LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Starting a conversation
2. Overview of the human stress response
3. Assessment tools: symptoms & coping
4. Strategies
5. Resources
3 Domains for Learning

COGNITIVE
- What information is most salient (individual, environmental, systemic)?

AFFECTIVE
- What feelings, values or attitudes are most salient?

SKILL
- What behaviors (skills) could be learned and practiced to best address the presenting concerns?
Starting a Conversation

• When you say “I’m stressed”, what do you mean?
  – *Listen for: emotion, behavior, cognitive, social/roles?*

• What do you know about yourself and stress?
  – *What are your “distressing” stressors?*
  – *stress-related symptoms*
  – *ways of coping (healthy, unhealthy/ineffective)*
  – *Strengths*

• What 1 change would reduce stress to manageable level?
  – *Ex: “vent”, support, organize, eliminate, skills, find meaning*
Defining Stress

• “Stress” is a non-specific term > no direction for change

• DEVELOP a LANGUAGE for CHANGE:

• “Stress” = any pressure that creates a response challenge
  – Stress as a neutral concept, neither good nor bad!

• “Stressors” = types and sources of pressure

• “Stress response” = how one perceives the pressure:
  – Distress (dysfunction)
  – Coping (resources & responses)
  – Eustress (growth)
What are “Stressors”?

• Occur on a continuum: mild to traumatic

• Common “stressors” (sources of pressure):
  – Self-demands, roles, life changes, daily hassles
  – Environmental: people, places, things, events

• Stressors can be:
  – **Acute** (intense, time-bound, isolated events)
  – **Chronic** (intense or not, ongoing)
  – **Expected** or **unexpected**
  – **Real** or **imagined**
  – …or –most likely- a combination of any of the above!
Role of Perception

• Perception of stressor/s correlates with response type

• Perception is processed through assessment:
  – of stressor: threat/ no threat?
  – of coping resources: can I handle this?
  – of expected outcome: will I succeed or fail?

• Implications:
  – We may or may not have control over stressors
  – We DO have the ability to adjust our perceptions
Stress Appraisal & Response

• Initial appraisal:
  – Primary: significance? (threat/no threat)
  – Secondary: capacity to respond? (low/high)

• Signs of **Distress** appraisal:
  – Emotional, dramatic, catastrophic (fight/flight, or freeze)
  – Inability to access and/or use available resources

• Signs of **Eustress** appraisal:
  – Realistic, control/confidence/efficacy, hopefulness
  – Can distinguish actual problem from emotional response
  – Effective use of available resources
Stress & the Nervous System

Primitive Response
Limbic system (amygdala)/brain stem
The “emotional brain”; “fight or flight”; the freeze response

Cognitive Response
Frontal lobe
“Directed attention”, “willful activity”
Emotional intelligence

Info Transfer Bi-Directional
CNS/brain & spinal cord ↔ sensory receptors/body
Can use brain and/or body to prevent and interrupt unhealthy stress responses (cognitive and/or behavioral interventions)
Consequences of Chronic Stress

SYMPTOMS: Social, physical, mental, emotional

• Functional Impairment
  – Interpersonal (dysfunction, isolation)
  – Work (over/underwork)

• Physical Health
  – Cardiovascular disease, sleep disorders, digestive problems, obesity, skin conditions, impaired immunity (asthma, allergy)

• Mental Health
  – Mood disorders (depression, anxiety)
  – Substance abuse and behavioral addictions
  – Cognitive impairment (processing, decision-making)
Defining Resilience

• “Adapting well in face of adversity” (Southwick, 2011)
  – Allostatis: returning to normal functioning
  – Green twig analogy

• Three core psychological attributes (Buckwalter, 2011):
  – Strength
  – Meaning/purpose
  – Pleasure

• Multidimensional (varies across domains)
• Possible to increase resiliency
Resilience: Psychosocial Factors  
(NCPTSD: Southwick, 2011)

• “...can be enhanced through learning and training”
  – Engaging neuroscience: plasticity and the brain

• Mediating factors:
  – Genetic, developmental, neurobio, psychosocial, spiritual
  – Need for accurate assessment (multiple instruments)

• Psychosocial factors:
  – Role models, positive emotions, emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, coping style, spirituality, moral code, social support, training, rapid recovery, purpose and meaning
ASSESSMENT TOOLS
&
STRATEGIES
Awareness

SELF-INVENTORIES: STRESS COPING

Tools:
• Identify, quantify & explore **STRESSORS**
• Identify, quantify & explore **STRESS SYMPTOMS**
• Identify, quantify & explore **COPING RESOURCES**

**AWARENESS** facilitates ability to:
• **MONITOR** stress
• **INTERRUPT** and **AVOID** stressors
Monitoring Stress Arousal

- Awareness of optimal stimulation range
- Practice body scanning (physical awareness)
- Adjust demands level
- Check your pacing
- Avoid rapid shifts in pacing
- Record patterns
Interrupting Stress Arousal

• **Interruption** of neurological stress response:
  – Accurate assessment of stressor / coping resources
  –+ Intentional change in cognition or behavior (willful activity)
  –= Alteration of neurochemistry & information flow
    • Diffusion of adrenaline and cortisols

• **ACTIVITIES:**
  – Laughter
  – Mindfulness practices
    • Walking, moving, sitting; prayer, contemplation; drawing
  – Aerobic exercise (breathing exchange of gasses)
    • Any cardio, yoga, kickboxing, hiking, swimming, walking
Resources & Wrap Up

• Resources: see handout