong.

Make up your own affirmations to suit your needs. The ingredients of a good affirmation are that it must be simple, clear, brief and positive. Repeat it several times a day to yourself.

Exercise

Increasing our level of personal fitness will do a great deal to overcome distress.

Exercise:

- Fulfils the action demanded by the fight/flight response.
- Makes our bodies stronger and better able to cope with the debilitating effects of distress.
- Releases endorphins which make us feel better.



Comfort tricks

Anything that we do to excess - eating, drinking and so on - is called a *comfort trick* because it provides us with instant gratification. Such 'tricks' - alcohol, cigarettes, food and drugs - often *increase* our distress levels, because we know that they aren't doing us any good. The answer is to find something else to do - until the desire for the 'comfort trick' has passed. The more active we are the quicker the distress will disappear.

Meditation and relaxation

In 1968, Dr Herbert Benson and his colleagues at Harvard Medical School decided to put meditation to the test. Volunteer practitioners of meditation were tested to see if meditation really could counter the physiological effects of distress.

Benson proved that during meditation:

- Heartbeat and breathing rates slow down.
- Oxygen consumption falls by 20 percent.
- Blood lactate levels drop. (This level rises with distress and fatigue.)
- Skin resistance to electrical current, a sign of relaxation, increases fourfold.
- EEG ratings of brain patterns indicate increased alpha activity, another sign of relaxation.

Benson went on to prove that *any* meditational practice could duplicate these physiological changes.

Discharging Skills

Discharging skills are being able to produce an appropriate emotional response to a situation: When we are sad, we cry; when we are happy, we laugh; when we are angry, we express that anger and so on.

Constant seriousness can damage your health. Laughter has a profound effect on our wellbeing and on our bodies. People often laugh to release tension. Norman Cousins tells in his book *Anatomy of an Illness* how he used humour as a vital and contributing factor to his recovery from a crippling illness.

Uncontrolled anger has a debilitating effect on the digestive system. The same is true of tightly controlled anger. Both are inappropriate responses. A useful technique is to discharge anger as quickly as possible - throw something (soft) at a wall, work it out through vigorous exercise and then replace the anger with positive emotions.