

Session 9

Dealing with stress

The aim of the session is to understand:

- ✓ What stress is and what causes it.
- ✓ How stress affects your heart health.
- ✓ How to manage stress.

The information you need to get across is:

 10 minutes

What is stress and what causes it?

Stress is a word we hear a lot. It's sometimes used to describe how we react to the very fast pace of life that many of us lead, or the way we feel when we're under a lot of pressure. We all find different things stressful and respond differently to feeling stressed. Stress generally occurs if we feel unable to cope when high demands are placed on us.

It is difficult to measure stress, but we all have some experience of what it is like and how we cope with stressful situations. People have different ways of coping with stress. Some need to relax quietly, while others find that doing some exercise gets the stress 'out of their system'.

So the way that we perceive and recognise stress, both in ourselves and those around us, is very important.

We need *some* stress to feel motivated and enthusiastic. But too much stress can cause ill health, for example, if too many new or challenging things happen at once, or if the challenges go on for too long. Getting the balance right helps us to cope with stress in a positive way and lead a healthy, active life.

How does stress affect your heart health?

Stress is not considered a direct risk factor for coronary heart disease, as we're not sure how it affects the development of the disease. However, the way that you respond to stress can encourage unhealthy behaviour, such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol and overeating. These can all increase your risk of developing coronary heart disease.

How can you manage stress?

Once you have identified the things that are causing you stress, think about how you could tackle each source of stress. For example:

- If you have trouble managing your workload, you could talk to your manager and maybe arrange to go on a time management course.
- If you find that you are rushing around all the time, think carefully about what really matters to you. Can you work out what your priorities are, and drop the less important things?
- If you are having family difficulties, you could think about having counselling or arrange to spend more time with your family or friends doing activities that you all enjoy.

Checklist



Session time:
30 minutes

You will need

- Training card 9
- Visual card 9



- Summary sheet 9





- How do you know you're stressed? worksheet 



There's also a lot you can do to manage stress or anxiety. For example:

- Avoid stressful situations at home or at work if you can.
- Learn to say "No" to people, when you feel overburdened.
- Find out about techniques for managing stress. Your GP will be able to advise you and help you decide on the best way to deal with it.
- Talk to friends, workmates and family. Or find out about joining a support group.
- Learn how to relax. Some people find physical activity and/or yoga and other relaxation techniques help.

Making some changes to your lifestyle may help to reduce the effects of stress on your body. For example:

- Take more exercise.
- Eat well, and drink plenty of water.
- Cut down on alcohol.
- Give up smoking.
- Make more time for rest and relaxation.

Pre-session preparation

Print out *Summary sheet 9* and the *How do you know you're stressed? worksheet* 

Activities

Key activity: Stress worksheet (individuals)

 10 minutes

Hand out a *How do you know you're stressed? worksheet* to everyone in the group. Ask them to fill it out and count how many boxes they have ticked. The number of ticks will indicate how stressed they are and what signs and symptoms to look out for in future.

Key activity: What triggers stress-related responses discussion (whole group)

 10 minutes

Discuss with the group what triggers stress-related responses. Ask them to answer the following questions (Answers will differ from person to person):

1. How can you identify what causes you stress?

One idea is to keep a diary and try to work out why your stress levels feel higher on some days than on others. Once you have identified the sources of your stress, you can think about how you can deal with them.

2. What are some of the triggers that cause you stress?

Triggers could be due to:

- relationships
- health
- major life events
- finances.

3. How do you respond to these triggers – both physically and mentally?

Signs and symptoms of stress at work can be:

- poor performance
- feeling tired
- lack of concentration

- wishing you could avoid work
- taking a lot of sick leave.

4. Have you found any ways to change how you respond to stressful situations?

Positive responses to stressful situations could be:

- avoid the source of the stress
- tackle the cause of the stress.

At the end of the session

Hand out *Summary sheet 9* 

Background information

Although you now have all the basic information you need to deliver Session 9, here's some more detail which you might find useful.

Is stress good or bad for you?

The right amount of stress makes you feel motivated, energetic and flexible enough to change up or down a gear when necessary. However, too much stress can have a negative effect on your health and wellbeing.

What's the best cure for stress?

First try to find out what is causing the stress. Try to reduce the source of stress if you can. Even if you can't change the situation, you can talk to someone about it. You can also find ways to deal with stressful situations – for example, using relaxation techniques to reduce your stress levels.

What's wrong with having a drink or two when you're feeling stressed?

Alcohol can make you feel happy and trouble-free. Unfortunately, alcohol is addictive and can have depressant effects, which may increase your stress. And if this happens, you could end up drinking much more, feeling even more stressed and doing serious damage to your body.

Is it true that if you have coronary heart disease you must avoid any stress?

Many people think that coronary heart disease is caused by years of stress or worry or overwork. In fact, coronary heart disease results from a build-up of fatty deposits within the walls of the coronary arteries. You are more at risk of coronary heart disease if you smoke, have a high cholesterol level or high blood pressure, if you are inactive or overweight, or if you have diabetes or a family history of coronary heart disease – or a combination of these. Although stress may not be the major cause of heart problems, it is still important that people with coronary heart disease learn how to deal with and manage stress. Living with coronary heart disease is easier if you eat healthily, take moderate physical exercise and enjoy the company of your family and friends. All these things should help to reduce your stress levels.

For more information

bhf.org.uk

BHF Heart Helpline: 0300 330 3311 – for information and support on anything related to heart health. This service is available in English only.

BHF booklets:

Coping with stress (in English)

To order these free resources, call the **BHF Orderline** on **0870 600 6566**.