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Cognitive Restructuring & Stress Management

Most stress management programs focus on physical techniques for reducing stress like meditation, exercise and progressive muscle relaxation. This workbook will introduce you to a new way to manage stress called *cognitive restructuring*. Cognitive restructuring helps you reduce stress *mentally* by showing you how your mind contributes to every stressful event you experience.

Physical techniques erase stress.

Physical approaches to stress management attempt to alter the body's physiology: that is to *erase* stress, after the fact, by turning tension into relaxation.

Cognitive restructuring, on the other hand, is used *during* the stressful event. It has no direct physical effect on the body. It simply attempts to change your *thinking* when stressful situations arise. Cognitive stress management is *proactive* and physical stress management is, in a sense, *retroactive*.

Physical techniques take time.

Physical techniques also require time spent practicing the technique. Meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, biofeedback, yoga and exercise all require a daily commitment of time to help you manage your stress.

Cognitive restructuring requires no extra time at all. Once you master it, you simply invoke the technique at the moment you need it. You don't have to set aside time each day to practice it.

Since time pressure is considered by many authorities to be the #1 source of stress in the United States, it's hard to imagine anyone taking even more time from their busy schedules in order to practice *any* form of stress management. This time constraint often causes people to give up physical stress management techniques before they even begin.

This article is not meant to discourage you from the practice of physical stress management techniques. In fact, these techniques are excel-

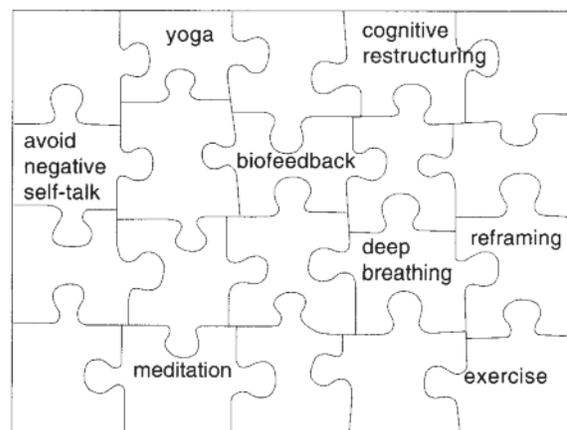
lent for erasing the buildup of stress you can't avoid mentally. Still, it's important for you to know that, for many reasons, cognitive techniques are sometimes more practical especially when being considered for use on the job.

Cognitive restructuring is perfect for work.

Since cognitive restructuring is a *mental* technique, no one knows you are using it but you. You certainly can't stop to meditate if your boss is getting on your nerves, but you can practice cognitive restructuring right then and there. Which is why cognitive restructuring may be the perfect tool for managing stress at work.

As you glance through this workbook you'll notice that every article has a corresponding exercise on the facing page. Completing these exercises will help give you hands-on experience in the use of various cognitive restructuring techniques. For your first exercise you're going to learn the difference between the terms stress and stressors. This exercise is important because the practice of cognitive restructuring relies heavily on your ability to break down a stressful event into its component parts, two of which are represented by stress and stressors.

The stress management puzzle



Listing your stress and stressors...

Stressors are the triggering events and circumstances that cause you to feel stressed. (A flat tire, a traffic jam, a demanding boss, etc.) **Stress** is what you often feel after you've come in contact with a stressor (anxious, tense, upset). It's also how your body reacts (headaches, muscle tension, stomach upsets, etc.) It's important to know the difference between stress and stressors because (as you will soon see) stressors don't *automatically* cause stress. In the columns below, describe five stressful episodes you have encountered in the last few days.

Stressors

In this column, describe the events, thoughts, and interactions that caused you to feel stressed.

Stress

In this column, describe how the event made you *feel*: angry, sad, frustrated, annoyed, etc. Also note any associated stress symptoms: headaches, muscle tension, stomach upsets, coming down with a cold, etc.

I got caught in a traffic jam before an important meeting.

1

2

3

4

5

I felt upset, tense I could feel a headache coming on.

1

2

3

4

5

Notice any patterns in your list of stressors? Is your stress occurring mostly at work, with a certain person or during a particular activity like driving or waiting in line? Show this list to a friend or spouse. Try to find something on the list of stressors that *doesn't* bother him or her. Identifying these discrepancies will help you see how cognitive restructuring works: If a stressor doesn't bother him or her, *why does it have to bother you?*

How do you *think* about stress?

If you're like most people, you blame events and circumstances for your stress - never realizing that it's your thoughts and beliefs about these events that are the true source of your stress. If this sounds hard to believe, please read the following example.

Let's say a person has \$1,000 invested in the stock market. One morning she looks at the paper and notices her investment is down \$20. No big deal, she thinks.

That afternoon she goes out to lunch at a restaurant. She hands the waiter a fifty dollar bill for a \$15 lunch. She puts the change in her coat pocket without even looking at it. When she gets back to work and moves the money to her handbag, she realizes she's \$20 short. She's not sure if she lost the money or the waiter shortchanged her, but either way she's upset.

The stimulus in these two events is exactly the same...she lost \$20. But her interpretation is different. Thus, the first event has virtually no effect while the second event leaves her feeling out of sorts.

The main difference between the two events is *what she thought about them.* In the stock market example, she thought: "*\$20 down is not so bad, it could have been much worse; it will probably bounce back in a few days, but if it doesn't I understood the risk I was taking when I invested the money.*"

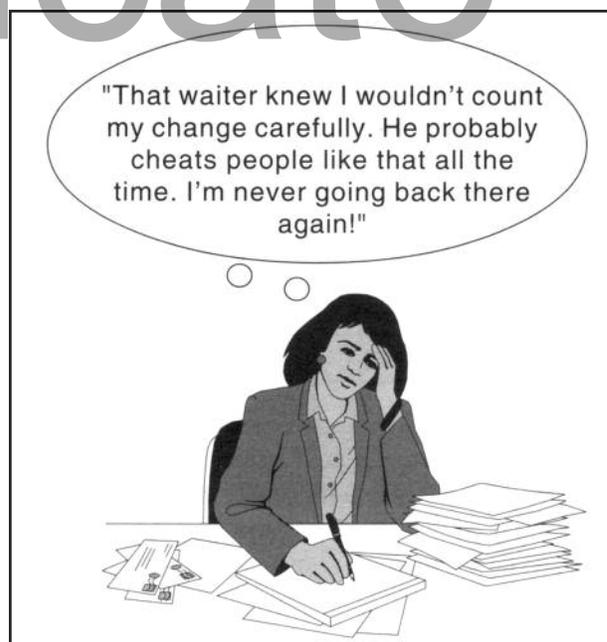
In the second example, she's quite upset: "*Perhaps the waiter did it on purpose- or the restaurant cashier - how outrageous,*" she thinks! "*Or maybe I just lost the \$20 when I reached into my pocket for my keys in the parking lot.*" As she ponders the possibility that she made a "stupid mistake" she says to herself: "*What an idiot I am!*"

Her thinking about the second event is entirely different even though *the net loss is exactly the same!* Believe it or not, this kind of distorted thinking occurs in just about every stressful event you encounter. Your thoughts about an event are often the *cause* of your stress. This may seem like bad news, but it's

also good news -*depending on the way you think about it.* If you can create stress in your own mind, you can eliminate it there, too.

Most of us think like the woman in our two examples. But why can't we see the second event as clearly as the first? Why can't we say to ourselves: "*It could have been much worse, everyone loses money now and then. And if the waiter did it, I'm sure it was an honest mistake. This event will remind me to always count my change.*"

The next time you feel stressed, notice your thoughts. See what's going on inside your head. Try to determine whether your thinking is contributing to your stress. During stressful events your mind fills with all kinds of distorted thoughts such as: *Why does this always happen to me.* Or, *this is the worst thing that could have happened.* Or, *I must be a bad person because I let this happen.* These are all examples of cognitive distortions which are more commonly known as negative self-talk. In the next exercise you'll be asked to monitor your self-talk.



Monitoring **your** self-talk

When you say things to yourself like: “*I hate myself; I’m lousy at everything; I’m a terrible parent; My boss is a total jerk; Life is so unfair; I can’t stand waiting a minute longer; He shouldn’t have done that; This job is impossible;*” these are all examples of negative self-talk. In order to practice cognitive restructuring you need to become aware of your self-talk. The next time something stressful occurs, listen to your self-talk and jot down a record of what happens in the columns below.

Stressful event

My boss asked me to work

late on Friday

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

Associated thoughts

“Why does he always ask me?”

I’m such a pushover.”

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

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The ABC's of Cognitive Restructuring

If you were working on your computer, and a sudden power outage caused you to lose several hours work, how would you feel? Stressed? Of course. And if you're like most people, you'd blame your stress on the power company or some other outside force beyond your control. But in fact, your stress was the result of your *thoughts* about this event, not the event itself.

Imagine for a moment, what your thoughts would have been as you watched all your hard work go up in cyber-smoke: "Why does this stuff *always* happen to me? I'm such an *idiot* for not buying that backup power supply. This is the *worst* thing that could have possibly happened."

If that's what you would have thought in this situation you are certainly not alone.

Just about everybody thinks this way. But you don't have to. You have the power to change your thoughts through the use of cognitive restructuring.

Cognitive restructuring (CR) can give you the tools you need to dispute negative, stress inducing thoughts at the precise moment they occur. In the above computer example CR would encourage you to *restructure* your thoughts by saying to yourself: "This stuff doesn't *always* happen to me. In fact, it hasn't happened in several months. If it happened more often I *would* have bought that power supply. This is nowhere near the *worst* thing that could have happened."

Once you learn to dispute your irrational thinking and faulty logic, through the use of cognitive restructuring, you begin to substitute accurate, objective thoughts at the moment you feel most stressed.

The next time your computer crashes, you might tell yourself: "This happens to everyone. It's no big deal. The last time it happened, I was able to restore what I had done in 15 minutes."

Psychologist, Albert Ellis came up with a simple way of summarizing the cognitive restructuring process using the equation: **A+B=C**. In this equation **A** stands for the *Activating event*. **B** stands for your *Beliefs* about the event and **C** stands for the *Consequence* of A+B.

So in the previous example, the Activating event, or **A** was the lost work that resulted from the power going off. **B** was your belief that this was the worst thing that could have happened. **C** was what you felt when you combined **A+B**. In this case the consequence was that you felt frustrated and upset. But if you change your thinking at **B** you can change the outcome or consequence of this event.

So if you *believe* that losing the document is the worst thing that could have happened to you, the consequence of A+B is going to be *stress*. But, if you *believe* that you can quickly restore your document, your C is going to be entirely different. In other words, your stress is going to be *much* less.

So, while you may not be able to control events and circumstances, you can control your reaction to them by controlling your thoughts and beliefs. That's what cognitive restructuring is all about.

The exercise on the next page will help you identify your ABC's.

$$A + B = C$$

Knowing your ABC's

During the next 7 days, analyze how *Activating events* (for example, a missed deadline) plus your thoughts and *Beliefs* about those events (for example, *this is the worst possible thing that could have happened*) can add up to stressful *Consequences* (for example, anger, frustration and tension). Any time you experience stress during the course of the next week, try to isolate the activating event and notate it in the A column. Then try to determine what your thoughts were at that time and notate them in the B column. And finally, record what you felt as the result of A+B in the C column.

A's

Activating events. What was it that started you feeling stressed?

I got a \$100 speeding ticket for going 12 mph over the speed limit.

1.

2.

3.

4.

B's

Beliefs. What were you saying to yourself before, during and after a stressful event?

What an idiot I am. Why can't the cops catch real criminals? It's not fair!

1.

2.

3.

4.

C's

Consequences. How did you feel at the conclusion of the stressful event?

Angry, frustrated, neck muscles tense.

1.

2.

3.

4.

In looking over your list of A's, B's & C's can you think of any thoughts you might have substituted in the B column that would have resulted in a less stressful outcome in the C column?

WHEN LEARNING YOUR ABC'S, DON'T FORGET D FOR DISPUTE

In Dr. Albert Ellis' equation $A+B=C$ (which we discussed on page 6) **A stands for the Activating Event.** That's the cause of stress - a flat tire, a broken appliance, or an angry boss. These are all A's or *Activating events*.

B stands for Beliefs. What you think about the flat tire and the broken appliance or the angry boss represent your *beliefs* or your interpretation of what has taken place.

C stands for the Consequence. How you feel and what happens to you physically (i.e., a stiff neck or a tension headache) and emotionally (i.e., anger, fear, frustration, sadness) is the *consequence* of A+B.

This equation helps you understand how your beliefs about events - not the events themselves - are the true source of your stress. During an activating event your thinking tends to be distorted: "This flat tire is going to ruin my whole day," or, "This appliance is going to cost a fortune to fix," or, "My boss is going to kill me when she discovers the mistake I've made." In these examples your **Beliefs** are exaggerated and faulty. You're doing what Dr. Ellis calls *awfulizing*. You're assuming that the worst possible scenario is the *only* possible scenario. While sometimes the worst thing does happen, *most of the time it doesn't*. Why put yourself through all that misery every single time, when the worst possible scenario rarely comes to pass?



That's where the letter "D" can help. You need to Dispute statements that simply aren't true or are hardly ever true: A flat tire is not going to ruin your *whole* day. A broken appliance isn't *automatically* going to cost a fortune and your boss certainly isn't going to *kill* you. Flat tires are relatively easy to repair, bosses don't always expect you to be perfect, and sometimes you can fix an appliance yourself with the help of the troubleshooting guide in the back of your owners' manual. When you dispute your distorted thoughts you immediately lower your stress, you start to think of solutions and most importantly, you change the **Consequence** of **A+B**. You'll be astounded by how effective this one simple idea can be when it comes to preventing and eliminating stress.

So when learning your ABC's, don't forget the letter **D** for **Dispute**.

Disputing your distorted thinking

Distorted thinking is a major cause of stress. However, you can learn to dispute your own distorted thoughts, and thereby lower your stress. Stress is often a signal that your thinking may be muddled, irrational or confused. In the left column below jot down the examples you've already written in column B on page 7. In the right column attempt to argue, dispute, reality test, or think more objectively about what you wrote in the Faulty Beliefs column. If you need ideas for how to dispute your faulty beliefs see page 10 for assistance.

Faulty Beliefs

Rational counter arguments

It was unfair of the cop to single me out
for a traffic ticket. I was an idiot for not
slowing down more quickly.

Yes, other people were going faster, but
life isn't always fair and I was speeding.
I made a mistake. I'll be more careful.

1.

1.

2.

2.

3.

3.

4.

4.

12 irrational things we say to ourselves and how to dispute them.

1. “I can’t stand this.”

Dispute: I already have.

2. “This is the worst thing that could have happened.”

Dispute: If it *really* was the worst thing that could have happened I wouldn’t be standing here right now.

3. “I’m such an idiot for letting that happen.”

Dispute: I made a mistake. Everyone makes mistakes.

4. “I’ll never learn to use this _____.” (You fill in the blank, for example:

stupid computer.)

Dispute: I’ve learned to use other things that were just as difficult and I can learn to use this one, too.

5. “Why does this stuff always happen to me?”

Dispute: This stuff happens to everybody, not just me.

6. “He *never* returns my calls.”

Dispute: It always takes longer than I would like, but eventually he *does* return my calls.

7. “My neighbors are completely inconsiderate.”

Dispute: My neighbors probably don’t realize how much this bothers me.

8. “*Nobody* cares about this issue but me.”

Dispute: Of course other people care about this issue; I just need to seek them out.

9. “Life seems so unfair to me.”

Dispute: Life isn’t always fair and it’s foolish to expect that it would be, but sometimes I am fortunate, too.

10. “I’m a terrible parent.”

Dispute: I could have handled this situation better. The next time it comes up I’ll be better prepared.

11. “If I let someone else do this it won’t get done right. I must do it myself.”

Dispute: I can’t do everything. I’ll let someone else do it and it doesn’t have to be perfect.

12. “My boss is the world’s worst.”

Dispute: I wish my boss treated me better, but he certainly isn’t the world’s worst. In fact my last boss had his bad moments, too.