

This Morning's Presentations

- **Recognizing and Managing Symptoms of Emotional Distress**
 - *Douglas F. Steenblock, M.D., psychiatrist with Iowa Psychiatric Society*
- **How Unemployment Affects the Ways We Think About Ourselves**
 - *J. Jeffrey Means, M. Div., Ph.D., associate professor & chair of the Department of Behavioral Medicine at Des Moines University*
- **Helping Children Cope with the Stresses of Unemployment**
 - *Kelli Hill-Hunt, Ph.D., child psychologist at Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center*

How Unemployment Affects the Ways We Think About Ourselves

*J. Jeffrey Means, M. Div., Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Chair
Department of Behavioral Medicine
Des Moines University
February 6, 2010*

I'm losing my confidence

I've let everybody down

I don't need any help. I can do this on my own.

Without a job, no one will respect me.

I'm a loser

will

I didn't like my job anyway

There are no jobs out there, so why try! I'm wasting my time.

What will happen to me and my family?

Why me? I was doing everything right.

Outline

- Illusions and the role of work
- Stress
- How the brain works
- The role of cultural myths
- Unhelpful thinking patterns that trap us
- Simple things that help

Illusions and the role of work



Living in an Illusion

- Many of us live our lives with the illusion of being in control of our lives
- Unexpected life events shatter this illusion, e.g., Health crises, family crises, economic crises, job loss
 - Our psychological defenses can be overwhelmed
 - We don't know what to do
 - We lack the strength to respond effectively

Interestingly, those who have experienced less control over their lives can often cope better

The Role of Work

- For many people, work is central to their lives
- When it stops, it leaves a hole
 - Our self-worth and self-esteem
 - Our sense of competence
 - Our sense of social standing
 - Our social support network
- People who have structured their lives in a balanced fashion may adapt more effectively to unemployment than those who have focused their lives primarily around work

Results of Unemployment

- Loss of social connection
- Loss of social status
- Humiliation and shame
- Increased negative “self-talk”
- Despair and fatigue creating inertia
- Increased debt
- A way out of an unpleasant job
- Opportunity to re-think your life direction



Stress

STRESS? HA!
I LAUGH IN THE FACE OF STRESS!
HA! HA!
I THUMB MY NOSE AT STRESS!
HA! HA! HA!
I INSULT THE MOTHER OF STRESS!
HA! HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!
I SPIT ON THE SHOES OF STRESS!!
HA! HA! HA! HA! HA!



HELP ME!!

Stress = Environmental Challenges

- The three stages of the adaptation response are:
 - Alarm – the body’s natural initial response
 - Resistance – mobilization of defenses
 - Exhaustion – response to prolonged stress
- Prolonged stress can cause disease - “diseases of adaptation”

Physical Effects of Stress

- Cardiovascular disease
- Muscle pain – neck, shoulders, lower back
- Gastrointestinal disorders – irritable bowel syndrome
- Reproductive inhibition – endometriosis, decreased fertility, impotence
- Pulmonary effects – exacerbate symptoms of asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Psychosocial Effects

- Procrastination; difficulty making decisions
- Lack of concern for others
- Reduced effectiveness in communication
- Emotional hypersensitivity → reactivity, irritability
- Suppression of feelings and withdrawal
- Increased risk-taking behavior
- Increased drug use
- Mental fatigue → loss of spontaneity and creativity; boredom
- Depression & anxiety

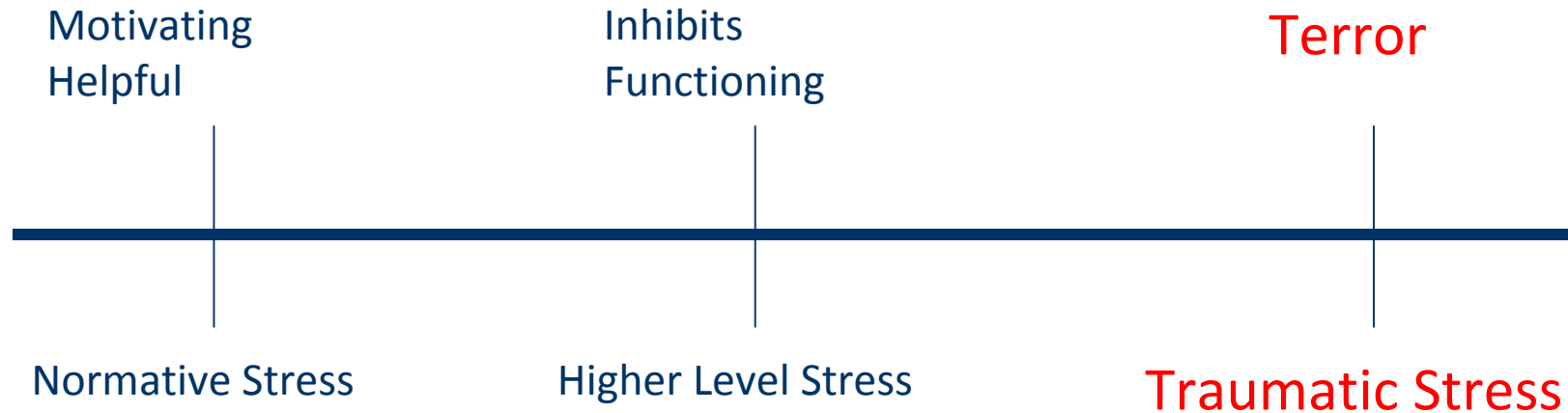
Lack of Sleep: Negative Ripple Effects

- Contributing factors
 - Medical conditions: Pain, restless leg syndrome, allergies, sleep apnea
 - Drug side effects, esp. stimulants, SSRI's, prednisone
 - Alcohol use
 - Habits, e.g., working up to bedtime, watching the news
- Helpful strategies
 - Exercise
 - Preparation for sleep
 - Established bedtime
 - Relaxation techniques: reading, yoga, writing
 - Meditation, centering prayer
 - No clock watching
 - Consider a sleep evaluation

Characteristics of Stress

- Some stress is good
- Too much stress is hurtful
- Chronically high levels of stress are especially problematic
- Unresolved stress builds up in our bodies
- Everyone reacts to stress differently
- This can make empathizing difficult

Stress Continuum

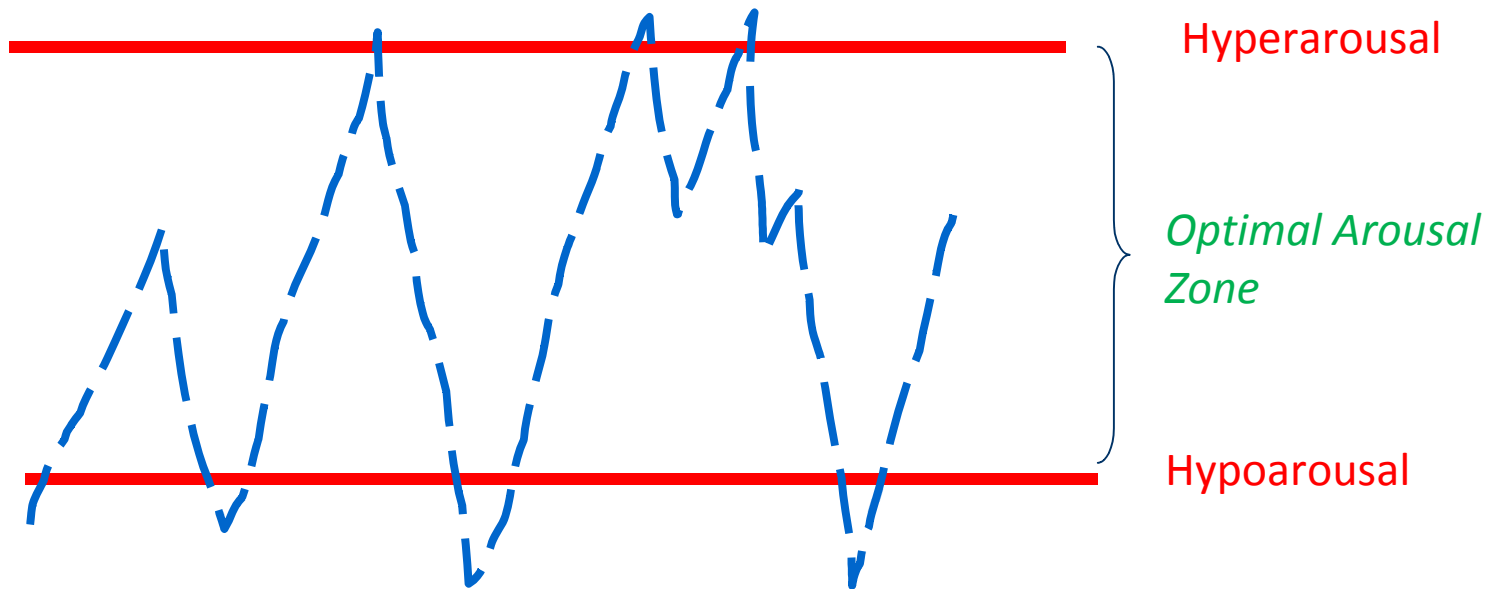


Acute – stressor subsides → period of recovery

Chronic – stressor continues over time → alteration in psychophysiology

Window of Tolerance

(Ogden & Minton, 2000; Siegel)

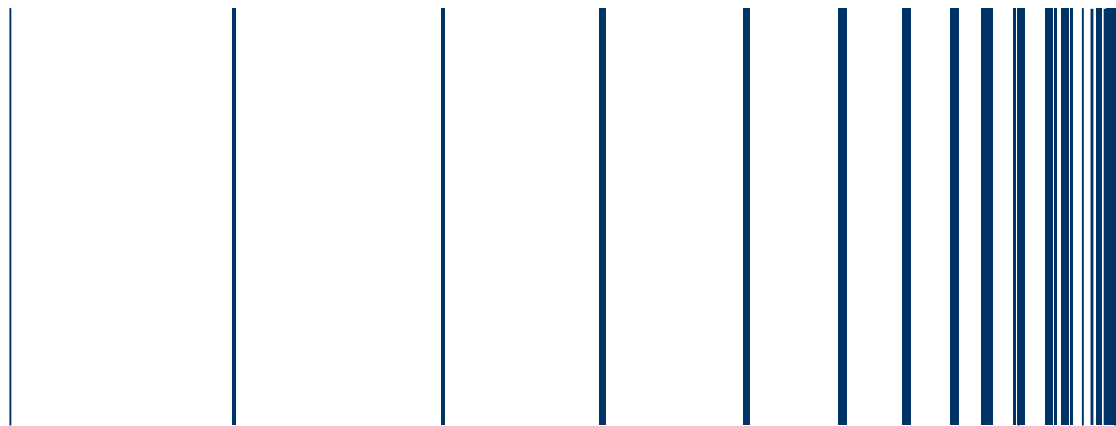


Hyperarousal – Agitated, fight, flight, freeze (SNS)

Hypoarousal – Collapse, flat affect, numbing, submission, dissociation

Optimal Arousal Zone – Social engagement

Sensitization of the Nervous System



Stress-related episodes



Repeated episodes of stress lead to increasing reactivity

Adapted from Jon G. Allen, Ph.D. A presentation in Des Moines, IA on October 27, 2000.

Signs of a Sensitized Nervous System

- “Making mountains out of molehills”
 - Reacting to a minor stressor as if it were a traumatic one
- “That was the last straw”
 - Increased reaction to the last stressor in a series of stressors

In both cases, the reservoir of stress in the system is full

Unbearably Painful Emotional States

Current Stress

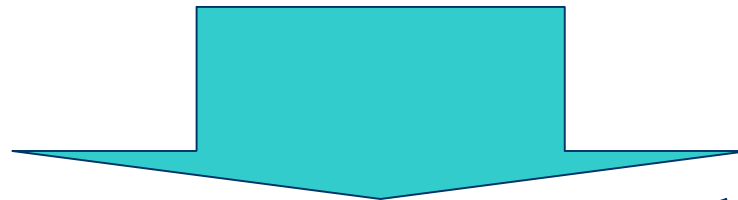
(Reminders of trauma, life events)



Past Trauma



Sensitized Nervous System



Unbearable Emotional Pain

Problematic Coping

Unhealthy ways of responding to high levels of stress

- Rigidity of coping responses
- Use of substances → addiction
- Compulsive behaviors → addiction
- Over-reliance on others → loss of social network

Common Unhelpful Responses to Unbearable Emotional States

- Withdraw
 - Isolate
 - Become depressed
 - Dissociate
- Move against self
 - Self-harm (cutting, burning)
 - Substance abuse
 - Eating disorders
 - Suicidal gestures
- Move against others
 - Rage
 - Aggression
 - Physical harm & violence

These responses represent frantic attempts to relieve distress and/or avoid a re-experiencing of previous abandonment and neglect

They most frequently do not represent efforts at manipulation

How the brain works



The Brain's Response Systems

Emotional stimulus → sensory thalamus →

- Two separate systems:
 - Fear (emotional) system
 - Amygdala → hypothalamus → release of stress hormones to blood stream
 - Rapid, general ideas about avoid/approach; flee/fight
 - The reasoning (cognitive) system
 - Path through the sensory cortex
 - Longer path, takes more time, is more precise and discriminating

Thinking & Feeling

- Our emotional response system is fast and powerful
- It moves us to action and/or inaction
- It affects the way we feel and think about everything and everyone, including ourselves
- It can help us, and it can block us
- It is difficult to counter-act
- BUT, with effort and practice, we can!

Levels of Processing



Cognition

Emotion

Body



Thinking & Feeling

As humans, we make meaning of events

Our feeling responses are fast and powerful

We form assumptions

Some are helpful and effective

Some are helpful and effective

Some are unhelpful and ineffective

Some are unhelpful, inaccurate, and ineffective

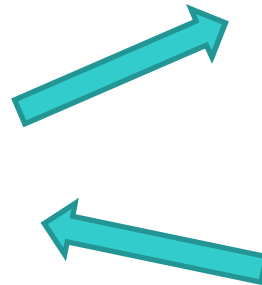
- Automatic thoughts
- Negative core beliefs
- Cognitive distortions

Go limp

Move against self

Move against others

- Critical
- Angry
- Impatient
- Hostile
- Discounting



The role of cultural myths

Basic assumptions of the culture that are not necessarily true and can affect us in negative ways

Cultural Myths

We are influenced greatly by beliefs held by the culture we live in.

- “No one can love me unless I love myself first”
- “Those that are unemployed are lazy”
- “You have to pull yourself up by the boot straps”
- “Kids are resilient and will bounce back”



**Unhelpful thinking patterns that
trap us**

How We Think

- We structure our world using cognitions
- These cognitions are based on certain assumptions (schema)
- These schema derive from life experience, esp. interpersonal experiences and significant life events that lead us to question ourselves – our self-image, our competence, our self-worth
 - Some are also learned through our immersion in our particular culture

Unhelpful Thinking Patterns

Thinking problems come from three sources:

- Negative core beliefs
 - Result of long-term negative life experiences, e.g., abuse
 - Form the basis of how we see ourselves, others and the world
- Dysfunctional automatic thoughts
 - Spontaneous misperceptions that block realistic appraisals of one's self or a situation
- Cognitive distortions (errors in logic)

Negative Core Beliefs

What we believe about ourselves based on earlier life experience, especially with those we have depended upon

Examples:

- “I’m a bad person.”
- “If people really knew me, they’d think I’m an awful person.”
- “I’m really disgusting.”
- “I’m not smart enough to get a good job.”
- “I’ll never succeed.”

Dysfunctional Automatic Thoughts

What I say to myself without even thinking about it, and have difficulty stopping

Examples:

- “It’s me again.”
- “She doesn’t love me anymore.”
- “My kids are going to lose respect for me.”
- “If I lose my job, I will lose my friends.”

Cognitive Distortions

- **All-or-nothing thinking** – “I’m a total failure”
- **Overgeneralization** – a single event is seen as a never-ending pattern
- **Mental filter** – picking out one single negative detail and focusing on it
- **Disqualifying the positive** – insisting that positive experiences “don’t count”
- **Jumping to conclusions** – drawing a negative conclusion without supporting facts
- **Catastrophizing or minimizing** – exaggerating or minimizing the importance of something that happens
- **Emotional reasoning** – “I feel it so it must be true”
- **Should statements** – punishing self → guilt; directing these at others → resentment, frustration, anger
- **Labeling & mislabeling** – “I’m a loser” “He’s a louse”
- **Personalization** – seeing self as the cause of an event for which you have no responsibility

See: “The Feeling Good Handbook” by David Burn

Unrealistic Beliefs

- Failure is not OK.
- Crying shows weakness.
- If I am not “successful” no one will love me.
- I should be competent in all things I attempt.
- If I can't do it right the first time, it's not worth trying.
- If people don't treat me fairly, they are just rotten people.

Examples of Triggering Events

- The interviewer says, “We’ll let you know in a week,” but never calls.
- Your spouse says, “How come you’re not making calls today?”
- The representative at a job fair says, “We’re really looking for people with different skills.”
- The person answering the phone seems distracted, uninterested and short with you.

Simple things that help



Helpful Things

- Self-activation
 - Stay active and connected to others
- Counteract negative thoughts, core beliefs, and cognitive distortions
- Keep in mind that feelings change and generally pass with time
- Disconnect the emotional associations between current and past events since these can make things seem worse than they are

Coping Card

(Can be a useful help)

- One side
 - A common automatic thought or cognitive distortion or core belief
 - “Nobody will hire me.”
- Other side
 - an adaptive response
 - “I have good skills. I need to keep looking for the right fit.”

Helping Strategies

- Social support
 - Positive involvement with others
 - At least one strong nurturing connection with some person
 - Involvement in a social network
- Education
- Writing
- Progressive relaxation
- Diaphragmatic breathing
- Physical exercise
- Rest/sleep
- Referral

Information Resources

www.iowapsych.org

See Education & Resources area

Click on Articles; see “Handling Stress”