CHAPTER 12 -- UNDERSTANDING STRESS & HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO STRESS

STRESS

Stress is a universal experience. Selye initially defined stress as the nonspecific result of any demand upon the body, and explained a physiological version of stress as general adaptation syndrome (GAS). GAS occurs in two stages: (1) an initial adaptive response (fight or flight), or acute stress, and (2) the eventual maladaptive consequences of prolonged stress. Later, Selye distinguished between distress, which is destructive to health, and eustress, which is not harmful to health.

Stressors

Two categories of stressors exist: (1) physical, exemplified by environmental conditions such as cold, trauma, excessive heat and physical conditions such as infection, hemorrhage, hunger, or pain; (2) psychological, exemplified by divorce, job loss, unmanageable debt, death of a loved one, retirement, marriage, unexpected success. Researchers have found that the perception of a recent life event determines the person’s reactions to it.

Stress and Coping

Mediating Factors

Mediating factors include age, sex, culture, life experiences, lifestyle, and social support. Self-help groups are a means of providing social support. Ideally, high-quality social support should be provided since research tells us it is linked with high satisfaction. High-quality support relationships are free from conflict and negative interactions; they are close, confiding, and reciprocal. Low-quality support relationships may negatively affect a person’s coping effectiveness in a crisis.
**Culture and Stress**

Culture plays a role in determining what is considered dangerous, how to manage violations of social code, what reactions are permissible in given experiences, how a stressful event is appraised, and how emotion generated by the event should be expressed. Culture plays a role in how people experience stressors in their lives and what interventions will be useful. The majority of Asian, African, and Central American peoples express subjective distress in somatic terms, rendering psychological interpretations less useful.

**Spirituality and Stress**

Religious and spiritual beliefs are helpful for many people coping with stress. Studies have demonstrated that spiritual practices can enhance the immune system and sense of well-being.

**ASSESSING STRESS AND COPING STYLES**

**Measuring Stress**

The Recent Life Change Questionnaire is available for self-rating. Recent findings suggest that life stress over the last 35 years has increased markedly. Other findings note there is a gender difference in the way in which certain factors such as finances are rated.

**Assessing Coping Styles**

**Rahe** identifies four categories of coping styles that people use as stress buffers: (1) health-sustaining habits, (2) life satisfactions, (3) social supports, (4) response to stress. Nurses evaluate these to identify areas to target for improvement. Coping strategies include psychological defense mechanisms, psychophysiological defenses that are in our awareness (e.g., headache) or out of awareness (hypertension or depression).
HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO STRESS

Benefits of stress reduction include altering the course of medical conditions such as hypertension; decreasing need for medications such as antihypertensives; diminishing or eliminating the need for unhealthy behaviors such as smoking; increasing cognitive functions such as learning, breaking up static patterns of thinking to allow creative perceptions of events; and increasing sense of well-being via endorphin release.

Behavioral Approaches

Cognitive behavioral methods are the most effective ways to reduce stress. Behavioral methods include a number of relaxation techniques.

Relaxation techniques: Benson’s relaxation technique allows clients to switch from the sympathetic mode of autonomic arousal to the parasympathetic mode of relaxation, and can be learned with practice. Relaxation techniques should be used with physician approval as they may not be appropriate for use by depressed, hallucinating, or delusional clients, or by those in severe pain.

Meditation: This is mind training to develop greater calm, increased relaxation, and the ability to access inner resources for both healing and operating more effectively in the world.

Guided imagery: This is used to produce a relaxation response. A person is led to envision images that are calming and health-enhancing. Imagery techniques are useful for pain relief; and for reducing levels of cortisol, epinephrine, and catecholamines, thus supporting the immune system and producing beta endorphins (which increase the pain threshold and enhance lymphocyte proliferation).
Breathing exercises: Learning abdominal breathing can be helpful in the modification of stress and anxiety reactions.

Behavioral Techniques Requiring Special Training

Therapeutic touch (TT): This technique employs the steps of centering, scanning, and rebalancing to manipulate a client’s energy fields, usually for the purpose of pain relief or promotion of healing.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR): This technique achieves deep relaxation by systematically tensing and releasing various muscle groups.

Biofeedback: Instruments give a person information on physiological functions such as brain waves, skin temperature, blood pressure, etc., to help the individual gain control over what had been considered involuntary functions.

Cognitive Approaches

Journal keeping: Keeping an informal diary of daily events and activities helps identify sources of daily stress. The individual can then take measures to modify or eliminate the stressors.

Restructuring and setting priorities: Once stressful events have been identified, the individual can shift the balance from stress-producing events to stress-reducing activities. Adding daily pleasant events has a positive effect on the immune system.

Cognitive restructuring and reframing: This includes restructuring of irrational beliefs and replacing worried self-statements with more positive self-statements. Essentially, reframing is reassessing a situation. [continued on next page]
Restructuring a disturbing event to one that is less disturbing gives the client a sense of control, reduces sympathetic nervous system stimulation, and, in turn, reduces secretion of **cortisol** and **catecholamines**.

**Assertiveness training:** Involves learning behavior that allows one to stand up for one’s rights without violating the rights of others. Four formulas for assertive communication are: (1) simple assertion via a direct statement; (2) empathic assertion, showing understanding of the other’s feelings and assertively stating what one needs; (3) nonaccusingly describing the situation, stating one’s feelings about the situation, and asking for change; and (4) confrontation assertion.

**More Effective Stress Reducers**

Music, pets, and exercise: Benefits of each are reviewed.