

Handout for

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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What is Stress?

Stress is commonly defined as any event or ongoing situation to which you must *adjust*, one which makes some kind of *demand* on you. However, such events and situations are more accurately called “stressors,” while “stress” is the *impact* they have on you. This impact depends mostly on your *ways of thinking* about your experiences.

Stress problems involve experiencing **anger** and **fear** *excessively*, that is, too *often*, too *intensely* or too *prolonged* at low levels. Managing stress must involve learning to handle anger and fear *more effectively*. This means changing your *beliefs* (that lead to fearful and angry thoughts), your *physiological reaction* (to anger and fear) and your *behavior* (in situations triggering anger and fear).

Counteracting Distorted Beliefs that lead to Stressful Thoughts

To change ways of thinking that are linked with stress, you need to get a “sample” of your own typical stress-producing thoughts (that is, the thoughts that lead to excessive anger and fear). For a week, keep a written record of any occasions when you experience any of the stress symptoms below. Whenever you have a symptom, you can assume that you’re either angry (with someone, something or yourself) or afraid.

- **Physical symptoms:** Heart racing or pounding, muscle tension, trembling, lightheadedness, butterflies or tightness in the stomach, chills, flushing, headache, shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, numbness, tingling, chest pain or pressure, sweating.
- **Cognitive symptoms:** Disruptions in thinking, like a lapse in attention or concentration, daydreaming, forgetfulness, blocked thinking, preoccupation.
- **Behavioral symptoms:** Deliberately avoiding people or situations, compulsive activity (like busywork or eating), procrastinating, gossiping, excessive joking, hostile remarks, aggressive or destructive acts.

You feel *anger* whenever you think you’ve *been wronged* (whether or not you really have been). Feeling angry leads you to try to *get even*. In contrast, you feel *fear* when you think you’re in some kind of *danger*. Feeling fear leads you to *escape* or *avoid* certain people or situations. However, getting even and avoiding things only *increases* your stress symptoms.

If you interpret something as a wrong or an offense against you when it really isn’t, this *interpretation* creates excessive anger. Even when there was a wrong or an offense but you respond by trying to get even, this *response* creates excessive anger.

Similarly, if you interpret something as a sign of danger when it really isn’t, this *interpretation* creates excessive fear. Even when there is a danger but you respond by avoiding things, this *response* creates excessive fear.

These faulty interpretations and misguided responses reflect *faulty thinking*, and faulty thinking results from living life “under the influence” of certain **distorted beliefs**. Common beliefs that eventually lead to stress symptoms are described in the left side of the chart below. To the right of each distorted belief is a set of alternative beliefs that are more *reasonable* and *realistic*. They are expressed in the form of “self-statements.” You can *counteract* and *change* distorted beliefs you’ve relied on by *mentally rehearsing* the corresponding self-statements—*often*. The self-statements gradually become part of your thinking, leading to more effective coping instead of continued stress symptoms.

Distorted beliefs that lead to stress symptoms	Self-statements to counteract distorted beliefs
<p>PERFECTIONISM involves measuring your worth as a person by some unrealistic standard, and pushing yourself to be perfect in ability, stamina and resourcefulness. This leads to constant <i>fear</i> of failure and frequent <i>self-criticism</i> (anger toward yourself).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I must not fail in anything I do.</i> • <i>I must be quick, and never “take my time.”</i> • <i>Needing help means I’m incompetent.</i> • <i>If I’m not “productive,” I’m lazy and worthless.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I don’t have to be perfect in order to be successful, competent or make progress.</i> • <i>Not one of the people I admire most is perfect.</i> • <i>Combining all my successes and my mistakes for today gives me a fine “batting average.”</i> • <i>A mistake is something I make—not something I am.</i> • <i>Needing help only means I’m human.</i> • <i>I didn’t punch some “time clock” at birth, so I’m not going to harass myself as if I’m a bad boss. I’m</i>

- *If I'm corrected, I'm rejected and I'm a failure.*
- *I should know, understand and foresee everything.*
- *Changing my mind means I don't know what I'm doing.*
- *I should never be tired or sick.*
- *If I get angry, I'll be a bad person or I'll lose control of myself or hurt others.*
- *My value as a person depends on my accomplishments.*

- *worth much more than what I can produce.*
- *People who let me know about my mistakes could be giving me an opportunity to improve.*
- *Changing my mind shows only that I learn from my experiences.*
- *Reasonable people can accept me with my limitations.*
- *I can't control my emotions but I can choose how to express them. I can use anger as a signal that I'm bothered by something, and I can tell others tactfully.*

EXCESSIVE RESPONSIBILITY involves assuming responsibility for things beyond your control or authority—like the needs and feelings of others or the functioning of an entire department. You dismiss your own needs. You fear disappointing others if you don't take all this responsibility. You do it because it makes you feel needed—even indispensable.

- *If I just do enough for others and take care of them, someday they'll realize what I need and take care of me.*
- *Expressing my own needs openly is selfish, and it would only burden others.*
- *In a good relationship, people somehow just know each other's needs and feelings.*
- *I know what's best for everyone, and if I'm aware of any need I must take care of it.*
- *To not take care of every problem I see is irresponsible, negligent and lazy.*
- *Feeling responsible for everything is part of being a "team-player."*

- *No one reads minds. I don't automatically know what other people need—they do.*
- *Acting like I know what's best for everyone only makes me come across as a "controlling" person.*
- *Expressing my own needs does not make me "selfish" or "demanding."*
- *Coercing people into overextending themselves is pure manipulation—even when I do it to myself.*
- *Waiting for others to ask me for help—and then deciding whether or not, when and how much I'll do—shows self-respect, not "selfishness."*
- *There are some problems I must ignore, because some things can't improve until after they "fall apart."*
- *There are people whose inappropriate actions I can't excuse or cover up.*
- *Unless my advice is requested, I need to do work assignments as directed. Otherwise I set myself up to be blamed when things turn out badly.*
- *Feeling responsible for everything is part of being chief executive officer. A group is a "team" only if everyone plays the same way.*

PLEASING and APPEASING involves continuous efforts to make certain people happy or keep them from getting upset. This is done to avoid losing their approval or acceptance.

- *I must always have love and approval from people in my life.*
- *If I don't please others, they will reject me, abandon me or fire me.*
- *If I hear that someone thinks badly of me, I must prove to him/her that I'm an innocent, worthwhile person*

- *I can do things for people, but I'm not responsible for anyone's "happiness" but my own.*
- *I have no control of what others think. I don't even know what they think.*
- *Trying to control what others think leads me to seek gossip and reveal my personal business to others.*
- *Pleasing and appeasing leads me to always check the other person's mood—which only deepens my fear of that person.*
- *I must not give any person the power of my own conscience.*
- *If people only accept me if I give them what they want, I'm basically just a "vending machine."*
- *"Rejection" means a relationship is absolutely over. How would I know it was over? If there's no "sign" I can rely on, pleasing/appeasing is a waste of time.*

PERSONALIZING is a tendency to assume that you are the cause of all kinds of problems, setbacks and

- *Instead of getting upset when things go wrong, I'll stop and think of things other than me that*

<p>disappointments that actually have nothing to do with you.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone who <i>disagrees</i> with me is either <i>upset</i> with me or is trying to <i>start an argument</i> with me. • Anyone who <i>corrects</i> me is just trying to <i>humiliate</i> me. • When someone is <i>upset</i> or a problem arises, I'm either the <i>cause</i> of it or the one who must <i>fix</i> it. • People who do <i>annoying things</i> around me are trying to <i>annoy</i> me. 	<p>contributed to whatever has happened. Many factors <i>beyond my control</i> can cause things to turn out badly—like personal problems of other people and the <i>circumstances</i> surrounding us.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most other people are trying to get their own needs met, <i>not interfere</i> with mine. • Anyone who is <i>upset</i> with me is <i>responsible</i> to tell me. I can't read minds.
<p>BLAMING is the result of assuming that every problem that arises is <i>someone's fault</i>. So, a problem is "taken care of" by blaming and punishing that person. If someone bothers or offends you, you believe you must get even.</p> <p>You vilify people who do things you dislike. That is, you use a person's bothersome behavior to <i>label</i> him/her as <i>all bad</i>, e.g., just plain "stupid," "selfish," "mean," "irresponsible," etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaming does nothing but make everyone feel <i>too defensive</i> to work together. • We're <i>not</i> in some "court" with me as the "judge". • Various people—including me—can play a role in <i>creating</i> a problem, so we can each play a role in <i>fixing</i> it. • Blaming others for my problems leads me to expect others to <i>solve</i> those problems. That won't happen. • I don't have to blame <i>anyone</i>—including <i>myself</i>. Instead of verbally abusing myself whenever I make a mistake, I'll give myself the <i>supportive, encouraging comments</i> I'd give to someone else. • I won't make people who frustrate me "easier to hate" by turning them into <i>villains</i>. I can only see people's behavior, <i>not what's going on "inside."</i>
<p>CATASTROPHIZING is a tendency to expect the <i>worst</i>. The "worst" usually involves <i>losing something deeply important to you</i>—like your job, a relationship, your health, your life, your mind, control of yourself. You look for certain events that might signal that "the worst" is about to happen. Your stressful thoughts often begin with, "What if...?"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every time the "worst" thing I expect <i>doesn't</i> happen, I'll write down <i>why</i> it didn't happen—without ever using the idea of "luck." • Instead of assuming I'd be <i>unable</i> to cope if something I fear <i>did</i> happen, I'll make a written plan of exactly what I would do if it did occur. • My catastrophizing has <i>not</i> made me more "prepared" for life's problems. It has only <i>kept me upset</i> most of the time. • My own fearful expectations can lead me to <i>behave</i> in ways that actually make it <i>more likely</i> for things to turn out the way I fear. I need to <i>stop</i> those behaviors. • There's a normal, self-protective "alarm" response in people for handling danger. I need to "re-adjust" my alarm so it's <i>less sensitive</i>.
<p>EITHER/OR thinking involves a tendency to rigidly divide people, things and experiences into two categories, as if they can only be one or the other. You don't recognize the "middle ground" or "shades of gray" or reasonable compromise in many life situations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are <i>either</i> on my side or against me. • It's <i>either</i> my way or the wrong way. • Things are <i>either</i> wonderful or terrible. • You <i>either</i> love me or you hate me. • I'm <i>either</i> indispensable or I'm useless. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many things are <i>not</i> simply black-and-white. I can allow for some "shades of gray," for some "middle ground." • I can often find a good <i>compromise</i> if I look for one. • The world is not full of people just waiting to pounce on me. I'll resist the impulse to act "tough" and "push" others around, and see if they really will antagonize me.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are <i>either</i> dependable or <i>undependable</i>. • If I don't push <i>others</i> around, <i>they'll</i> push me around. 	
<p>MAGNIFYING and GENERALIZING. Emotional reactions are <i>amplified</i> when you <i>label</i> your experiences with <i>extreme</i> words, like <i>always, never, all, none, everything, nothing, everybody, nobody ... the worst, awful, etc.</i> This makes unpleasant experiences seem unbearable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'll <i>never</i> learn this." • "I'm a <i>terrible</i> parent (spouse, employee, son, daughter)." • "This <i>always</i> happens to me." • "Other people <i>never</i> return my calls." • "I <i>can't</i> stand this—it's <i>awful</i>." • "Nobody <i>cares</i> about me." 	<p>Instead of exaggerating, I'll label the problem situation more precisely and accurately.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'll get rid of extreme words and describe what's going on objectively and accurately, so I'll understand it better and be less upset. • I'll remind myself of things that have happened contrary to the sweeping generalization I've made. <p>I'll try to find some good in unpleasant situations, by asking...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can I learn from this experience? • What changes do I now know I should make that would improve my future? • What unexpected opportunities could arise after a painful loss?
<p>ENTITLEMENT involves <i>unrealistic</i> expectations of other people or the world.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You raise your personal needs and desires to the level of <i>law</i>. If you want something badly and for good reasons, and you can't imagine any reason not to have it, you feel outrage if people don't give it to you—as if they had committed a crime. You don't tolerate frustration, like waiting in lines, delays, demands, disappointments, annoying people, criticism. • You might believe you should not have to <i>tell</i> others how you hurt or what you need—they should just <i>know</i>. • You insist on fairness or justice when it's unreasonable to do so, as if there's a "<i>law</i>" of fairness for personal experiences like the law of gravity for physical objects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other people are not obligated by my needs, and I'm not obligated by theirs. We each have a right to say "No" or negotiate. • Instead of insisting on how things <i>should</i> be, I'll tell myself and others how I prefer them to be. I'll find a way to make the best of things that don't work out as I prefer. • No one reads minds. Other people don't know what I need, I do. There's no substitute for telling people. • Fairness and justice are good, but always insisting on them creates more stress than it's worth. A certain degree of unfairness and injustice is simply part of life. I can work on preventing future problems, but waiting for some kind of payback keeps me stuck in the past.

Self-Calming Skills: Controlling the Physical Arousal of Anger and Fear

Successful coping includes gaining some control over the *physical arousal* that is part of the emotional states of anger and fear. This arousal causes all the physical symptoms you feel. These symptoms all intensify *together* or diminish *together*, and if you learn to reduce *one* symptom the rest will follow. Two of the symptoms can easily be brought under your *voluntary control* —increased *muscle tension* and rapid *breathing*

Tense-Release Muscle Relaxation

You can train your muscles to release tension altogether whenever you say a *cue word* to yourself (like training a dog to sit whenever a cue word is spoken). Choose a cue word to use every time you do this practice routine and every time you use the technique. Choose *any* word you want, like *relax, let go, release, calm, float*, etc.

Sit or lie down in a quiet, comfortable place. Close your eyes. Take a couple of slow, deep breaths (as described below in *Controlled Breathing*). This helps release tension and clear your mind. Then, for each muscle group listed below, starting with the first one, tighten only that part of your body and hold it tight for 5 seconds. After 5 seconds, say your cue word to yourself and let go of that muscle group. Wait about 10 seconds and then work with the next muscle group in the same way.

1. Curl the toes (of both feet) under (or back).
2. Point feet downward, away from head (heels on floor).
3. Point feet upward, toward head (heels on floor).
4. Tighten entire right leg.
5. Tighten entire left leg.
6. Tighten buttocks and groin.
7. Tighten abdominal (stomach) muscles.
8. Arch the back (chest forward, shoulders back)—but only if possible without pain.
9. Tighten right arm and fist.
10. Tighten left arm and fist.
11. Pull shoulders up high (arms limp).
12. Tighten entire face.
13. Release any tension remaining anywhere you notice it by using only your cue word.

This practice routine takes 5 minutes. The goal of practicing it is to become able to make all your muscles release tension at once whenever you just say your cue word. You can reach this point in two to three weeks if you practice 3 times a day. Doing it less will give little or no benefit. Do this practice routine during the times of your day when things are the least hectic. Don't do your final practice at bedtime, because you might learn to respond to your cue with drowsiness instead of with the calm (relaxed alertness) that you want. Remember, this is a practice routine—it's not what you do when you're upset. The ability to calm yourself when upset by just saying your cue word is achieved only after doing this practice routine enough times.

Controlled Breathing

Simply slowing your breathing can help reverse your physical arousal and reduce any symptoms of hyperventilation (over-breathing) like shortness of breath, lightheadedness, numbness/tingling and dizziness.

Try "5-second breathing." Count a full 5 seconds as you inhale slowly through your nose, and 5 seconds as you exhale slowly through your mouth. Do this for at least a minute.

Another approach is to deliberately use the diaphragm muscle at the floor of your chest. Inhale slowly (through your nose) by expanding your abdomen, instead of by expanding your chest. Do this for at least a minute.

Techniques for Improving Sleep

Sleep loss is a common stress symptom. However, many of the ways people try to handle this problem actually make it worse. The techniques below have helped many people with problems getting to sleep and resuming sleep after interruption.

1. Schedule 7 to 8 hours for sleep. The proportion of people who need less sleep is very small. Some people need more. Don't assume that you need only a few hours just because you've been getting only a few hours. The deterioration in your functioning may be slight and gradual, but it takes its toll sooner or later. Don't succumb to the myth that sleep is "a waste of time," and you're somehow a better, more efficient person if you can get by with less. Go to bed and get up at the same time every day—even if you slept poorly the previous night.
2. Use your bed only for sleep (and sex). When you read, watch TV, talk on the phone or toss and turn in bed, you condition yourself to stay awake in bed. If you're still not asleep 15 minutes after lying down (or after awakening during the night), get up and go to another room, turn on a light, sit upright and then do something that helps you

unwind, e.g., read, watch TV, listen to music, do crossword puzzles. Return to bed at the first sign of drowsiness. Repeat this as many times as needed.

3. **Eliminate naps**, because they usually make sleep problems worse. Handle waking-time drowsiness by taking a 5- to 10-minute brisk walk. The metabolism during physical exercise produces a chemical that naturally stimulates the nervous system. (For this very reason, don't try to get sleepy by vigorously working out right before bedtime. You'll be physically tired but mentally aroused.)
4. **The less caffeine the better.** As a central nervous system *stimulant*, caffeine puts a strain on the biological equipment you rely on to regulate your sleep/wake cycle. Caffeine is found in coffee, tea, sodas, chocolate and some medicines.
5. **Reduce sugar intake.** Sugar triggers metabolic changes that lead to arousal of the central nervous system.
6. **Don't use alcohol as a sedative or sleep aid.** As a central nervous system *depressant*, alcohol initially makes you sleepy. When this artificial quieting of your nervous system wears off a while later, the system "rebounds" into arousal, which awakens you.
7. **Avoid meals—especially heavy or spicy meals—close to bedtime.** For many people, this disrupts sleep.
8. **Use a self-calming technique** (such as tense-release muscle relaxation training or pleasurable imagery). With the muscle relaxation technique, this does *not* mean to *practice* it at bedtime. It means that if you've *already* practiced it enough to be able to calm yourself *just* by saying your cue word, then you can use your *cue word* to turn on the calm state necessary for sleep.
9. **If you're a light sleeper**, easily awakened by background sounds, try using a "white noise" generator. This is an electronic device that emits a mixture of all audible sound frequencies, which sounds like rushing wind and can help mask almost any background noise. These units are sold at some electronics stores.
10. **If you can't "shut off" your mind** and stop thinking about things, get up and *briefly write down* what the issue or problem is that you face and a specific step you can take the next day to address it.
11. **Consider using a paradoxical approach.** You've probably discovered that the harder you *try* to sleep the longer you *remain awake*. That's because any kind of *struggle*—including a *fight against insomnia*—causes the kind of nervous system *arousal* that *prevents* sleep. Instead, pretend you're trying to *stay awake*. Tell yourself things like, "OK, I'm going to make myself wider and wider awake. I'm going to see how many really interesting thoughts I can have" before I have to go to sleep."

Note: You may need a medical evaluation for any illnesses or medications that might be affecting your sleep. Remember that most sleep medications (prescribed or over-the-counter) are intended for *temporary, short-term* use.

Burnout: Prevention and Recovery

A river within its banks gives life. A river overflowing its banks brings ruin.

Burnout is the "emotional exhaustion" that results from **overextending yourself for others without getting your own needs met**. The strain of dealing with the *needs and problems* around you for too many years eventually causes your emotions to self-protectively "shut down" so that you *stop caring* and *withdraw* from burdensome activities that would emotionally drain you further. Burnout typically develops in people who are assigned—or who *assume*—responsibility for too much or for things beyond their control. Burnout occurs *wherever there are people*—at work (though some workplaces foster it more than others), in a family or in some other group. It develops slowly and can be mild to severe. The central problem is not caring and helping *per se*, but caring and helping in the *wrong way*, under the *wrong conditions* or for the *wrong reasons*.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS: The more that are present, the more likely burnout will develop.

Wrong ways to care and help:

- Playing a misguided role with others, e.g., trying to *reform* others, *rescuing* others, *make peace* among others, *hold together* a group, being the *strong one*. "Misguided" here means unnecessary, unhealthy or impossible.
- Allowing your helping or caring role to *define you* (as a person) and *dominate your life*.

- *Sympathizing* (taking upon yourself others' emotions) when you should be *empathizing* (understanding others).

Wrong reasons to care and help:

- Caring and helping in an attempt to someday earn *approval, intimacy or care* from others.

Wrong conditions in which to care and help:

- Others' expectations of you, and the limits of your responsibility, are *unclear or unrealistic*.
- You get (or accept) *little or no support* from others.
- You have *role conflict*: You play *incompatible* roles with someone (e.g., being a subordinate *and* confidant to your boss) or with several people (e.g., trying to satisfy their incompatible demands and expectations).
- Those around you rely on *assuming, gossip and secrets* instead of clear, direct communication.
- Those around you try to involve *you* in problems *among themselves*.

SYMPTOMS of burnout: Many *changes in your attitude, mood, behavior and physical functioning* are possible.

You become cynical, distrustful, critical, pessimistic and irritable. You blame others. You think people "owe" you. You feel ineffective. You lose hope. Things seem futile. You withdraw from responsibilities and obligations. You avoid others or treat them in an impersonal way. You miss work or overuse your sick time. You may steal small items from the workplace. Work performance deteriorates and serious errors increase. You start using alcohol or drugs to cope. You may have fatigue, headache or insomnia.

PREVENTION and RECOVERY strategies

1. Stop doing the things you do that are based on the distorted belief that you know what's "best" for others.
2. Develop at least one *confidant*—someone with whom you can safely have mutual encouragement, ventilation, honest feedback, etc. Talk about your own *sadness, and anger, over neglecting your own needs* for so many years.
3. Develop *assertiveness*. Take *responsibility for your own needs and ask for help*—no one can read your mind. Start letting go of the ideal of *self-sufficiency*. Learn how to say "No" and set *limits* on what you're willing to *do* for others or *tolerate* from them.
4. Openly clarify and negotiate your *expectations* of others, and their expectations of you. Resolve any role conflicts.
5. Don't *identify* completely with any job or role. Cultivate *other* parts of your life and yourself as a person.
6. Do *more empathizing and less sympathizing*.
7. Learn to *delegate* tasks. You're an important, valuable person, but *no one* is indispensable.
8. Cultivate *relaxation, recreation and solitude*—don't dismiss them because they seem "non-productive." Rest is part of a natural cycle, alternating with periods of high arousal and activity.
9. Maintain proper diet, sleep and exercise. Don't use alcohol or drugs to cope.
10. Manage your "boundaries," *i.e.*, maintain appropriate separation between your *work and home* life, between your *marriage and extended family*, between your *family and community*, etc. If employed, find an effective way to "unwind" in making the transition from work to home. Limit overtime and on-call time. Resist involvement in interpersonal problems where you don't have enough information, objectivity or power. Don't act on hearsay.
11. Look for *humor* in difficult situations and things you've taken too seriously. Learn to laugh at yourself.

Developing Assertive Behavior

Assertive behavior is an essential skill for communicating your thoughts and feelings to others—in person or in writing. Lack of this skill contributes to stress, because if you can't let others know your *needs* or the *limits* of what you're willing to do or tolerate, you'll feel helpless, resentful and eventually hopeless.

Assertive behavior involves **expressing your thoughts and feelings in a clear, respectful way**. Being "respectful" means communicating in a way that would be acceptable to any *reasonable* person. Often we're afraid people might become upset with us, but if someone becomes upset over what you communicate, that doesn't prove that *you* did something "wrong." When face-to-face with others, you can be confident that you *are* being respectful by communicating in the following ways:

- Approach the other person *privately*.
- Maintain *eye contact*.

- Speak as *calmly* as you can.
- Allow a response without interrupting.
- Refer to the *behavior*, not personality, of others.

- Gently but firmly *stick to the point*.
- Don't *accuse, blame* or *insult*.
- Be *direct* and *simple*.

Personal beliefs that hinder assertive behavior. Living under the influence of any of the beliefs below makes it extremely difficult to assert yourself. Any such beliefs need to be replaced with reasonable ones.

- Other people should just "know" how I feel and what I need without me having to *tell* them.
- I shouldn't question the opinions or decisions of others.
- My needs are not as *important* as those of other people.
- If someone gets upset with something I say, I must be wrong or rude.

Challenges from other people that hinder assertive behavior. Some people don't accept what you say (at least, not immediately) just for what it is. They mistakenly think you're trying to "attack" them, so to *protect* themselves they say things to get *you* feeling fearful, angry, guilty or confused enough to back off. To minimize frustration and save time, use a comeback designed to get the *get the dialogue back onto your point*. Below are the basic ways difficult people challenge what you say. To the right of each type of challenge are *comebacks* you can use to respond to it.

Ways someone might challenge what you say

Comebacks you can use to return to your point

1. You ask a person to do something or stop doing something, and he/she says something irrelevant , as if it's a reason <i>not</i> to consider what you said.	"I hear what you're saying, but <i>my point</i> is (repeat your initial statement, word-for-word)." Don't ask what the irrelevant statement meant.
2. The other person makes a joke of what you say.	"I think the joking is getting us <i>off my point</i> , which is (repeat your initial statement, word-for-word)."
3. You ask a person to stop doing something that bothers you, but he/she responds by complaining about something you do.	"It looks like we <i>each</i> want some changes. We can only deal with <i>one</i> thing at a time, so do you want to go first or should I?"
4. The person delays dealing with what you've said, claiming to be too tired or too busy.	"OK. Let's set a time when we can deal with this." (And if the person <i>won't</i> set a time...) "I'll get back to you."
5. The person questions why you feel uncomfortable about something you've asked him/her to stop doing, or why you're bringing the matter up now .	"The issue of <i>why</i> or <i>when</i> is <i>beside the point</i> . I'd like you to take what I'm saying just for what it is. I'm being as clear as I can about what I need."
6. The person acts hurt or wounded by what you've said, as if you've made an attack—so that you'll <i>feel</i> so guilty you'll drop the matter.	"I can see that this is difficult for you, but I've brought it up for the sake of our relationship and I'm confident you can handle it."
7. The person responds to something you've said by saying something that sounds like a threat —so that you'll <i>feel</i> so fearful (of what might happen) you'll drop the matter.	<p>"That <i>sounds</i> like a threat—is it?" If the person answers...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "No."] "Then I'm <i>confused</i> over why you would say it." (Continue looking at the person with a <i>confused</i> expression.) • "You can take it any way you want."] "In that case, I won't take it <i>seriously</i>." • "Yes."] "Do you really prefer that we deal with each other using <i>threats</i>?" ... or, in a workplace, "Could you put that <i>in writing</i>? If not, it's no problem, I'll send it to you as a memo for <i>written confirmation</i>."
8. When you ask a person to stop doing something that bothers you, he/she denies ever doing it.	"OK. How would you like me to let you know the next time I <i>think</i> it's happening?"

Comebacks must sometimes be repeated—in the *exact same* words. If this doesn't work after a couple of attempts, try saying, "Here's what I need from you. Would you be willing to do it?" If the response is *not* clearly "Yes," you can say, "It looks like we're not getting anywhere, so I'll get back to you another time."

Always be ready to **reinforce any cooperation**. That is, whenever someone *accepts* what you say or *does* what you ask, be sure to **express appreciation**.

Here are some situations which people often have difficulty handling assertively.

- Asking someone for help
- Stating your own opinion—especially if it differs from someone else's (e.g., "I understand your view. I have a different one, and it's this: _____")
- Asking someone to stop doing something that bothers you
- Responding to undeserved criticism
- Responding to unreasonable demands or expectations by saying "No"
- Asking someone to correct a mistake that has affected you
- Expressing frustration about poor service
- Setting limits on what you'll tolerate

Basic strategies for using assertive behavior. Most of the situations in which you need to act assertively involve (1) asking someone to change the way he/she treats you, (2) setting a limit on what you're willing to do for others or tolerate from them, or (3) asking someone what he/she wants from you.

- **Ask someone to change the way he/she treats you.** Be clear in your own mind what *specific behavior* you want *more of, less of or none of*, so that you ask only for changes that are *measurable*. Here are some bothersome behaviors, described in ways that are clear *without* being condemning: You *interrupt me*. You *ask me personal questions*. You *tell others what I told you in confidence*. You *reprimand me in front of my co-workers*. You *stand within arm's length of me*. You *play your radio at this volume*. You *don't look at me while I talk to you*. You *slam folders on my desk*. You *walk away when I cry*. Don't ask a person to change his/her "attitude," or to be "more responsible" or "more mature." You never *directly encounter* these inner personality qualities. The only thing you directly encounter is the other person's *behavior*. Here's a simple formula you can use in many situations:

Identify the events or behaviors you have found bothersome.

Identify the **problem** you have with these events or behaviors, e.g., they *interfere* with completing your work, they leave you feeling *uncomfortable*.

Identify the **change** you want, by asking someone to either *stop* doing what you've described or *do something else* instead.

- **Set a limit on what you're willing to do or tolerate—if you've already asked someone to do or stop doing something but nothing has changed.** This does not involve "threats" or "warnings" about what you'll do to others. It involves *advising* the others of how you plan to simply *take care of yourself*. Here are some examples:

1. "I've asked you not to act this way, and the *next* time you do it at a family gathering, I'm going to *leave*."
2. "I'll give you my best effort on this job, but there's a limit to how *many* tasks I can do—and how *fast*—with acceptable quality."
3. "I like spending time with you, but if you come to my house drunk I'm not going to let you in."
4. "Boss, I notified you about (*the problem event*) on (*specific dates*), but nothing has changed. As far as I can see, if it keeps occurring it will unavoidably lead to (*specific, inevitable consequence of ignoring the problem*). I can't be responsible for things beyond my control."
5. "I've talked to you before about how I need to leave on time, and it's still a problem. I want to let you know that, from now on, if you're not here by (*specific time*), I'll assume you don't plan on going with me."
6. "Boss, I notified you about (*the problem event*) on (*specific dates*) but it's still happening. This situation is not tolerable, so from now, whenever it occurs, I'm going to handle it by (*some specific, appropriate action*), unless you direct me otherwise, in writing, by (*some reasonable date*)."
7. "I understand what you want me to do, but I'm *not* going to do it. I'm not going to explain it or debate it. I'm just trying to be clear about it."

- **Ask someone what he/she wants from you.** If you're always *confused* about what someone wants or expects from you (in a personal or work situation), it may be because that person has given you *inconsistent or incompatible messages* about his/her needs or expectations. This is enough to confuse *anyone*, and it can become extremely

stressful when the other person doesn't acknowledge what's going on. Here are examples of such incompatible messages:

1. A person *tells* you that "you're in charge" of something ... but later *criticizes the decisions you make* (which sends the message that you're *not* "in charge").
2. A person *asks* you for help ... but *complains* about whatever you suggest or just *never does it* (which sends the message that your help is *not* wanted).
3. You (and others) are constantly *told* not to upset some person because he/she has a "condition" (e.g., heart problem) ... but that same person is allowed to yell and scream in tantrums (which sends the message that the condition is *not* so serious and the person *not* so fragile).
4. A person *tells* you to do something one way ... but when you do it that way the person says it should be done some *other* way ... and when you then start *asking* the person about each task, you're told that "you don't seem to know what you're doing."
5. A person officially in charge if a job *keeps silent* whenever *you* do the job and it turns out well (which sends the message that you *should* do it) ... but when a problem arises with it, that person *criticizes* you for "interfering" (which sends the message that you *shouldn't* do it).

Here's a four-step formula for coping this: Identify the *specific statements or behaviors* that convey *each* message to you. Admit that you're *confused*. Ask the *other* person to *clarify* things for you. Let that person know *which* one of the two messages *you* intend to follow *until* things are clarified. For example, with a boss,

"When you announced your 'open-door policy' a few weeks ago, I got the message that *I can come to your office whenever I need help*. But when I came yesterday and you *rolled your eyes, dropped your pen and sighed loudly*, I got the message that *I shouldn't come to your office with a problem*. I'm *confused*. Could you let me know which one you mean or how they fit together? Until I hear from you, in writing, I'm going to follow *the message I got at your door*."

Notice that when you say, "I'm confused," you're not blaming, accusing or attacking anyone. There's no legitimate reason for anyone to take offense—but be prepared, especially in the workplace. If the other person responds, "Well, no one *else* has a problem with this," *don't* defend yourself, but reply, "I don't know about anyone else—I'm confused," or, "That may be, but *I'm* still confused." If a supervisor accuses you of "complaining," "making trouble" or "challenging authority," simply say, "I'm just trying to *clarify* things so I can *do my job*." Even if you're told, "Maybe you just *can't handle* this job," your comeback can be, "What I'm having trouble handling is this *confusion*. Would you help me clear it up?"

Note: Some of this material on assertiveness is adapted from *The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook (Second edition)*, by M. Davis, E. R. Eshelman and M. McKay (New Harbinger Publications, 1982)

Dealing with Difficult People

Actually, every part of this entire handout is useful for dealing with difficult people. Several guidelines are given below. After reviewing them, we'll try to apply them to specific problems group members bring up.

What makes difficult people so "difficult" is that they can't (or won't) handle problems in straightforward ways. When you ask them for something, they don't cooperate. When they want something from you, they try to get it in a way that creates problems. Any pattern of difficult behavior that resists change serves some kind of *function* for the person doing it—and sometimes for others too. That is, the difficult behavior enables someone to either *get* something or *avoid* something. Usually, what is being avoided is feelings of shame, fear, guilt or despair (even if the behavior *appears* to get the difficult person power, control or respect). It's useful to ask yourself, *What could this person's behavior be accomplishing for him/her?* Remember, though, that your goal is not to thoroughly analyze the behavior or to reform the difficult person. Your goal is to *reduce* the difficult behavior this person does with *you*.

Difficult behavior usually involves **manipulation**, in which someone uses *your emotional reactions* to his/her advantage—and usually to *your disadvantage*. The manipulator's behavior provokes a strong emotion (within you) that leads you to do what he/she wants. Manipulators try to use your feelings of *fear, guilt, shame, anger* or *confusion*.

Fear—The manipulator might yell, break something, insult you or just casually say something that sounds like a threat. This behavior is intended to make you feel so afraid of what might happen that you give in.

Guilt or shame—The manipulator acts hurt and wounded, or disappointed and disgusted, over something you've done or said, so that you'll feel so guilty or ashamed that you'll give in. Often the manipulator resorts to this when it no longer works to appeal to your *pride* (like when you were told, "You're our *only* hope," or, "Nobody understands and cares like *you* do").

Anger—The manipulator says something that evokes strong anger within you—while he/she, oddly enough, *doesn't* seem that angry. The manipulator might describe how he/she is being mistreated by another person, or express "concern" about things that another person is doing—things that the manipulator knows *you* find upsetting or improper. In a way, you are being used to "contain" the anger the difficult person chooses not to feel. This anger "pollutes" your relationship with that third person. You may even later *confront* that person, only to regret it. You only realize later that there was no legitimate need at all for you to know what the manipulator told you.

Often, what evokes your anger is *hearsay*—gossip, rumors and secrets. When someone tells you things you're better off *not* knowing, it's best to *say* so, as in, "You know, I'm better off *without* that information." When you're being given gossip, be prepared to say, "That sounds like *hearsay*." You can ask, "Can I *quote* you on that?" and if the other person refuses, ask, "Then why should I take you *seriously*?"

Suppose Joe shows concern as he asks about your problem with Tom (which isn't his business). You can reply, "Joe, it's best for me if that stays between Tom and me."

Suppose Susan tells you of a problem between her and Paul. It seems like she just needs "support," but she may really want you to become *their referee* or *her ally*. You can reply, "Susan, I'm not sure what you want from me, but I won't advise you, because I'm close to you, I don't have all the facts and I'm not a therapist." You could also say, "Susan, this is really between you and Paul, isn't it?"

Suppose someone tells you that "certain people" (named or unnamed) have some kind of problem with you. You should either say nothing at all or, "You know, *anyone* who has a problem with me knows where to find me." *Don't* start defending yourself. You're not on trial.

Let's say problems have resulted at work when you've carried out directives a co-worker "passes on" from your supervisor. You can send the supervisor a memo, "To assure clear communication, I'll follow directives given to me only by you or someone you designate in writing."

Confusion—Intense, prolonged stress can come from dealing with someone who repeatedly says or does things that are confusing but who *avoids accountability* for communicating this way. The *inconsistent* or *incompatible* messages you get about what he/she wants can create a dilemma for you difficult enough to leave you agonizing, "What's going on? Am I crazy or what?" This issue is covered above in the section, **Developing Assertive Behavior**.

The first step in dealing with a difficult person is usually to use **assertiveness**, as outlined above (in the section, **Developing Assertive Behavior**). If that doesn't help enough, one or more of the issues described below may be involved in the problem. If so, try to adjust your approach accordingly.

Is the way you feel treated by the difficult person similar to the way *you* view and treat *yourself*? There may be a part of you that "sides with" the difficult person. That is, you may inwardly treat yourself in the same *critical, intimidating* or *shaming* way—making *you* your own "difficult person." This must be dealt with before you can effectively handle the difficult person. Working on this usually involves changing some unrealistic expectations and assumptions (like those in the section, **Counteracting Distorted Beliefs that lead to Stressful Thoughts**).

Here's a related question: Is your difficult person similar in some way to someone from your *past* with whom you had a difficult relationship? If so, the same painful emotions you felt long ago could be triggered *currently*, leading you to respond in the same *fearful, enraged* or *passive* way you did so long ago. In such a case, your task is to find ways to use the *power, support* and *choices* available to you *now*.

Have your previous responses to the difficult person's behavior "helped" it *continue*? Without realizing (or wanting) it, your responses to the difficult person's behavior might allow that behavior to get the person what he/she wants. This would *reinforce* (strengthen) that behavior, so that it continues. Also, if your responses have *given the impression* that you don't care about the difficult behavior, it will continue. Look for any "payoff" the difficult person may get as a result of his/her behavior, and stop doing whatever *you've* done to participate in this payoff (like *making excuses* for him/her or *rescuing* him/her).

Is someone *else* in the larger group (family, social or workplace) gaining some kind of *advantage* from the difficult person's behavior? If that person is somehow reinforcing or enabling the behavior (unknowingly or deliberately), this must be considered and addressed in some way.

Consider trying an *indirect approach*, using "paradoxical intention." Paradoxical intention involves *requesting* the difficult behavior instead of resisting it. It takes some thought and planning to apply this to any particular situation, but can be very effective. Find a way to *request* or *amplify* the difficult behavior, by referring to it as if it actually provides something *you need* or accomplishes some *goal* for you. Difficult behavior often enables the difficult person to *control the interaction* with you, but redefining that behavior as *cooperation with you* renders it useless for this purpose. Below are some examples.

Difficult behavior	An example of a paradoxical response
1. The difficult person <i>argues</i> with you—not to learn or understand, <i>just to argue</i> .	Agree with <i>every</i> opinion or claim the person makes, e.g., "You know, you're absolutely right. I couldn't agree with you more."
2. The difficult person always <i>complains</i> about how bad things are.	"You know, I need to get some <i>balance</i> in my thinking, and <i>your</i> outlook on things helps me control my naïve optimism. I'm always seeing the positive side of things, and <i>you</i> really help me keep that in check. I need that."
3. The difficult person is a boss who constantly <i>questions why</i> you do things and where you've been, and watches you as if you're a crime suspect.	Express concern over not being watched closely <i>enough</i> : "Sometimes I could use your advice on things I'm doing, but I never know when they'll come up. I want to make sure you don't miss them in case I forget to tell you, so could you make sure you really keep an eye on me?"
4. The difficult person always points out something supposedly <i>wrong</i> with things you do.	"I'm bound to make some mistakes here without noticing, so I'd like you to keep me on track by pointing out at least one of them whenever we're together."
5. The difficult person always has to have the <i>last word</i> .	When a conversation has begun, say, "Just so I can get <i>closure</i> on what we're discussing, when we're done talking would you mind saying the final word on it?"

The difficult person might complain that you're "being sarcastic" or "playing games," etc. If so, keep a *confused* look on your face as you gently say, "What? Wait, I'm really confused here. I'm just trying to give you what you want." If the person questions this, explain that you're just trying to deal with what he/she *keeps doing* (and describe his/her behavior as it's worded in the **Difficult behavior** section above).

Rehearse new responses you plan to use with difficult people. The guidelines above can help you develop new and better ways of handling the difficult people and situations in your life. However, new responses will occur when you need them *only if you practice and rehearse them*. For *each* specific encounter or situation, *write down* the exact words you'll want to say. Then imagine the most likely response you'll get from the difficult person and write down a specific comeback to *that*. Repeatedly imagine yourself with the difficult person, *saying and doing what you need to*. It helps to "role-play" the encounter, by having a confidant act out the part of your difficult person while you practice your responses. Rehearsal embeds the new response more firmly in your mind, so it's *available*—even while you're feeling unpleasant emotion.

In the workplace, it's usually best to communicate with your difficult person *in writing* (as well as speaking) and request that any responses be *in writing*. The written word has more power to clarify and anchor things in reality.

Breathing Retraining

Your goal is to learn to breathe, using your diaphragm (the large muscle that forces air in and out of your lungs). Ideally, you should breathe so that your lower stomach moves in and out while your chest remains still. In addition, your goal will also be to slow the rate of your breathing and to make the breathing movements in your lower stomach fluid and relaxed. Here are some suggestions to help you do this:

1. Try to breathe through your nose during breathing practice. If you cannot breathe through your nose, then try to keep the opening of your mouth as small as possible.
2. Try to breathe so that your lower stomach pushes out every time you inhale. It should suck in every time you exhale. Your chest should remain still while you inhale and exhale.
3. If you push your stomach in and out properly, your diaphragm will naturally cause you to breathe properly.
4. Try to slow your rate of breathing down to approximately 12 breaths per minutes. This is equivalent to breathing in to the count of 4 ("one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four-one thousand") and breathing out to the count of 4.
5. If you feel dizzy or lightheaded during breathing practice then you are accidentally hyperventilating. If this happens, pause for a moment and then start over. Sometimes relaxing your neck and shoulders before beginning breathing practice makes it easier to do the practice correctly.
6. Try to practice your breathing 2 times every day for 10 minutes at each practice session.