

# Five Strategies for Putting on *Stress-Free* Stress Seminars

**By Miriam Kimball**



*For the past twelve years, Miriam Kimball has worked as a consultant putting on training programs throughout the United States, servicing both the private and public sector across a variety of industries, such as health care, utilities, retail, financial institutions, and government agencies including the IRS, CIA and GSA. In addition to stress management training, she conducts training on a variety of other subjects. However, she often finds stress is a “natural” component of many other training programs. For example, in her work training managers and supervisors, she considers how the work place organization and environment can be structured to minimize stress, and thus promote employee effectiveness. In customer service training, she recognizes the need to help front line customer service employees manage the stress that comes from dealing with the public. And in dealing with change programs, stress management is a critical issue as well.*

So what have I learned about conducting effective and satisfying stress seminars over these many years? Here are some of the guidelines that I have identified, most of them the hard way!

**1 Have fun.** Without a doubt, the most important thing I learned through my experience was the wisdom of Liberace, who once said, in explanation of his style, “People want to be entertained.” Even when participants have a specific desire or need to learn, they have a preference for learning in an entertaining way. Fortunately, people are easily entertained! This is especially true at work when our expectations for what qualifies as “entertainment” are relatively modest.

In presenting stress seminars, entertainment can take the form of demonstrations involving participants, such as biodots or biofeedback monitors. Entertainment can be accomplished by playing subject related training games and exercises...with prizes, of course. Prizes can also be awarded for voluntary class participation in discussions, or the completion of course material. It’s amazing how hard people will compete for token rewards, such as stickers, candy or T-shirts, and have a great time doing so. And as a bonus, their hard work and pressure to win will work as a “classroom” example of eustress! (Editor’s note: Eustress is *good* stress: anything exciting, new or challenging like a new job, a new house, a promotion or getting married would be considered eustress.)

And finally, high quality videos are a natural way to entertain. Because we all know that a picture is worth a thousand words, we know that a video can help us concisely present a very rich message. How do you know if your training video is high quality and entertaining? It couldn't be easier to assess...simply watch your participants watch the video! Are they focused on the video, which they will signal by non-verbals such as minimal note taking, nodding, smiling and even laughing, (only when appropriate, of course, since laughing might also be a signal of a very bad video!) I can literally "set my watch" to the laughter I will hear in some videos, such as **Laughing at Stress** with humorist, Loretta LaRoche or **Short Circuiting Stress**, with its participant-pleasing film clips from "It's a Wonderful Life."

The next step of video assessment is what happens immediately after the video is presented. I feel confident that the video met its mark if the participants begin to discuss it before I can even begin a facilitated discussion. And lastly, do the participants consistently tell you that they were able to personally connect or relate to the video's content. Want to boost the entertainment value of your video presentation? Add popcorn; it's easily available, smells great, light on the training budget, almost universally liked, and even somewhat healthy as snacks go.

**2** **Protect participants** sensitive issue in the pants may feel their per-training program may be used performance as a whole. training environment which for participants to take the

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risks.*

**self-esteem.** This is a workplace, as performance in the to evaluate their work Therefore, develop a makes it comfortable "risks" involved in

participation. Strategies to do this include providing acknowledgment to most all participant responses, even when you need to disagree or clarify their comment. For example, if a participant suggests that alcohol consumption is an appropriate stress management technique, you might respond by thanking the person for the input and acknowledging their right to their view and then invite them, and the class, to consider some of the potential disadvantages of alcohol. Another way to minimize risk and maintain self-esteem within the training session is to use a small group or pair format when asking participants to respond to specific topics. It's so much more comfortable to say "Our group decided..." as opposed to going it alone.

Another way to protect self-esteem and maintain participant comfort is to provide printed information, such as handouts or workbooks that help participants clearly see where the program is and where it is going. It can be uncomfortable for participants to ask you to repeat information, or to clarify information. On the other hand, participants don't want "text heavy" course material that can be perceived as intimidating or time consuming. A standardized, yet flexible curriculum such as **The Seven Steps To Stress Mastery** is an example of a product that will provide your participants with a program road map and still allow sufficient flexibility for you and your participants to "customize" your agenda.

**3 Ensure learning is transferable.** Adult learners are goal orientated, meaning they have a specific reason or application for the training in mind. Allow participants to easily see the application potential of what they are learning to “real life” work or personal situations. One way to accomplish this is to ask participants such questions as, “How does this relate to what you see in your office?” or “What experiences have you had that support this concept?”

Another way to insure the application potential of material is to present information in a format that is suited to the “diversity” factor of your participants. It’s the facilitator’s job to make sure everyone feels included. You will want to be sure to use inclusive language, especially in your use of gender-related pronouns. For example, when talking about a boss, avoid the tendency to always refer to the boss as a “he.” Look for training materials and videos that are representative of our diverse population as well. Once you have assessed your participants you can make a point to provide examples that will feel appropriate to them. Some factors to consider are the gender, age, racial, and geographic background of participants. In other words, you will want to consciously tailor the program to match the participants’ profiles. This will prevent participants from feeling like the information someone else, but they may be valid for them. doesn’t work for

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**4 Share the spotlight.** This is how you get participants to feel ownership in the training process. In a nutshell, this means you have to know when to literally sit down and allow a participant to take center stage. Being able to maintain control of the ultimate flow of the program while allowing participants to feel free to present their own insights and “truths” is a critical ability for the successful facilitator. This is relatively easy to do in stress management training, since we are all “experts.” We all encounter and respond to stress and we all have valuable experiences and lessons to share. And there is real value in allowing participants to relate personal experiences, since we know that venting, or sharing stressful experiences with others is an effective stress management technique. Naturally, you will want to help participants distinguish between venting and whining. This sharing of the spotlight approach will also help keep your program interesting and relevant, and help meet the need of adult learners to be self-directed. Finally, you will be amazed at how much you learn by truly listening to your participants.

**5 Manage your own stress.** Arriving anywhere one should be on time and in a calm and controlled manner, but it becomes mandatory when presenting stress management seminars! Your participants will arrive with the expectations that you actually know something about managing stress and look to you as a role model. Running in at the last minute with your training materials in disarray won't help their confidence level, or yours! It's a good idea to deliberately allow more than enough time to get to the training location and prepare the room, equipment and your material. Once you have finished, you will have time to actually practice relaxation while waiting to greet your participants. Due to my frequent encounters with Murphy's Law, I know if I plan to arrive significantly early, I'll at least end up being ready to go when the seminar is scheduled to begin.

A great technique to get your audience to im-stress management is to playing as participants **From Stress** is a good program is available in video format. There-introduce the participants to the "sound" of relaxing in the beginning of your program which will help set the stage for learning this technique later.

*Your participants will  
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model.*

help you relax and mediate focus on have an audio tape arrive. **A Day Away** choice, because this both audio and fore, you can

My last point brings me full circle to my first point. Once you have arrived early and established a comfortably calm environment, its time to use another technique to manage your own stress ...have fun!

*(If you are interested in scheduling a seminar with Miriam Kimball she can be reached at: 301-934-4383. Her e-mail address is Miriamkim@AOL.com)*

# A Beginner's Guide to Teaching Stress Management.

**By James E. Porter**



*James Porter is president of AudioVision/StressStop.com a company that provides stress management training materials to thousands of corporations, hospitals and government agencies from the Cleveland Clinic to the CIA and from Michelin Tire Corporation to Major League Baseball. Porter has produced numerous films, and published many articles, workbooks, and even a newsletter on stress management. In addition, he conducts seminars on stress management for hospitals and corporations.*

**M**any of our customers are experienced trainers and educators who are presenting programs on stress management for the first time. While they may have extensive background in training, and perhaps have even put on other wellness programs - they are new to the subject of stress management and need some assistance. They come to us for their training materials but often ask for advice on how to use these materials as well. As the result of talking to some of these customers personally and putting on seminars myself, I've created this beginner's guide to teaching stress management.

## **TIP #1 Make a List of People's Stress.**

Try starting your program by asking your audience about *their* stress: What are the things that cause them to feel stressed? Write down their responses so everybody can see them. This exercise works on many levels:

- 1. Get to know your audience.** It helps you customize the program to fit their needs. You can make minor adjustments to the focus of your curriculum based on their responses.
- 2. It's the perfect icebreaker.** It gives you a chance to feel comfortable in front of the group - *You don't have to deliver any information right away* - and it gives the members of your audience a chance to get to know each other.
- 3. Flexible time slot.** You can take as much time as you want with this exercise. You can get it done in 5 minutes or you can take a half an hour.
- 4. Everybody benefits.** Your audience benefits from this exercise and you will too! It's always cathartic for an audience member to admit what's bothering him or her or even to hear what's bothering someone else. But you'll be surprised by how much *you* learn from this process (e.g., the unique ways people experience stress).

With this exercise, I can accomplish several objectives. If I am teaching an introductory course on stress, I use the list (which is often quite long) to teach people the difference between the words stress and stressor. (The term stress as it is commonly used is confusing. We use the term interchangeably to mean both stress and stressor. Consequently people mistakenly think stress *is the result of itself and the cause of itself*. Hans Selye the scientist who coined these terms intended us to use the word *stressor* for causes of stress. Examples of stressors are *traffic jams, deadlines and crying children*. Examples of stress are what you feel when you encounter a stressor: *feeling upset, frustrated, depressed, angry, sick, etc.*) In this exercise, your audience will usually volunteer examples of both stress and stressors - not knowing the difference. Pointing out the difference sets the stage for learning how to master stress: You can't control stressors but you can control your *reaction* to them. This ultimately allows you to control stress since stress is your *reaction* to stressors.

If I am teaching a cognitive approach to managing stress I use the list to accomplish another objective. I ask anyone in the audience to identify any stressors (they see on the list) that they are *not* bothered by. Most people (like a traffic jam, for instance) *bother everyone*. But there will always be that someone in the audience who volunteers the problem unfazed by his or her opener. *If it doesn't bother them why does it bother everyone else?* This is the basis for understanding a cognitive (or thinking person's) approach to managing stress.

*Everyone in the group  
agreed that traffic  
jams were NOT  
STRESSFUL.*

assume that stressors  
bother everyone  
something on the list  
isn't bothered by.  
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opener. *If it doesn't  
have to bother me?*  
standing a cognitive

I recently addressed a group of senior citizens and - looking to help them start the list - I suggested that traffic jams were stressful. *Without exception* they disagreed. They felt that traffic jams *were not* stressful. I have to admit I (who have seen people disagree about every stressor under the sun) was a bit surprised by this. But when I thought about it, it made perfect sense. For these older drivers, (where time pressure isn't necessarily a factor) creeping along in unison was probably less stressful than driving at 55 with everyone else whizzing past.

So my first tip, making a list of stress and stressors can go a long way. In fact, you could probably build an hour long program out of just this exercise alone.

#### **TIP #2 ADMIT TO YOUR ANGER.**

**A**nother surprisingly good exercise is giving your audience members the opportunity to discuss any held-in anger or grudges they are having difficulty letting go of. This creates a much different dynamic from the opening exercise we just discussed. That exercise is primarily a chance for people to air (and become aware of) all those millions of little things that annoy them. It's

an icebreaker. There's very little risk involved in revealing that telemarketing calls, or a broken shoelace, or a last minute request is a source of stress.

This exercise requires a much higher comfort level between you and the audience and between the audience members themselves. But the potential reward is often worth the risk. People often hold on to the memory of even minor disturbances for months, even years, refusing to let go of their anger. And those who take the risk and reveal something closely held are often greatly helped.

It requires a lot of mental energy to hold in anger, hatred, resentment and distrust. Once someone admits to their held-in emotions in front of a group they begin the process of letting it go. Obviously, this is a powerful exercise and may be inappropriate for certain groups. If you do decide to use it, save this exercise for longer sessions and use it toward the end of the session when everyone feels comfortable with each other.

**TIP #3 Build an hour long program around a 20 minute video.**

**M**y third tip for putting on a successful stress management seminar is to build a one hour program or a series of one hour programs around the showing of a 20 minute video. If you need to put this method is a real "no spend the first 20 minutes the video, the next 20 minutes the final 20 minutes re-examples to illustrate these

*A program that is  
easy as ABC.*

together a program in a hurry, brainer!" When I do this, I introducing the main points in utes showing the video and viewing it and giving personal points.

For instance, when I use our video **SHORT CIRCUITING STRESS**, I spend the first 20 minutes talking about Albert Ellis's equation  $A+B=C$  (which is the central theme of the video). I write the equation on the board: The **A**ctivating event plus **B**elief equals the **C**onsequence. I show them exactly how this equation would work if they lost their keys. The Activating event, or A, is the lost keys. What you say to yourself about losing your keys is your Belief, or B. ("I'll never find these stupid keys.") The Consequence, or C, is what you feel as the result of A+B (In this case, frustration.)

After explaining this example thoroughly I play the video. I spend the last 20 minutes of the session exploring examples that illustrate this equation in the home and work lives of my audience.

For our program **LAUGHING AT STRESS** with PBS Star, Loretta LaRoche, I spend the first 20 minutes introducing the idea that stress is *funny*. I mention Dr. Steve Allen Jr's equation: *Comedy=Tragedy plus Time* and explain that given enough time and with enough perspective, anything, even really bad things, can seem funny. I play the video and spend the last 20 minutes

asking people to recount an event which, despite being stressful at the time, seems funny now. (Many people have a humorous tale about stress they've experienced that very day!) Another theme of this program is to let people know that they can find humor anywhere they look for it. I often make overhead transparencies of funny lists I get off the internet and cards that I see in pharmacies and bumper stickers I buy in stores. You'll be amazed at how ready and willing people are to laugh at anything even remotely funny, especially after they've spent twenty minutes laughing at Loretta LaRoche!

For our program **SICK OF STRESS**, which is an introduction to stress management I spend the first 20 minutes, focusing on the differences between stress and stressors, and what the particular stressors and hence are. (See showing the few relaxation either guide progressive myself or play one of the five minute exercises from one of our relaxation audio (or video) tapes like **A DAY AWAY FROM STRESS** or **JUST RELAX** which works just as well.

*Comedy = Tragedy + Time*

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**TIP #4 Relax. Teaching stress management is easy.**

I've always been surprised by how easy it is to put on a stress management seminar, even when I think back to the first couple of times I did it. Back then, I had a tremendous fear of public speaking so I was extremely nervous about presenting. I thought I hadn't prepared well enough because I only had an outline of the main points I wanted to cover and a list of several interactive exercises like the ones I've mentioned in this article. But these two things got me through my first experiences without a hitch.

There are dozens of ways you can fill up an hour teaching stress management. There are exercises and stress assessment tests. There are audiotapes and videotapes. There are biodots and reproducible handouts. You can even let people talk about their own stress. As long as you have an outline of where you want to go and a list of activities you literally can't go wrong.

But for those of you who still want more, we developed **THE SEVEN STEPS TO STRESS MASTERY**. This product combines everything we've learned to date about putting on stress management seminars. It gives you a rock solid outline - running along on the same page as your full presentation. It gives you overhead transparencies you can put up at just the right moment. It gives you the perfect exercise just when you need it to highlight a particular point. It gives you the materials for four different one hour seminars you can present individually or as part of a series -

and you can customize it to fit the demographics of your particular audience. It also gives you all the ancillary materials you need from biodots to handouts and from training videos to relaxation audios.

Whether you decide to use **THE SEVEN STEPS TO STRESS MASTERY** or not, don't be afraid to put on a stress seminar. It's easier than you think. You don't have to be an expert on stress to help people identify their stress and you don't have to be an expert on stress to lead people through several relaxation techniques. And with those two things alone - you've already created an hour-long program on stress management.

*Please call the number below if you would like any more advice about how to put on a successful stress seminar. We love to talk about teaching stress management!*

# Teaching Stress Management to workers, formally on welfare, who must cope with challenges they find daunting...

By Daniel Andrews

*Daniel Andrews is a stress management trainer who lives and works in Newport News, Virginia.*

**I** conduct workshops for people entering the workforce who have been on welfare. Stress management is a major component of our program: My clients often need help learning how to handle everyday situations that arise at work. These situations which include expressing an opposing opinion to a boss, dealing with an angry co-worker or handling unfair treatment, can be challenging and stressful for my clients.

In addition to these hurdles, the participants in my workshops often have their own personal problems to contend with such as alcoholism, drug dependency, living in abusive relationships, over-eating and spending beyond their means. These problems can make it difficult to succeed in the workplace. Not surprisingly, the incidence of stress related illness in this group is high. Cases of high blood pressure, immune system disorders, depression, and attempted suicide are not uncommon. But even though the need for stress management is clear, I have learned over the years, that how I present this subject needs to be customized to fit the special needs of my audience.

For example, one group I worked with flatly refused to participate in a visualization exercise. This came as a real shock to me. What could possibly be threatening about a visualization exercise? It turned out that they didn't want to close their eyes in a group setting. And there was even some fear of the unknown territory of the inner-mind. Initially they preferred the certainty of their hectic outward lives to the uncertainty of going within. I no longer ask anyone to close their eyes until much later on in the program when my rapport with the group is firmly established.

Since most of my clients struggle with issues concerning anger, teaching anger management is an important part of what we do. But in seeking to explain why we get angry I had another surprise in store for me while explaining the fight or flight response. To me, the fight or flight response is an abstract concept which describes two completely unacceptable choices in our modern world. But to my clients fighting or fleeing seemed more like *normal* responses to certain highly charged situations. This is an example of how my understanding of my *clients* has changed my under-

standing of *stress*.

My biggest challenge is always to establish trust between myself and the group. I want to show my audience that I genuinely understand their problems. But if I come across the wrong way - I may seem insincere and, more importantly, they will reject what I have to say. Generally my groups are resistant to my ideas and suggestions at first.

One way I can bridge this gap is by focusing on emotions. **No matter how different people are, the emotions we all feel are similar.** Everyone knows what it's like to feel fear, anger or envy. These emotions are universal. When people start talking about these feelings they open up. They are usually easier to reach and everybody gets closer. Talking about negative emotions can have this effect but so can positive emotions too.

When people are reluctant to talk about their negative experiences I sometimes get them to that vulnerable space by talking about positive emotions. People are glad to share positive experiences about the people and them the most happy. way often leads to the When the discussion of to the happy times deprived of, this in turn about *their* children be-happy times too. And as gression we arrive at the Either way we approach occurs and the desire to change is born.

*The participants give each other insights that would just sound like preaching if I said them.*

things that have made Surprisingly this path-same vulnerable spot. happy times leads them they've missed or been often leads them to talk ing deprived of these the result of this pro-same vulnerable place. it, a real breakthrough

Another unique way we approach stress is to encourage participants to help each other come up with their own answers. This often leads to some surprising results. For example, if one participant even hints at a tendency toward abusive relationships the other women pick up on this and point it out to that person. The women, in effect, create their own adhoc support group. They give each other insights that would just sound like preaching if I said them. This also helps them see that they can solve their own problems.

**That's why instead of telling them *what* to change, or even *how* to change I prefer to help them see *why* they should change.** I do this by allowing them to vividly imagine what their lives would be like if they made a particular change. I challenge them to overcome their self-defeating behaviors like giving up too easily when they encounter resistance or shutting down completely when they encounter a conflict of any kind.

(Many of my participants were raised by grandparents who were *two* generations removed and thus

had trouble relating to them while they were growing up: As a result conflicts were often swept under the rug or avoided and arguing was not allowed.

Therefore, I encourage my clients to examine their self-defeating behaviors and internal conflicts they have avoided facing all their lives. I ask them to see the harm this avoidance has caused them: In terms of broken relationships, being attracted to dysfunctional partners, or even through personal neglect.

**Many of my clients spend their entire lives convincing themselves that they are *not supposed* to have the basic amenities that most of us take for granted.** I encourage my clients to see themselves (through visualization techniques) providing their families with proper food, shelter and clothing and getting into relationships with men that are free of abuse and finding neighborhoods to live in that are free of crime. This visualization exercise (which after I have gained their confidence, they are now willing to participate in) allows them to see where the world of work might take them. And these thoughts - these imaginings - sow the seeds of behavioral change.

Furthermore, I encourage them to see themselves as the person who breaks the mold. Even though their mother, their grandmother and all their sisters may have acted one way, they don't have to emulate this behavior. The visualization exercises are a crucial part of the motivational process. It helps make a better future (and the changes that are required to create it) seem less formidable and more attainable.

**I encourage them to take the tiniest steps necessary to implement the smallest change so they can experience the power of personal growth for themselves.** I have found that when a client successfully makes one change it can break the logjam that inhibits their personal development. One change often leads to another change which will trigger yet another change and so on. And it only takes one small success for a client to see that they have the ability to make a change.

And let me add, that even the people who pessimistically sit in the back pretending to be unaffected by what they see are often experiencing something positive. By paying attention, not being a distraction to the group, the seeds of change are sometimes planted. Especially when they witness - first hand - the power of positive change.

I feel I have to pick my ancillary stress training materials for these workshops very carefully. I don't want to risk alienating my clients with materials they can't relate to. I like **A DAY AWAY FROM STRESS** and the other relaxation tapes since it helps people achieve a relaxed state without necessarily closing their eyes. I also use the **BIODOTS** which can be a lot fun and genuinely promote learning about the causes of stress.