Stress Reduction Strategies

**Description and Definition:** Stress is part of everyone’s daily life. A certain amount of stress elicits a positive physiological response that allows us to deal constructively with daily problems and meet challenges, but too much can be devastating to our health. Depending on the source of stress (i.e., personal environment, work stressors and general emotional health), stress-reduction strategies should be tailored to the specific stressor. A **stressor** is a chemical or biological agent, environmental condition, external stimulus or an event that causes stress to an organism. The word "stress" is from *estrecier*, to tighten. This document will guide the decisions about strategy options and should be adapted to meet the specific needs of an individual or church.

**Goal of the Intervention and Evidence to Support Why This Intervention Works:** A Stress Management Program should be provided as an effective preventive service for healthy behavior change. Some people deal with stress better than others and recover from stressful events quicker. The sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) often work in opposition within the body, and are key to understanding and coping with stress. The SNS releases stored energy and activates the body, while the PNS controls relaxation, recuperation and digestion. When stress activates these networks, the SNS goes into overdrive to protect you. By employing various types of therapy, you can learn how to also activate the PNS, which allows you to relax and drop your heart, metabolic and breathing rates.

Not effectively dealing with stress can leave a person feeling emotionally exhausted, and cause cardiac, respiratory and emotional health problems. Stress releases insulin and cortisol that accelerate cellular aging, triggering diabetes and other chronic diseases. While stress is inevitable for all, people in impoverished areas are often faced with situations that they cannot control and tend to have higher levels of stress and stress-related diseases. The good news is that many types of interventions—including music, nutrition, spiritual counseling, exercise and laughter—can help a person learn to effectively cope with stress, which leads to decreased stress and stress-related problems. The most successful stress management programs combine aspects of all stress reduction therapies to allow a person to heal from within, while also giving them coping skills and increasing physical resilience.

**Resources Needed:** See specific interventions to determine the resources needed.

**Intervention Detailed Information:**

- [Stress Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Tips to Cope with Stress](#)
- [Difficulty Coping with Stress](#)
Relaxation Techniques
Meditation
Group Therapy
Music Therapy
Exercise Therapy
Diet Analysis
Laughter Therapy
Relationship Therapy
Just Say No
Financial Therapy Strategies
Coping with Work Stress
Daily Stress Log
Pediatric Considerations
Gender Disparity

Marketing Materials and Strategies:
Stop Stressing, Start Living
Control Your Work-Related Stress
Laugh Your Stress Away

Follow-Through with Participants: See specific interventions for appropriate follow-through.

Links/Resources:
Mental Health Treatment Program Locator:
Stress in America Survey:


References:


3 Ibid.


Publication Date: May, 2013

Expiration Date: November, 2013

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Frequently Asked Questions about Stress

What is stress?
Stress is the brain’s response to any demand. It is the body’s instinct to defend itself. It causes an increase in heart rate and muscle tension so we can respond to changes in our environment.

What triggers stress?
Stress can be triggered by change—positive or negative—real or perceived. Triggers can be recurring, short- or long-term. Common triggers include: commuting to and from school or work; competing in an event; watching a scary movie; losing keys; having a flat tire; missing the bus; getting a traffic ticket; riding a rollercoaster; traveling for a vacation; moving to another home; marriage or divorce; serious illness; car accident; exposure to violence; retirement; job changes; children leaving or returning home; financial difficulty; uncertainty about the future; marriage or relationship problems; job instability; and changes in the family dynamic.

Is there a positive stress response?
Yes, all animals have a stress response which can be life-saving in some situations. When your body experiences stress, nerve chemicals and hormones are released that prepare you to face a threat or flee to safety. When faced with danger, your pulse quickens, you breathe faster, your muscles tense, your brain uses more oxygen and increases activity, and your concentration is increased. All these functions are aimed at survival.

How does that become negative?
With chronic stress, the same nerve chemicals that are life-saving in short bursts can suppress functions that aren’t needed for immediate survival. Your immunity is lowered, your digestive, excretory and reproductive systems stop working normally. Problems occur if the stress response goes on too long, such as when the source of stress is constant or if the response continues after the danger has subsided.

What are sources of stress?
Routine stress related to work, family or everyday pressure and responsibilities include: sudden negative life changes like losing a job; divorce; or illness. Examples of traumatic stress include: a major accident; war; assault or natural disaster.
How does your body react to stress?
Different people experience stress differently, but common responses include: digestive symptoms of nausea, heartburn, constipation or diarrhea; headaches; sleeplessness; back pain; fatigue; high blood pressure; increased pulse rate; sweating; shakiness; relationship problems; shortness of breath; stiff neck or jaw; weight gain or loss; decreased concentration; more frequent and severe viral infections; and decreased efficacy of vaccines. Stress also elicits feelings of depression, anger, irritability, anxiety, fear, worry, nervousness, confusion and hostility. Many of these symptoms may be from other health problems, so you should see your health care provider when you experience any of these symptoms to determine its cause.

Are there chronic health problems from stress?
Yes, changes in health from routine stress may be hard to notice at first. Since it gradually builds, the body does not get a clear signal to return to normal function. Over time continued strain on your body from routine stress may lead to serious health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, anxiety disorder, migraine headaches, back pain and ulcers.

When should you seek help?
You should seek help from a qualified health care provider if you are overwhelmed, feel you cannot cope, have suicidal thoughts or are using drugs or alcohol to cope. When in doubt, your local Emergency Room can assist you with available resources and make sure you are safe.

Who can help with stress coping?
Stay in-touch with people who can provide emotional and other support. Ask for help from faith community nurses or clergy, family, friends and community organizations to help reduce your stress burden.

Will my body give me signs of stress?
Yes, learn to recognize the signs of your body’s response to stress—they could be difficulty sleeping, increased alcohol or other substance use, becoming easily angered, feeling depressed or having low energy. Early signs can include tension in your shoulders or neck or clenching your hands into fists.

Will my stress go away if I can avoid the trigger?
Yes, it often will, but sometimes it is not possible to avoid the event or thing that leads to your stress. It is therefore important that you learn how to react to stress in a manner that is helpful.

Why is exercise useful?
Exercise is a healthy way to relieve your pent-up energy and tension. It releases endorphins that make you feel good, helps you get in better shape and allows you to feel better about yourself.

What is meditation?
Meditation is a form of guided thought that can take many forms. You can meditate with exercise that uses repetitive motions, like walking or swimming.

Is the immune system affected by stress?
Yes, the immune system is responsible for fighting diseases and germs that invade the body. When it is weakened by chronic stress, the person becomes sick more often as his/her body is unable to fight the invasion.
Why do I need to recognize my stressors?
It is important to identify your stress triggers so you can work on eliminating them or develop ways to better respond to them. Keeping a Daily Stress Log may help you identify your stressors.

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Tips to Cope with Stress

Take a **time-out**: Quiet time allows you to review situations in your mind and pray about it.

**Humor**: Laughter makes you feel good. Don't be afraid to laugh out loud at a joke, funny movie or comic strip, even when you're alone.

A positive approach to life allows you to better manage stress and helps you to remain in control.

Spend time with **family and friends**: Even if you don't talk about your stressors, being around people you care about and who care about you is very supportive.

Set **priorities**: Decide what must get done and what can wait.

Learn your **limitations**: Learn to say no to new tasks if they are overloading your schedule. It is easier to refuse to do something than to get caught in the middle of something you can't finish.

Note what you have **accomplished** at the end of the day, not what you have been unable to do.

Avoid dwelling on problems. Try to put things in **perspective**—in the grand scheme of life; is this really a big deal?

**Exercise** regularly: Aim for 30 minutes a day of gentle exercise to help boost your mood and reduce stress.

**Schedule** time for healthy, relaxing activities.

**Don't worry** about things you can't control, like the weather.

**Solve** the little problems first; this helps you gain a feeling of control.

**Prepare** (to the best of your ability) for stressful events, such as a job interview.

Try to look at **change** as a positive challenge, not a threat.

Work to **resolve conflicts** with other people.

**Talk** with a trusted friend, family member or counselor. Sharing your thoughts and receiving advice can often present another way to handle a stressful situation that you may not have thought of.
Set realistic goals at home and at work.

Avoid overscheduling so you are not rushed. Try to "pace" instead of "race."

Eat regular, well-balanced meals to keep your body alert and responsive.

Get enough sleep, usually at least eight hours per night will help your body handle stress.

Participate regularly in something you enjoy, such as sports, social events or hobbies.

Avoid controllable stressors. Example: if shopping with your husband stresses you, don’t take him.

Do one thing at a time and do it well. Then move on to the next thing.

Plan major lifestyle changes so they all don’t occur simultaneously. Example: graduating, getting married, moving, starting a new job and having a baby.

Improve communication: Relationship stress can be greatly reduced by listening, smiling, admitting when you are wrong, giving compliments and assertively expressing your thoughts and feelings.

Reward yourself: As you successfully overcome challenges, treat yourself to a massage, a night out, or some “alone time.”

Visualize anticipated stressful events. Rehearse the event by visualizing what will happen so you are familiar with the subject, what you will say and how you will respond. Visualize how the worst case scenario would act out. This will help your self-confidence and allow you to develop a back-up plan.

Take a deep breath: Slowly inhale through your nose, hold it for three seconds, and then slowly exhale through your mouth; this technique will help counteract the fast shallow breathing pattern created by stress.

Ask others to help with tasks. Most people enjoy helping someone and enjoy being asked.

Get organized: Use "to do" lists to help you focus on your most important tasks. Approach big tasks one step at a time. For example, start by organizing just one part of your life—your car, desk, kitchen, closet, cupboard or drawer.

Practice giving back: Volunteer your time or return a favor to a friend. Helping others helps you, too.

Use positive self-talk: Practice this daily. Examples: I can get help if I need it. We can work it out. I won't let this problem get me down. Things could be worse. I'm human and we all make mistakes. Someday I'll laugh about this. I can deal with this situation when I feel better.

Count to 10 before you speak. Sometimes a few seconds makes all the difference.

Walk away from the stressful situation and say you'll handle it later.

Don't be afraid to say "I'm sorry" if you make a mistake.

Set your watch five to 10 minutes ahead to avoid the stress of arriving late.
Drive in the slow lane or avoid busy roads to help you stay calm while driving.

Smell a rose, hug a loved one or smile at your neighbor.

Go for a drive, chat with a friend or read a good book.

Try to do at least one thing every day that you enjoy, even if you only do it for only 15 minutes.

Start an art project (oil paint, sketch, create a scrap book or finger paint with grandchildren).

Take up a hobby; new or old.

Read a favorite book, short story, magazine or newspaper.

Have coffee or a meal with friends.

Play golf, tennis, ping-pong or bowl.

Sew, knit or crochet.

Listen to music during or after you practice relaxation techniques.

Take a nature walk: Listen to the birds, identify trees and flowers.

Make a “bucket list” of everything you still want to do in life.

Watch an old movie on TV or rent a video.

Take a class at your local college.

Play cards or board games with family and friends.

Become active in civic groups, church or other local clubs.

Volunteer: Assisting others in their time of need can also benefit the helper. See www.29gifts.org.

Accept circumstances that cannot be changed; focus on circumstances that you can alter.

Take decisive actions rather than detaching completely from problems and stresses, and wishing they would just go away.

Look for opportunities for self-discovery. People often learn something about themselves and may find they have grown in some respect as a result of their struggle with loss. Many people who have experienced tragedies and hardship have reported better relationships, greater sense of strength even while feeling vulnerable, increased sense of self-worth, a more developed spirituality and heightened appreciation for life.

Take care of yourself. Pay attention to your own needs and feelings.

Write about your deepest thoughts and feelings related to the stressful events in your life.
Simplify your life by de-cluttering your life and mind.

Clear the clutter: Pick one area to tackle, such as the junk drawer in the kitchen or the piles of clothes in the bedroom. Take a hard look at what you’ve accumulated. Clear out any items you’re not using. If they’re in good condition, donate them to a local charity. If you absolutely can’t part with some items, box them up and put an expiration date of a year in the future on the box. Store the box. If the box remains unopened until the expiration date, you clearly can do without its contents. Trash or donate the unopened box.

Switch off the media: Cell phones, TVs, radios, laptops and video games—they all contribute to audio-visual clutter. Being flooded with stimuli, even entertaining stimuli, is a tremendous source of stress. Unplug and unhook yourself. At the very least, turn off the TV while you’re on the phone, or turn off the phone when you’re watching TV. If that’s not enough, take a “vacation” from the news, the daily paper and news magazines. It can take a couple of weeks to adjust and get beyond the withdrawal effects. Eliminating the daily paper will also reduce the amount of paper cluttering up your home.

Clear your calendar: Being too busy can become a habit so entrenched that it leads you to postpone or cut short what really matters to you, making you a slave to a lifestyle you don’t even enjoy. You may have so much going on that you don’t have time to assess what matters most, let alone make time to do it. Think about how pleasant it would be to look at your calendar and find that all the “don’t-want-to-but-have-to” commitments have been erased.

Stop multi-tasking: Long touted as the mark of the highly efficient, multi-tasking has recently been revealed to be less of a boon than once thought. In fact, research shows that people who multi-task tend to be less able to concentrate and more easily distracted than people who rarely multi-task.

Start making more friends or improving the relationships you already have. Whether you're the one getting the support or the one doling out the encouragement, you'll reap many rewards.

Take a warm shower or bath. The warm water will relax you and make you feel good.

Go to your local State Park and commune with nature.

Tape notes to your mirror, computer or car dashboard that say “breathe” or “relax” or “let God.”

Write in a journal to help with self-awareness and personal growth.

Step out of your comfort zone with a new activity—break out of your ruts.

Massage the tips of your ears, this releases endorphins.

Play in your garden: Soil contains a friendly bacterium that increases serotonin metabolism, and yard work or gardening can help you unwind.

Tell the truth: Getting rid of buried, denied emotions can release tension and create positive energy.

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Difficulty Coping With Stress

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

If you are overwhelmed, feel you cannot cope, have suicidal thoughts, or are using drugs or alcohol to cope, you may need to seek help.

Stay in-touch with people who can provide emotional and spiritual support. Ask for help from faith community nurses or clergy, family, friends and community organizations to help reduce your stress.

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques include a number of different practices with a similar goal: to consciously produce the body's natural relaxation response, which is characterized by slower breathing, lower blood pressure, and a feeling of calm and well-being. Relaxation techniques may be used to release tension and counteract the ill effects of stress. Relaxation techniques are also used to induce sleep, reduce pain and calm emotions. The best way to start and maintain a relaxation practice is to incorporate it into your daily routine. Between work, family, school, church and other commitments, it can be tough for people to find the time. Fortunately, many of the techniques can be practiced while doing other things.

**Progressive muscle relaxation:** With eyes closed, start at the feet and concentrate on holding the muscles tight in one part of your body for 10 seconds. Squeeze them tightly, and then relax that area and focus on the tension flowing away as each muscle and body part becomes limp and loose. The most popular sequence is as follows: right foot; left foot; right calf; left calf; right thigh; left thigh; hips and buttocks; stomach; chest; back; right arm and hand; left arm and hand; neck and shoulders; and face. Allow time to stay in this relaxed state as long as needed. With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like throughout the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompany stress. And as your body relaxes, so too will your mind.

**Abdominal breathing:** Lie down on a flat surface or sit with your back straight. Place a hand on your stomach, just above your navel and place the other hand on your chest. Breathe in slowly through your nose and try to make your stomach rise. Hold your breath for three seconds. Breathe out slowly through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. This helps your body get plenty of oxygen and activates the relaxation response which is the body’s antidote to stress.

**Incorporate the following good habits into your sleep routine:** Sleep and wake at the same time each day; sleep in a cool, dark, quiet environment; use the bedroom only for sleep and sex; give yourself 30 minutes to wind-down prior to bedtime; limit caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.

**Visualization training:** Visualization or Guided Imagery is a variation on traditional meditation that requires you to employ not only your visual sense, but also your sense of taste, touch, smell and sound. When used as a relaxation technique, visualization involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all your tension and anxiety. Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, such as a beach, favorite childhood spot, river, field of wheat or a quiet wooded glen. You can perform this visualization exercise on your own in silence, while listening to soothing music or with a therapist (or an audio recording of a therapist) guiding you through the imagery. To help employ your sense of hearing, you can use a sound machine or download sounds that match your chosen setting—the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example. Find a quiet, relaxed place. Beginners sometimes fall asleep during a visualization meditation, so you might try sitting up or standing. Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell and feel. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible, using at least three of your senses. When visualizing, choose imagery that appeals to you; don't select images because
someone else suggests them or because you think they should be appealing. Let your own images come up and work for you. For example, if you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake: walk slowly around the dock and notice the colors and textures around you; spend some time exploring each of your senses; see the sun setting over the water; hear the birds singing; smell the pine trees; feel the cool water on your bare feet; and taste the fresh, clean air. Enjoy the feeling of deep relaxation that envelopes you as you slowly explore your restful place. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present. Don't worry if you lose track of where you are during a guided imagery session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of stiffness or heaviness in your limbs, minor, involuntary muscle-movements or even cough or yawn. These are all normal responses.

**Massage therapy:** Stress causes knots in various muscle groups, including the back and hands. A massage therapist is trained to loosen the tension in the muscles.

**Communication skills training:** Teaches you how to communicate effectively with others. Relationship stress can be greatly reduced by listening, smiling, admitting when you are wrong, giving compliments and assertively expressing your thoughts and feelings.

**Body scan meditation for stress relief:** A body scan is similar to progressive muscle relaxation except, instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the sensations in each part of your body. Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Breathe deeply for about two minutes, until you start to feel comfortable and relaxed. Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes. Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort. Move your focus to the fingers on your right hand and then move up to the wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm and shoulder. Repeat for your left arm. Then, move through the neck and throat, and finally to all the regions of your face, the back of the head, and the top of the head. Pay close attention to your jaw, chin, lips, tongue, nose, cheeks, eyes, forehead, temples and scalp. When you reach the very top of your head, let your breath reach out beyond your body and imagine yourself hovering above yourself. After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then open your eyes slowly. Take a moment to stretch, if necessary.

**Mindfulness for stress relief:** Mindfulness is an intentional self-regulation of attention from moment-to-moment for the purpose of relaxing and calming the mind and body. By staying calm and focused in the present, you can bring your nervous system back into balance. Mindfulness can be applied to activities, such as walking, exercising, eating or meditation. Meditation brings you into the present by focusing your attention on a single repetitive action, such as your breathing, a few repeated words or the flickering light from a candle. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations. Choose a secluded place in your home, office, garden, place of worship or the outdoors where you can relax without distractions or interruptions. Get comfortable, but avoid lying down as this may cause you to fall asleep. Sit up with your spine straight, either in a chair or on the floor. You can also try a cross-legged or lotus position. Your focal point can be internal—a feeling or imaginary scene—or something external—a flame or meaningful word or phrase that you repeat throughout your session. You can meditate with eyes open or closed. Also focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes. Don’t worry about distracting thoughts or how well you’re doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don’t fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.

**Yoga:** Involves a series of moving and stationary poses, combined with deep breathing. As well as helping to reduce anxiety and stress, yoga can also improve flexibility, strength, balance and stamina. Practiced regularly, it can also strengthen the relaxation response in your daily life. Since injuries can happen when
yoga is practiced incorrectly, it’s best to learn by attending group classes, hiring a private teacher or following video instructions. Although almost all yoga classes end in a relaxation pose, classes that emphasize slow, steady movement, deep breathing and gentle stretching are best for stress relief.

**Satyananda** is a traditional form of yoga that features gentle poses, deep relaxation, and meditation; making it suitable for beginners as well as anyone looking for stress reduction. **Hatha yoga** is also a reasonably gentle way to relieve stress and is suitable for beginners. Alternately, look for labels like *gentle, for stress relief* or *for beginners* when selecting a yoga class. **Power yoga**, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is better suited to those looking for stimulation as well as relaxation.

**Tai chi:** If you’ve ever seen a group of people in the park slowly moving in synch, you’ve probably witnessed tai chi. Tai chi is a self-paced, non-competitive series of slow, flowing body movements. These movements emphasize concentration, relaxation and the conscious circulation of vital energy throughout the body. Though tai chi has its roots in martial arts, today it is primarily practiced as a way to calm the mind, condition the body and reduce stress. As in meditation, tai chi practitioners focus on breathing and keeping their attention in the present moment. Tai chi is a safe, low-impact option for people of all ages and levels of fitness, including older adults and those recovering from injuries. Like yoga, once you’ve learned the basics of tai chi, you can practice it alone or with others, tailoring your sessions as you see fit.

**Rhythmic exercise:** Running, walking, rowing or cycling is most effective at relieving stress when performed with relaxation in mind. As with meditation, this requires being fully engaged in the present, focusing on how your body feels right now. As you exercise, focus on the physicality of your body’s movement and how your breathing complements that movement. If your mind wanders to other thoughts, gently return the focus to your breathing and movement. If walking or running, for example, focus on each step—the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breath while moving and the feeling of the wind against your face.

**Stretching:** Many stretches (see examples below) can be done throughout the day, and in most any environment. Familiarize yourself with a few so you can incorporate them whenever the time is right.

- **Cable Stretch**—While sitting with chin in, stomach in, shoulders relaxed, hands relaxed in lap, and feet flat on the floor, imagine a cable pulling the head upward. Hold for three seconds and relax. Repeat three times.

- **Neck Stretch**—Tilt your head toward one shoulder and hold it for 15 seconds. Return to a normal position and then repeat to the other side. Repeat three times on each side.

- **Diagonal Neck Stretch**—Turn your head slightly and then look down as if you’re looking in your shirt pocket and hold it for 15 seconds. Return to a normal position and then repeat to the other side. Repeat three times on each side.

- **Shoulder Shrug**—Slowly bring your shoulders up to your ears and hold for three seconds, then rotate your shoulders back and down. Repeat 10 times.

- **Executive Stretch**—While sitting, lock your hands behind your head and bring your elbows back as far as possible. Inhale deeply while leaning back and stretching and hold for 20 seconds. Exhale and relax. Repeat once.

- **Foot Rotation**—While sitting, slowly rotate each foot from the ankle, rotating three times in one direction, then three times in the other direction. Relax the foot and then repeat once.

- **Hand Shake**—While sitting, drop your arms to the side and shake your hands downward gently. Repeat frequently.
• **Hand Massage**—Gently massage the inside and outside of your hand using the thumb and fingers. Repeat frequently.

• **Finger Massage**—Gently massage the fingers of each hand individually, slowly and gently moving toward the nail. Massage the space between fingers. Do this daily.

• **Wrist Stretch**—Hold one arm straight out in front of you and pull the hand backwards with the other hand, then pull downward and hold for 20 seconds. Relax and repeat three times on each side.

• **Neck Roll**—Roll your head in a circle gently. Relax and repeat in both directions.

• **Abdomen Stretch**—Reach toward the ceiling and hold for 10 seconds. Repeat three times. Bend side-to-side slowly and hold on each side for three seconds.

**Simple daily tasks:** The following are ideas you can turn into habits to help you relax: walk slowly; choose the longest line in the grocery store; drive in the right lane without unnecessary passing in the left lane; and smile at everyone you meet.

**Tips for fitting relaxation techniques into your day**

• **If possible, schedule a set time to practice each day.** Set aside one or two periods each day. You may find that it’s easier to stick with if you practice first-thing in the morning, before other tasks and responsibilities get in the way.

• **Practice relaxation techniques while you’re doing other things.** Meditate while commuting to work on a bus or train or waiting for a dentist appointment. Try deep breathing while you’re doing housework or mowing the lawn. Mindfulness walking can be done while exercising your dog, walking to your car or climbing the stairs at work instead of using the elevator. Once you’ve learned techniques such as tai chi, you can practice them in your office or in the park at lunchtime.

• **If you exercise, improve the relaxation benefits by adopting mindfulness.** Instead of zoning out or staring at a TV as you exercise, try focusing on your body. If you’re resistance training, for example, focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements and pay attention to how your body feels as you raise and lower the weights.

• **Avoid practicing when you’re sleepy.** These techniques can relax you so much that they can make you sleepy, especially if it’s close to bedtime. You will get the most benefit if you practice when you’re fully awake and alert. Do not practice after eating a heavy meal or while using drugs, tobacco or alcohol.

• **Expect ups and downs.** Don’t be discouraged if you skip a few days or even a few weeks. It happens. Just get started again and slowly build up your momentum.

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Meditation for Stress Relief

Anyone can practice meditation—wherever you are—whether you're out for a walk, riding the bus, waiting at the doctor's office or even in the middle of a difficult business meeting. Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years, and was originally meant to help deepen understanding of the sacred and mystical forces of life. These days, meditation is commonly used for relaxation and stress reduction.

Meditation is considered a type of mind-body complementary medicine. Meditation produces a deep state of relaxation and a tranquil mind. During meditation, you focus your attention and eliminate the stream of jumbled thoughts that may be crowding your mind and causing stress. This process results in enhanced physical and emotional well-being.

Meditation can give you a sense of calm, peace and balance that benefits both your emotional well-being and your overall health. Meditation can carry you more calmly through your day and can even improve certain medical conditions.

When you meditate, you clear away the information overload that builds up every day and contributes to your stress. The emotional benefits of meditation include:

- Gaining a new perspective on stressful situations
- Building skills to manage your stress
- Increasing self-awareness
- Focusing on the present
- Reducing negative emotions

Meditation also might be useful if you have a medical condition, especially one that may be worsened by stress. A growing body of scientific research supports the health benefits of meditation for allergies, anxiety disorders, asthma, binge eating, cancer, depression, fatigue, heart disease, high blood pressure, pain, sleep problems and substance abuse. Be sure to talk with your health care provider about the pros and cons of using meditation for any of these conditions or any other health problems. In some cases, meditation can worsen symptoms associated with certain mental health conditions. Meditation isn't a replacement for traditional medical treatment, but it may be a useful addition to your other treatment.

Types of Meditation

Meditation is an umbrella term for the many ways to achieve a relaxed state of being. There are many types of meditation and relaxation techniques that have meditation components. All share the same goal of achieving inner peace. Ways to meditate can include:
• **Guided meditation:** Sometimes called guided imagery or visualization, with this method you form mental images of places or situations you find relaxing. You try to use as many senses as possible, such as smells, sights, sounds and textures. This may be led by a guide or teacher.

• **Mantra meditation:** You silently repeat a calming word, thought or phrase to prevent distracting thoughts.

• **Mindfulness meditation:** Is based on being mindful or having an increased awareness and acceptance of living in the present moment to broaden your conscious awareness. You focus on what you experience during meditation, such as the flow of your breath. You can observe your thoughts and emotions but let them pass without judgment.

• **Qi gong:** This practice generally combines meditation, relaxation, physical movement and breathing exercises to restore and maintain balance. Qi gong (CHEE-gung) is part of traditional Chinese medicine.

• **Tai chi:** This is a form of gentle Chinese martial arts. In tai chi (TIE-chee), you perform a self-paced series of postures or movements in a slow, graceful manner while practicing deep breathing.

• **Transcendental meditation:** You use a mantra, such as a word, sound or phrase repeated silently, to narrow your conscious awareness and eliminate all thoughts from your mind. You focus exclusively on your mantra to achieve a state of perfect stillness and consciousness.

• **Yoga:** You perform a series of postures and controlled breathing exercises to promote a more flexible body and a calm mind. As you move through poses that require balance and concentration, you're encouraged to focus less on your busy day and more on the moment.

Different types of meditation may include different features to help you meditate. These may vary depending on whose guidance you follow or who's teaching the class. Some of the most common features in meditation include:

• **Focused attention:** Focusing your attention is generally one of the most important elements of meditation. Focusing your attention is what helps free your mind from the many distractions that cause stress and worry. You can focus your attention on such things as a specific object, image, mantra or even your breathing.

• **Relaxed breathing:** This technique involves deep, even-paced breathing using the diaphragm muscle to expand your lungs. The purpose is to slow your breathing, take in more oxygen, and reduce the use of shoulder, neck and upper chest muscles while breathing so that you breathe more efficiently.

• **A quiet setting:** If you're a beginner, practicing meditation may be easier if you're in a quiet spot with few distractions—no television, radios or cellphones. As you get more skilled, you may be able to do it anywhere, especially in high-stress situations where you'll benefit the most, such as a traffic jam, stressful work meeting or long line at the grocery store.

• **A comfortable position:** You can practice meditation whether you're sitting, lying down, walking or in other positions or activities. Just try to be comfortable so that you can get the most out of your meditation.

Don't let the thought of meditating the "right" way add to your stress. You can attend meditation centers or classes led by trained instructors, but you also can practice meditation on your own. Make meditation as formal or informal as you like—whatever suits your lifestyle and situation. Some people build meditation
into their daily routine. For example, they may start and end each day with an hour of meditation. But all you really need is a few minutes of quality time for meditation.

Here are some ways you can practice meditation on your own, whenever you choose:

- **Breathe deeply**: This technique is good for beginners because breathing is a natural function. Focus all attention on your breathing. Concentrate on feeling and listening as you inhale and exhale through your nostrils. Breathe deeply and slowly. When your attention wanders, gently return your focus to your breathing.

- **Scan your body**: When using this technique, focus attention on different parts of your body. Become aware of your body’s various sensations, whether that’s pain, tension, warmth or relaxation. Combine body scanning with breathing exercises and imagine breathing heat or relaxation into and out of different parts of your body.

- **Repeat a mantra**: You can create your own mantra, whether it’s religious or secular. Examples of religious mantras include the Jesus Prayer in the Christian tradition, the holy name of God in Judaism, or the om mantra of Hinduism, Buddhism and other Eastern religions.

- **Walk and meditate**: Combining a walk with meditation is an efficient and healthy way to relax. You can use this technique anywhere you’re walking—in a tranquil forest, on a city sidewalk or at the mall. When you use this method, slow down the pace of walking so that you can focus on each movement of your legs or feet. Don't focus on a particular destination. Concentrate on your legs and feet, repeating action words in your mind such as lifting, moving and placing as you lift each foot, move your leg forward and place your foot on the ground.

- **Engage in prayer**: Prayer is the best known and most widely practiced example of meditation. Spoken and written prayers are found in most faiths. You can pray using your own words or read prayers written by others.

- **Read and reflect**: Many people report that they benefit from reading poems or sacred texts, and taking a few moments to quietly reflect on their meaning. You can also listen to sacred music, spoken words or any music you find relaxing or inspiring. You may want to write your reflections in a journal or discuss them with a friend or spiritual leader.

- **Focus your love and gratitude**: In this type of meditation, you focus your attention on a sacred object or being, weaving feelings of love and gratitude into your thoughts. You can also close your eyes and use your imagination or gaze at representations of the object.

Don't judge your meditation skills, which may only increase your stress. Meditation takes practice. Keep in mind that it’s common for your mind to wander during meditation, no matter how long you've been practicing. If you're meditating to calm your mind and your attention wanders, slowly return to the object, sensation or movement you're focusing on.

Experiment and you'll likely find what types of meditation work best for you and which you enjoy doing. Adapt meditation to your needs at the moment. Remember, there's no right way or wrong way to meditate. What matters is that meditation helps you reduce stress and feel better overall.

---

*The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.*
Group Therapy

Ground Rules

Many people find that sharing specifics about their personal experiences, listening to others share similar experiences, and collectively helping each other problem-solve can be very therapeutic and successful. Suggestions for successful groups include: setting ground rules at the first meeting; focusing on one topic at each session; assigning a homework task relative to the session topic that is reviewed at the next meeting; and incorporating relaxation exercises to end each session.

Helpful ground rules for group therapy include: emphasis on strict confidentiality of anything discussed within the group; importance of participating in the group dynamic; setting a time-limit for each session (generally two hours maximum); and allowing each member an opportunity to speak at each session.

Group Activity Exercises

Mix and match these suggestions or adapt them to fit your group.

- Participants are asked to describe a situation that provoked anger to the group. The person’s stressful and hostile responses can be identified and discussed. Cognitive behavioral strategies can then be suggested to alter the participant’s stressful and angry responses.

- Participants are asked to share experiences that were perceived and described as threatening. The participant and group discuss and re-formulate the actual problem by giving possible suggestions to solutions. The participant can then evaluate and judge the various suggestions.

- Participants are asked to share psychological consequences in relation to health problems.

- Participants are asked to share psychosocial stress and physiological stress reactions perceived, observed or felt.

- Participants are asked to share any anger and hostility in response to daily stress exposure, problem-solving and cognitive strategies.

- Participants are asked to share any worry, depression, anxieties, low-spiritedness and social inhibition. Discussing these things and supporting each other helps participants identify and address his/her response to these feelings and triggers.
Participants are introduced to examples of everyday conflict situations and asked to deal with them.

Participants are asked to share the strong “legs” in his or her life—these could be relationships, professional pride, health, etc. Participants are then encouraged to focus on their strong “legs.”

Participants are asked to share their strengths in work situations and how this strength becomes visible in their professional life. As others share, emphasize different strengths in different people. These differences can cause conflicts if a person is in a professional environment that does not support his/her strengths. This leads to stress and burn-out, and helping the person to realize he/she may be better suited elsewhere can substantially reduce stress.

Evaluating the current and the hoped for: How is my situation now? How would I like it to be? What can I do to make that happen? How do I divide my time between work, leisure, friends, and family? How would I like to distribute this time? How can I change that? How much time do I get for myself? What is a good balance between life domains?

Homework Exercise Options

- Have each participant observe and record his/her stress behavior patterns for the week.
- Have each participant identify and record positive and negative emotions.
- Have each participant record and report on their daily practice of relaxation behaviors.

Cognitive Behavioral Strategies

- **The Hook**—specially designed to attenuate irritation and anger. The person is asked to imagine being a fish and to experience the stressor as a “hook”. He/she is then given the choice either to “bite”– get irritated or angry–or to refrain from biting. This provides each individual with the opportunity to make a choice about how to react in a certain situation. Homework: practice how to avoid biting their hooks and report about their experiences at the next session.

- **Ladder of Life**—used to measure health-related global life quality. Display a ladder with 10 steps, the lowest one illustrating the worst state of life and the highest illustrating the best state, with progressions in between. The person is asked to rate his/her present health-related quality of life, then to estimate what it was like one year ago, and then what it would be like one year from now. Discuss the trend and if the person is satisfied with that trend, and if not, how it might be changed?

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Music Therapy for Stress Reduction

Music combines frequency, beat, density, tone, rhythm, repetition, loudness and lyrics to extend our language and influence our emotions. Music can have significant effects on the cardiovascular system and influence heart rate, cardiac variability and blood pressure. Historically, music has been used to improve athletic performance and concentration. Music can also be used as a therapeutic tool to reduce stress. Think about the effect of various musical styles when you are planning group activities or individual sessions with congregants or families.

Music can enhance positive calming emotions and is often utilized in church services. Relaxing music reduces cortisol levels, the hormone related to stress. Similarly, vocal or orchestral crescendos can cause skin vasoconstriction, chills and increased blood pressure. Soft, quiet classical or meditative music can reduce pain and stress. Music from youth can lead to improved mood, concentration and motivation.

If you are ministering to people during end-of-life, it is known that hearing is often the last sensation to go, so music might be the last source of enjoyment and happiness for the dying patient.

The most beneficial music for stress reduction is classical music composed by Bach, Mozart and the Italian composers. This type of music can calm cardiovascular disturbances, refresh the immune system, improve concentration and decrease depression. Popular music leads to buoyant spirits, good moods, increased motivation and general stimulation. Meditative music has sedating effects with slow sounds and few rhythms. Heavy metal and techno music encourage rage, disappointment and aggressive behavior, and increase heart rate and blood pressure. Hip Hop and Rap often have a negative effect due to their words and rhyming structure. Jazz appeals to all senses, but requires a high degree of concentration to listen to.

The idea of music as a healing influence which could affect health and behavior is as old as the writings of Aristotle and Plato. The 20th century discipline began after World War I when community musicians, both amateur and professional, went to hospitals around the country to play for the thousands of veterans suffering both physical and emotional war trauma. The patients' notable physical and emotional responses to music led the doctors and nurses to request musicians be hired to work at hospitals.

To learn more about Music Therapy or how to become trained as a music therapist, visit the American Music Therapy Association at [http://www.musictherapy.org/](http://www.musictherapy.org/).

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Exercise Therapy

Physical exercise affects the biochemical equilibrium within the body at the cellular level. When your muscles start working, there is an increase in the muscle blood supply that causes an increase in the circulatory system and gas exchange. The most successful and sustainable stress management programs include Exercise Therapy as one component along with others.

There is value in practical, creative activity—the important aspect is to start moving and increase your blood flow and cortisol levels. You can walk, clean the house, garden, ride a bicycle, play with the kids or grandkids, shop, lift weights, or dance—basically any activity will work! People who exercise regularly report feeling happier, more fulfilled and less stressed. As an added bonus, with two-thirds of American adults overweight or obese, moving more is a good way to fight this; the other being good dietary choices. **Be sure to consult your physician or health care provider before beginning any exercise program.**

Some tips for successful exercise programs include:

- Get started on a physical activity program—this is often the hardest part.
- Most experts recommend starting with three 20-minute sessions and building to 150 minutes of aerobic activity per week.
- Create a plan that you can work into slowly—start low and go slow—just keep going.
- Decide on a specific type, amount and level of physical activity.
- Fit this activity into your schedule so it can be part of your routine.
- Keep that time in your schedule consistent so that it actually happens.
- Find a buddy to exercise with—it is more fun and will encourage you to stick with your routine. A dog or other pet works, too!
- You do not have to join a gym—whatever activity works with your lifestyle, schedule and budget is fine.
- Find an activity that allows you to present yourself freely, without anxiety or inhibitions.
- Function at your level of competency, free from consciousness of self.
- As you build your program, increase your days-per-week before lengthening the time of each workout to prevent injury.
- Pilates or yoga can improve posture, tone your abdomen and extend your range of motion, making you look slimmer.
- Self-directed exercises may be more effective than those professionally-administered.
- If you have any health concerns, discuss them with your health care provider before you begin any exercise program.
- If you are worried about the effect exercise may have on you, you may want to consider exercising at a club or gym where others are around to help if you need it.
- Add variety to your activities to stay motivated.
- Warm-up to get your body ready for action. This can be as simple as shrugging your shoulders, tapping your toes, swinging your arms or marching in-place.
- Cool-down when you are done to protect your heart, relax your muscles and keep you from getting hurt.
- Don’t be too hard on yourself if you can’t do things the first time. Be proud that you are trying.
- Set short-term and long-term goals to maintain motivation.
- Reward yourself for achieving goals and for continuing.
- Track your progress—keep an activity journal so you can look back and see your progress.
- Wear comfortable shoes with a lot of support.
- Wear clothes that don’t bind or chafe, and a supportive bra.
- March in-place during commercials or while talking on the phone.
- You should be able to talk without gasping while exercising—otherwise, slow down.
- Don’t forget sunscreen if you are exercising outside.
- Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.
Diet Analysis

A poor diet puts the body in a state of physical stress and weakens the immune system. As a result, a person can be more susceptible to infections. A poor diet can mean making unhealthy food choices, not eating enough or not eating on a normal schedule.

Tips to help you analyze your diet include:

- Increase the amount of fruits and vegetables to improve your health and well-being.
- Use the food guide plate to help make healthier food choices.
- Eat normal-sized portions on a regular schedule.
- Reduce fat and sodium intake.
- Go flour free—anything with white flour (bread, rice, crackers, cereal, chips, pretzels) raises blood sugar which is readily converted to fat.
- Decrease the amount of processed and refined carbohydrates.
- Avoid no-carb diets as they are usually high in fat and low in fiber, vitamins and minerals, and are difficult to sustain.
- Steel-cut oatmeal, wheat berries, sweet potatoes and legumes are rich in fiber and nutrients.
- Too many calories can lead to weight gain and obesity.
- Find your recommended daily caloric intake on www.calorieking.com.
- Write down your favorite foods and your usual serving size. Then look them up in www.calorieking.com or www.thecaloriecounter.com to see the calorie-count in those servings.
- Be mindful of portion sizes—especially when dining out.
- Beware of smoothies and frozen coffee drinks as they are often laden with sugar and calories.
- Work to eliminate empty energy calories, such as sugar cereals, soda, ice cream, candy, and many processed foods.
- Pick breakfast cereals with at least five grams of fiber and less than 25% of calories from sugar.
- Eat slowly, focusing on your food and savoring the flavor of each bite to curb overeating.
• Make meal time special—turn off the TV and cell phone and add candles to the table.

• The recommended amount of dietary fiber is 25 grams per day for women and 38 grams per day for men.

• Many breakfast cereals, fruits, and vegetables are excellent sources of dietary fiber.

• Eating foods higher in healthy fats and lower in unhealthy fats can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease.

• Saturated fats and trans fats should be avoided in favor of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats (e.g., fish, olive oil, peanut oil, nuts).

• Trans fats are those that are solid at room temperature and are found in many margarines and in other fats labeled “partially hydrogenated.” Another major source is oils that are maintained at high temperature for a long period, such as in fast food restaurants.

• Saturated fats come mainly from animal products, such as cheese, butter and red meat.

• Folate is a type of B vitamin that is important in the production of red blood cells.

• Vitamins containing folate and breakfast cereal fortified with folate are recommended as the best ways to ensure adequate intake.

• The antioxidant vitamins include: vitamins A, C, E and beta-carotene. There is no evidence to support antioxidant vitamin supplementation for individuals who do not have specific vitamin deficiencies.

• Adequate calcium and vitamin D intake are important, particularly in women, to reduce the risk of osteoporosis.

• Pre-menopausal women and men should consume at least 1000 mg of calcium per day and post-menopausal women should consume 1200 mg per day.

• Post-menopausal women with or at-risk for osteoporosis should consume at least 800 International Units of vitamin D per day.

• Pre-menopausal women and men with osteoporosis should take 400 to 600 International Units of vitamin D daily.

• Moderate alcohol intake may reduce the risk of heart disease.

• United States Dietary Guidelines recommend alcohol intake in moderation, if at all. This means no more than one drink per day for women; and up to two drinks per day for men.

• Those who do not drink alcohol shouldn’t start.

• Alcohol is discouraged for those under 40 who are at-risk of cardiovascular disease because the risks are likely to outweigh the benefits in this group.

• Eat plenty of vegetables, fruits and whole grains, and a limited amount of red meat.

• Make fruits and vegetables part of every meal. Eat a variety of fruits and vegetables. Frozen or canned can be used when fresh isn’t convenient.

• Eat vegetables as snacks.
• Have a bowl of fruit out at all times for kids to snack on.
• Put fruit on your cereal.
• Consume at least half of all grains as whole grains (like whole wheat bread, brown rice, and whole grain cereal), replacing refined grains (like white bread, white rice, refined or sweetened cereals).
• Choose chicken, fish and beans instead of red meat and cheese.
• Cook with oils that contain polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats, like olive and peanut oil.
• Choose margarines that do not have partially-hydrogenated oils. Soft margarines (especially squeeze margarines) have less trans fats than stick margarines.
• Eat fewer baked goods that are store-brought, which may contain partially-hydrogenated fats (like many types of crackers, cookies and cupcakes).
• When eating fast-food, choose healthy items for you and your family, like broiled chicken or salad.
• Choose non-sweetened, non-alcoholic beverages like water, at meals and parties.
• Avoid occasions centered on alcohol.
• Avoid making sugar-sweetened beverages and alcohol an essential part of family gatherings.
• Keep calorie intake balanced with your needs and activity level.
Laughter Therapy—It’s OK to Laugh About It!

Therapeutic humor is a relatively well-developed practice supported by specialized organizations, books, journals, events and websites. Laughing reduces stress hormones, allowing the immune cells to function better. It also promotes a healthy oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange and clears airways. Humor is emotionally uplifting and forms bonds with others. Humor is particularly effective as a stress reduction strategy because it helps: develop different, often wildly contrasting perspectives; increase mental agility; disrupt very entrenched or rigid ways of viewing a situation; experience dilution of intensity; practice mind-awareness by imagining what’s happening in the minds of others; connect with others through shared experience; and practice tension relief. People who smile more may live longer and be more successful.

But using humor can be risky. Keep in mind the subject—things that are funny can also be deeply-wounding, either inherently (teasing, insulting, humiliating, insensitive) or stylistically if sarcasm is used. Try to aim humor at ourselves or situations that are not related to any people or their circumstances.

Laughter Therapy promotes health and wellness by stimulating playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life’s situations. Laughter Therapy stimulates positive discussions of the topics at-hand and promotes upbeat feelings among participants in the conversations. It creates an unusual environment where all parties are sharing the same or similar experience, power and feelings, leading to the formation strong alliances. Humor has the ability to reach and activate important emotions that people usually keep shielded, and it can be a non-threatening, non-aggressive and warm technique to dilute the intensity and pain of some of the issues being discussed.

A doctor in India uses a technique called Stimulated Laughter, which is based on the theory of “faking it leads to making it.” In Stimulated Laughter, breathing techniques are combined with chuckling, snickering, snorting, chortling and giggling. The idea is that a good belly-laugh is as good for you as physical exercise because it creates the same physiological changes. You can also include games, songs, dances or skits into your group therapy sessions to develop a sense of connection and a non-threatening atmosphere.

Some examples of how to incorporate Laughter Therapy include:

- Comical board games such as Pictionary or Twister
- Adding funny designs to pizzas or cakes
- Joke books, humorous books or comics
- Comedy films
- TV or radio programs
- Poetry, music or drama
- Theme days—like the 80s, a specific music group, nurses, farmers
- Outings to comedy films, plays or clubs
- Have a comedian come to visit your group
- Use pets—dogs, meerkats, anything that moves will work
- Auction off your stress
- Do the hokey-pokey
- Start a laughter club at your job—participants meet 10-15 minutes before work day to share a communal laugh
- Get a clown outfit—wear it and try to juggle
- Homework assignment: smile at yourself in the mirror every morning
- Bring someone in to teach the skills of stand-up comedy and improvisation

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Relationship Therapy

Just because someone has been in your life for a long time don’t put them on auto-pilot. Remind the people who are important to you why they are important. Practice presence, appreciation and honesty in any relationship. Focus on what your relationship is now—not what it was years ago—and learn to appreciate everything you can about that person. Be honest about anything in the relationship that needs work or annoys you, and ask them for similar feedback. It isn’t always a happy conversation, but it’s one of the quickest ways to improve a relationship.

**Communicating assertively can help you control stress and improve coping skills**

Being assertive means that you express yourself effectively and stand-up for your point of view, while also respecting the rights and beliefs of others. By being assertive, you can decrease your stress, boost your self-esteem and earn others’ respect. Assertiveness comes naturally for some people more than others, but everyone can learn to be more assertive.

Assertiveness is based on mutual respect. Being assertive shows that you respect yourself, because you're willing to stand-up for your interests and express your thoughts and feelings. It also demonstrates that you're aware of the rights of others and are willing to work on resolving conflicts. Assertive communication is direct and respectful. Being assertive gives you the best chance to successfully deliver your message.

People develop different styles of communication based on their life experiences. Your style may be so ingrained that you're not even aware of what it is. People tend to stick to the same communication style over time.

If your communication style is **passive**, you may seem to be shy or overly easygoing. You may routinely say things such as, “I'll just go with whatever the group decides.” You tend to avoid conflict. This can become a problem because the message you’re sending is that your thoughts and feelings aren’t as important as those of others. Internal conflicts that can be created by passive behavior can lead to stress, resentment and anger.

On the other hand, if your communication style is **aggressive**, you may come across as a bully who disregards the needs, feelings and opinions of others. You may appear self-righteous or superior and humiliate or intimidate others. Aggression undercuts trust and mutual respect. Others may come to resent you, leading them to avoid or oppose you.

If you communicate in a **passive-aggressive** manner, you may say “yes” when you want to say “no.” You may be sarcastic or complain about others behind their backs. You may have developed a passive-aggressive style because you're uncomfortable being direct about your needs and feelings.
Over time, passive-aggressive behavior damages relationships and undercuts mutual respect, making it difficult for you to get your goals and needs met.

So what would be a better communication style? Being **assertive** is typically viewed as a healthier communication style, and offers many benefits. It helps keep people from walking all over you, while you are not steamrolling others. Behaving assertively can help you gain self-confidence and self-esteem, understand and recognize your feelings, earn respect from others, improve communication, create win-win situations, improve your decision-making skills, create honest relationships, and gain more job satisfaction.

To communicate more assertively and effectively, try these tips:

- **Assess your style**: Do you voice your opinions or remain silent? Do you say yes to additional work even when your plate is full? Are you quick to judge or blame? Do people seem to dread or fear talking to you? Understand your style before you begin making changes.

- **Use “I” statements**: Using “I” statements lets others know what you’re thinking without sounding accusatory. For instance, say, “I disagree,” rather than, “You’re wrong.”

- **Practice saying no**: If you have a hard time turning down requests, try saying, “No, I can’t do that now.” Don’t beat around the bush, be direct. If an explanation is appropriate, keep it brief.

- **Rehearse what you want to say**: If it’s challenging to say what you want or think, practice typical scenarios you may encounter. Say what you want to say out loud. It may help to write it out first, too, so you can practice from a script. Consider role-playing with a friend or colleague and ask for constructive feedback.

- **Use body language**: Communication isn’t just verbal. Act confident even if you aren’t feeling it. Keep an upright posture, but lean forward a bit. Make regular eye contact. Maintain a neutral or positive facial expression. Don’t wring your hands or use dramatic gestures. Practice assertive body language in front of the mirror or with a friend or colleague.

- **Keep emotions in check**: Conflict is hard for most people. Maybe you get easily angered or frustrated, or maybe you even feel like crying. Although these feelings are normal, they can get in the way of resolving conflict. If you feel too emotional going into a situation, wait a little bit, if possible. Then work on remaining calm. Breathe slowly. Keep your voice even and firm.

- **Start small**: At first, practice your new skills in situations that are low-risk. For instance, try out your assertiveness on a partner or friend before tackling a difficult situation at work. Evaluate yourself afterward and tweak your approach as necessary.

Learning to be assertive will take time and practice. If you’ve spent years silencing yourself, becoming more assertive probably won’t happen overnight. By becoming more assertive, you can express your true feelings and needs more easily. You may even find you get more of what you want as a result.

**Reduce Stress by Overcoming Negative Self-Talk**

Is your glass half-empty or half-full? How you answer this age-old question about positive thinking may reflect your outlook on life, your attitude toward yourself, whether you’re optimistic or pessimistic—and it may even affect your health. The positive thinking that typically comes with optimism is a key part of effective stress management. If you tend to be pessimistic, you can learn positive thinking skills. Optimists have decreased mortality and are less likely to die from coronary
heart disease. Even in the face of struggling to meet basic needs, positive emotions are associated with better health.

Positive thinking doesn't mean that you keep your head in the sand and ignore life's less pleasant situations. Positive thinking just means that you approach the unpleasantness in a more positive, productive way. You think the best is going to happen, not the worst. Positive thinking often starts with self-talk. Self-talk is the endless stream of unspoken thoughts that run through your head every day. These automatic thoughts can be positive or negative. Some self-talk comes from logic and reason. Other self-talk may arise from misconceptions that you create because of lack of information.

If the thoughts that run through your head are mostly negative, your outlook on life is more likely pessimistic. If your thoughts are mostly positive, you're likely an optimist—who practices positive thinking. Health benefits that positive thinking may provide include: increased life span; lower rates of depression; lower levels of distress; greater resistance to the common cold; better psychological and physical well-being; reduced risk of death from cardiovascular disease; and better coping skills during hardships and times of stress. It's unclear why people who engage in positive thinking experience these health benefits. One theory is that having a positive outlook enables you to better cope with stressful situations, which reduces the harmful health effects of stress on your body. It's also thought that positive, optimistic people tend to live healthier lifestyles—they get more physical activity, follow a healthier diet and don't smoke or drink alcohol in excess.

Not sure if your self-talk is positive or negative? Here are some common forms of negative self-talk:

- **Filtering**: You magnify the negative aspects of a situation and filter out all of the positive ones. For example, say you had a great day at work. You completed your tasks ahead of time and were complimented for doing a speedy and thorough job. But you forgot one minor step. That evening, you focus only on your oversight and forget about the compliments you received.

- **Personalizing**: When something bad occurs, you automatically blame yourself. For example, you hear that an evening out with friends is canceled, and you assume that the change in plans is because no one wanted to be around you.

- **Catastrophizing**: You automatically anticipate the worst. The drive-through coffee shop gets your order wrong and you automatically think that the rest of your day will be a disaster.

- **Polarizing**: You see things only as good or bad, black or white. There is no middle ground. You feel that you have to be perfect or you're a total failure.

If these sound familiar, you can learn to turn negative thinking into positive thinking. The process isn’t difficult, but it does take time and practice, like all new habits. Here are some ways to think and behave in a more positive and optimistic way:

- **Identify areas to change**: If you want to become more optimistic and engage in more positive thinking, first identify the areas of your life that you typically think negatively about, whether it's work, your daily commute or a relationship. You can start small by focusing on one area to approach in a more positive way.

- **Check yourself**: Stop and evaluate what you're thinking periodically during the day. If you find that your thoughts are mainly negative, find a way to put a positive spin on them.

- **Be open to humor**: Give yourself permission to smile or laugh, especially during difficult times. Seek humor in everyday happenings. When you can laugh at life, you feel less stressed.
• **Follow a healthy lifestyle**: Exercise at least three times a week to positively affect mood and reduce stress. Follow a healthy diet to fuel your mind and body.

• **Surround yourself with positive people**: Make sure those in your life are positive, supportive people you can depend on to give helpful advice and feedback. Negative people may increase your stress level and make you doubt your ability to manage stress in a healthy way.

• **Practice positive self-talk**: Start by following one simple rule: Don't say anything to yourself that you wouldn't say to anyone else. Be gentle and encouraging with yourself. If a negative thought enters your mind, evaluate it rationally and respond with affirmations of what is good about you.

Here are some examples of negative self-talk and how you can apply a positive thinking twist to them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative self-talk</th>
<th>Positive thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I've never done it before.</td>
<td>It's an opportunity to learn something new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's too complicated.</td>
<td>I'll tackle it from a different angle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don't have the resources.</td>
<td>Necessity is the mother of invention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm too lazy to get this done.</td>
<td>I wasn't able to fit it into my schedule, but I can re-examine some priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There's no way it will work.</td>
<td>I can try to make it work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It's too radical of a change.</td>
<td>Let's take a chance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one bothers to communicate with me.</td>
<td>I'll see if I can open the channels of communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm not going to get any better at this.</td>
<td>I'll give it another try.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you tend to have a negative outlook, don’t expect to become an optimist overnight. But with practice, eventually your self-talk will contain less self-criticism and more self-acceptance. You may also become less critical of the world around you. Plus, when you share your positive mood and experience, both you and those around you enjoy an emotional boost.

Practicing positive self-talk will improve your outlook. When your state of mind is generally optimistic, you're able to handle everyday stress in a more constructive way. That ability may contribute to the widely-observed health benefits of positive thinking.

*The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.*
Just Say No

It is easier to say yes, but healthier to say no. When your plate is already full with deadlines and commitments, stress relief can be as straightforward as just saying no. A day will never become longer than 24 hours, and you are in control of how you use each one.

Consider these reasons for saying no:

- **Saying no isn't necessarily selfish**: When you say no to a new commitment, you're honoring your existing obligations and ensuring that you'll be able to devote quality time to them.

- **Saying no can allow you to try new things**: Just because you've always helped plan a certain activity doesn't mean that you have to keep doing it forever. Saying no will give you time to pursue other interests.

- **Always saying yes isn't healthy**: When you're overcommitted and under stress, you're more likely to feel run-down and could possibly get sick.

- **Saying yes can cut others out**: When you say no, you open the door for others to step-up. They may not do things exactly the way you would, but that's OK. They'll find their own way.

Sometimes it's tough to determine which activities deserve your time and attention. Use these strategies to evaluate obligations and opportunities that come your way.

- **Focus on what matters most**: Examine your current obligations and overall priorities before making any new commitments. Ask yourself if the new commitment is important to you. If it's something you feel strongly about, by all means do it. If not, take a pass.

- **Weigh the yes-to-stress ratio**: Is the new activity you're considering a short- or long-term commitment? For example, making a batch of cookies for the school bake sale will take far less time than heading-up the school fundraising committee. Don't say yes if it will mean months of added stress. Instead, look for other ways to pitch in.

- **Take guilt out of the equation**: Don't agree to a request that you would rather decline because of guilt or obligation. Doing so will likely lead to additional stress and resentment.

- **Sleep on it**: Are you tempted by a friend's invitation to volunteer at your old alma mater or join a weekly golf league? Before you respond, take a day to think about the request and how it fits in with your current commitments.
How to say no:

- **Say no:** The word no has power. Don't be afraid to use it. Be careful about using wimpy substitute phrases, such as “I'm not sure” or “I don't think I can.” These may be interpreted to mean that you might say yes later.

- **Be brief:** State your reason for refusing the request, but don't go on about it. Avoid elaborate justifications or explanations.

- **Be honest:** Don't fabricate reasons to get out of an obligation. The truth is always the best way to turn down a friend, family member or co-worker.

- **Be respectful:** Many good causes land at your door and it can be tough to turn them all down. Complementing the group's effort while saying that you can't commit at this time shows that you respect what they're trying to accomplish.

- **Be ready to repeat:** You may find it necessary to refuse a request several times before the other person accepts your response. When that happens, just hit the replay button. Calmly repeat your no, with or without your original rationale, as needed.

Saying no won't be easy if you're used to saying yes all the time. But learning to say no is an important part of simplifying your life and managing stress. And with practice, you will probably find that saying no gets easier.

---

*The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.*
Financial Therapy Strategies

The economy appears to be getting healthier, yet personal financial problems still worry many. The American Psychological Association offers tips to deal with stress about money and the economy:

- **Pause but don’t panic**: There are many negative stories about the economy. Pay attention to what’s happening around you, but refrain from getting caught up in the doom-and-gloom, which can lead to high anxiety and bad decision-making. Avoid overreacting or becoming passive. Remain calm and stay focused.

- **Identify your financial stressors and make a plan**: Look at your current relationship with money and analyze your patterns—what you are spending money on? How do you save? How do you earn? By understanding your patterns, you can change them and reduce stress. Make a budget. Write down ways you and your family can reduce expenses or manage your finances more efficiently. Then commit to a specific plan and review it monthly with your partner or financial advisor. If you are having trouble paying bills or managing debt, reach out for help from your bank, utilities, credit card companies or consumer credit counseling.

- **Recognize how you deal with stress related to money**: In tough times some people might relieve stress by turning to unhealthy activities like smoking, drinking, gambling or emotional eating. The strain can also lead to more conflict and arguments between partners. Be alert to these behaviors, if they are causing trouble; consider seeking help from a psychologist or community mental health clinic before the problem gets worse.

- **Turn these challenging times into opportunities for real growth and change**: Times like this, while difficult, can offer opportunities to take stock of your current situation and make needed changes. Think of ways that economic challenges can motivate you to find healthier ways to deal with stress. Try taking a walk—it’s an inexpensive way to get exercise. Having dinner at home with your family may not only save you money, but may help bring you closer together. Consider learning a new skill. Take a course through your employer or look into low-cost resources in your community that can lead to a better job. The key is to use this time to think outside the box and find new ways of managing your life.

- **Ask for professional support**: Credit counseling services and financial planners are available to help you take control of your money situation. If you continue to be overwhelmed by the stress, you may want to talk with a psychologist who can help you address the emotions behind your financial worries, manage stress, and change unhealthy behaviors.

*The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.*
Coping with Work Stress

Nowhere is stress more likely than in the workplace. Twenty-five percent of people say their job is the primary stressor in their lives. Since work brings in an income, it is therefore high on the priority list. The stress related to your job takes on increased value in an impoverished area. Job stress can affect your professional and personal relationships, your livelihood and your health. Some causes of stress are obvious—the threat of losing your job, for instance. But small, daily hassles and demands such as a long commute or difficult co-workers also contribute to elevated stress levels. Over time, small, persistent stressors can wreak more havoc than sudden, devastating events.

To identify the factors causing you stress, try keeping a stress log: For one week write down the situations, events and people who cause you to have a negative physical, mental or emotional response. Give a description of the situation. After a week, sit down and look at your stress log. Choose one situation to work on using problem-solving techniques. That means identifying and exploring the problem, looking for ways to resolve it, and selecting and implementing a solution.

Suppose, for instance, that you're behind at work because you leave early to pick up your son from school. You might check with other parents to see if he can ride with them. Or you might come in early, work through your lunch or take work home to catch-up. The best way of coping with stress is to find a way to change the circumstances that are causing it.

Work overload—feeling like you have too much to do—is a common cause of job stress. You may not be able to affect the amount of work you have, but you can use time management to help you be more efficient and feel less under-the-gun. Create realistic expectations and deadlines for yourself, and set regular progress reviews. Prepare a list of tasks and rank them in order of priority. Throughout the day, scan your master list and work on tasks in priority order. For an especially important or difficult project, block time on your schedule when you can work on it without interruptions.

When your job is stressful, it can feel like it's taking over your life. Try to maintain perspective. Get other points of view. Talk with colleagues or friends you trust about the issues you're facing at work. They may be able to provide insights or offer suggestions for coping—just having someone to talk to can also be a relief. Make the most of workday breaks. Even 10 minutes of personal time can be refreshing. Similarly, take time off, whether it's a two-week vacation or a long weekend. All work and no play is a recipe for burnout. Make sure to spend time on activities you enjoy, such as reading, socializing or pursuing a hobby. Be vigilant about taking care of your health. Get regular exercise, plenty of sleep and eat healthy. If none of these things relieves your stress or burnout, try talking with a health care professional. He/she can help you assess your feelings and consider all your options. In some cases, the best solution to intolerable job stress may be finding a new job.

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network's sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Daily Stress Log

A Daily Stress Log allows you to identify patterns relating to your stress. For several days, you will note any and all activities that put a strain on energy and time, trigger anger or anxiety, or precipitate a negative physical response. You can also note your reactions to these stressful events.

When you have completed a daily log for a few days, review the log and identify two or three stressful events or activities that you can modify or eliminate. It’s been said that awareness is half the battle. As you keep track of all the events of the day, notice patterns in which you find yourself getting more stressed and make adjustments to those damaging patterns.

The Daily Stress Log can be a real eye-opener in helping you become aware of daily stress triggers. Watch for patterns that develop. Do you notice that your stress level rises (*substitute appropriate examples*) every time your roommate’s boyfriend comes over and plops himself down in your favorite chair? Do you find that you always feel stressed after you and your friend consume an entire family-sized pizza?

The following is an example of a Daily Stress Log.
Daily Stress Log

Name:___________________________ Date:__________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Source of Stress</th>
<th>Tension level*</th>
<th>Coping strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Tension level 1 = Slight 2 = Moderate 3 = Strong 4 = Intense

Major source of stress today: __________________________________________________

Assessment of how you managed stress today: ____________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Stress is an unavoidable part of life, even for young children. But parents and caregivers can take steps to help children learn to deal with it in a healthy way.

The Nemours Foundation lists these suggestions for helping kids cope:

- Make sure your child eats nutritious foods and gets plenty of rest.
- Enjoy quality time with your kids every day—make sure they know you’re there to talk to and share fun activities with.
- Talk to your child about what’s causing the stress and find ways to deal with it, such as doing fewer after-school activities, writing in a journal or developing a regular exercise routine.
- Try to prepare your child for stressful situations, such as giving the child advance notice of a doctor’s appointment and what it will involve.
- Reassure your child that their emotions (anger, fear, anxiety, etc.) are normal, and you’re confident in their ability to handle these situations.

Building Resilience in Kids
Building resilience helps everyone cope with stress, and we can help our children develop it. Developing resilience involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned over time. Following are tips to build resilience:

1. **Make connections**
   Teach your child how to make friends, including the skill of empathy or feeling another's pain. Encourage your child to be a friend in order to get friends. Build a strong family network to support your child through his/her inevitable disappointments and hurts. Connecting with people provides social support and strengthens resilience. Connect with your church and its children’s activities.

2. **Help your child by having him/her help others**
   Children who feel helpless can be empowered by helping others. Engage your child in age-appropriate volunteer work, or ask for assistance yourself with some task that he or she can master.

3. **Maintain a daily routine**
   Sticking to a routine can be comforting for children, especially younger children who crave structure in their lives. Encourage your child to develop his/her own routines.
4. **Take a break**
   While it’s important to stick to routines, endlessly worrying can be counter-productive. Teach your child how to focus on something besides what's worrying him. Be aware of what your child is exposed to that may be troubling, whether it be the news, the Internet or overheard conversations, and make sure your child takes a break from those things if they trouble him/her.

5. **Teach your child self-care**
   Be a good example and teach your child the importance of making time to eat properly, exercise and rest. Make sure your child has time for fun and that your child hasn't scheduled every moment of his/her life with no "down time" to relax. Caring for oneself and even having fun will help your child stay balanced and better able to deal with stressful times.

6. **Move toward your goals**
   Teach your child to set reasonable goals and then move toward them one step at a time. Moving toward that goal—even if it's a tiny step—and receiving praise for doing so, will focus your child on what he/she has accomplished rather than on what hasn't. This can help build the resilience to move forward in the face of challenges.

7. **Nurture a positive self-view**
   Help your child remember ways in which he has successfully handled hardships in the past and how these past challenges will help him build the strength to handle future challenges. Help your child learn to trust himself to solve problems and make appropriate decisions. Teach your child to see the humor in life and the ability to laugh at one’s self.

8. **Keep things in perspective and maintain a hopeful outlook**
   Even when your child is facing painful events, help him/her look at the situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Although your child may be too young to consider a long-term look on his/her own, guide him/her to see that there is a future beyond the current situation and it can be good. An optimistic and positive outlook enables your child to see the good things in life and keep going even during difficult times.

9. **Look for opportunities for self-discovery**
   Tough times are often when children learn the most about themselves. Help your child take a look at how whatever he is facing can teach him “what he is made of.”

10. **Accept that change is part of life**
    Change often can be scary for children and teens. Help your child see that change is part of life and new goals can replace those that have become unattainable.

**Pre-school Age Stress**
Very young children will only have recently mastered walking and talking, and they may not be able to appropriately express their anxieties and fears. Although you may think they are too young to understand what’s happening, even very young children can absorb frightening events from the news or conversations they overhear.

Watch your children for signs of fear and anxiety that they may not be able to put into words. Have your children become extra clingy, needing more hugs and kisses than usual? Have your children started wetting the bed or sucking their thumb after they had outgrown that behavior? They may be feeling the pressure of what is going on in the world around them. Use **play** to help them express their fears and encourage them to use **art** or **games** to express what they may not be able to put into words.
Use your family like a security blanket for your children: wrap them up in family closeness and make sure your children have lots of family time. During times of stress and change, spend more time with your children playing games, reading to them or just holding them close. Young children especially crave routine and rituals. If bedtime is the time when you read stories to your children, make sure you keep that time for stories. Your child may be less able to handle change when he or she is going through a particularly rough time.

**Elementary School-Age Stress**

Elementary school children may start to encounter cliques and teasing that can occur as children begin to establish "social order" in their schools. As they start to study subjects about the world outside of their homes, they look to teachers and parents to make them feel safe and help sort it all out. Make sure your child has a place he/she feels safe, whether that is home or school (ideally, both would feel safe).

Talk to your children. When they have questions, answer them honestly but simply with reassurance that includes black-and-white statements that leave no room for doubt—such as "I will always take care of you." Don't discount their fears when they bring them to you. When there is a situation outside of the home that is frightening, limit the amount of news your children watch or listen to. You don't need to hide what's happening in the world, but neither do they have to be exposed to constant stories that fuel their fears.

Realize that extra stresses may heighten normal daily stresses. Your children might normally be able to handle a failed test or teasing, but be understanding when they respond with anger or bad behavior to stress that normally wouldn't rattle them. Reassure them that you just expect them to do their best.

**Middle School-Age Stress**

Even without larger traumas, middle school can be an especially difficult time for many children as they struggle to meet extra academic demands and avoid new social pitfalls. They look to teachers and friends as well as parents to make them feel safe. Reinforce empathy and help your child keep perspective. When your child is a victim of the shifting social alliances, help him/her understand that other children may be feeling just as lonely and confused. Help him/her see beyond the current situation—alliances that shift one way may shift back again next week.

Talk with your child about your own feelings during times of extraordinary stress such as the death of a loved one. Your children are probably old enough to appreciate some gray areas in your own feelings, but you should leave no room for doubt when you talk about how you will do whatever it takes to keep them safe. If your family does not have a plan in place for emergencies, make one and share it with your child so he knows there are decisive actions he can take in an emergency.

Enlist your children's help, whether it's a chore or an opinion about a family activity. Include your children in any volunteer activity that you do. Make sure your children know how their actions contribute to the entire family's well-being. If your children know that they have roles to play, and that they can help, they will feel more in control and more confident.

**High School-Age Stress**

Although your teens may tower over you, they still are very young and can feel the fear and uncertainty of both normal teenage stress, as well as world events. Emotions may be volatile and close to the surface during the teen years and finding the best way to connect with your teen can be difficult. Talk with your teens whenever you can, even if it seems they don't want to talk to you. Sometimes the best time to talk may be when you are in the car together; sometimes it may be when you are doing chores together, allowing them to focus on something else while they talk. When your
teens have questions, answer them honestly but with reassurance. Ask their opinion about what is happening and listen to their answers.

Make your home an emotionally safe place. In high school, taunting and bullying can intensify—home should be a haven, especially as your teen encounters more freedoms and choices. Your children may prefer to be with their friends rather than spend time with you, but be ready to provide lots of family time when they need it and set aside family time that also includes their friends.

When stressful things are happening in the world, encourage your teen to take “news breaks,” whether he/she is getting that news from the television, magazines, newspapers or the Internet. Use the news as a catalyst for discussion. Teens may act like they feel immortal, but they still want to know that they will be alright. Honest discussions of your fears and expectations can help your high schooler learn to express his own fears. If your teen struggles with words, encourage him/her to use journaling or art to express emotions.

Many teens are already feeling extreme highs and lows because of hormonal levels in their bodies; added stress or trauma can make these shifts seem more extreme. Be understanding but firm when teens respond to stress with angry or sullen behavior. Reassure them that you just expect them to do their best.

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Gender Disparity—All Stress is Not Created Equal

Women and men deal with stress differently and have different stressors. The *Stress in America™* survey uncovered interesting differences in the way women and men experience and manage stress. While both genders report stress levels beyond what they consider healthy, women are more likely to say their already-high stress levels are on the rise, and they are less likely to believe they are doing a good job managing their stress.

Women continue to report higher stress levels than men (5.3 vs. 4.6 on a 10-point scale where 1 is “little or no stress” and 10 is “a great deal of stress”). Both genders agree, however, that 3.6 is a healthy level of stress, pushing women nearly two points beyond the level of stress they believe to be healthy.

What’s more, women are more likely to say their stress is on the rise. More women say their stress levels have increased in the past five years (43 percent vs. 33 percent of men) and in the past year alone (38 percent vs. 32 percent of men).

Men and women both turn to exercise (52 percent for both genders) and listening to music (48 percent for both genders) as their top stress management techniques. However, women are more likely to engage in social and sedentary activities to manage stress, such as reading (50 percent vs. 29 percent), spending time with friends or family (43 percent vs. 34 percent) and shopping (18 percent vs. 6 percent). Women are also more likely to say they eat to manage stress (27 percent vs. 22 percent).

In fact, men increasingly report doing an excellent or very good job at managing stress (2010: 30 percent; 2011: 35 percent; 2012: 39 percent). While women acknowledge the importance of stress management, few feel they are doing a good job at it. Sixty-eight percent of women say managing stress is important to them, but only 34 percent say they are doing an excellent or very good job at it.

Top sources of stress are the same for men and women, including money (66 percent and 72 percent), work (64 percent and 66 percent) and the economy (60 percent and 62 percent).

Women are more acutely aware of the impact that stress, lifestyle and behavior can have on physical and mental health. At the same time, they report experiencing symptoms of stress more often than men. Despite their attention to these issues, however, they are no more likely to be successful when trying to accomplish healthy living goals. Women are more likely to benefit from group therapy involving only women. Females have a higher willingness to participate in group therapy.
Eighty-two percent of women believe that stress impacts overall health compared with 75 percent of men. At the same time, women are more likely to understand the impact that poor eating habits (80 percent vs. 73 percent), hostility or negativity (75 percent vs. 63 percent) and a lack of sleep can have on health (76 percent vs. 67 percent).

Women are more likely to report that they lie awake at night (46 percent vs. 38 percent), overeat or eat unhealthy foods (43 percent vs. 29 percent) and skip meals (31 percent vs. 23 percent) because of stress. Women are also more likely to report symptoms of stress, ranging from feeling depressed or sad to experiencing headaches and changes in sleeping habits. Women are more likely to report experiencing the following due to stress:

- Fatigue (45 percent vs. 29 percent)
- Feeling nervous or anxious (42 percent vs. 27 percent)
- Feeling overwhelmed (41 percent vs. 29 percent)
- Lacking interest, motivation or energy (39 percent vs. 29 percent)
- Feeling depressed or sad (39 percent vs. 28 percent)
- Feeling like crying (38 percent vs. 17 percent)
- Having headaches (34 percent vs. 20 percent)
- Changes in sleeping habits, [(e.g., oversleeping, difficulty falling asleep, night waking)] (35 percent vs. 25 percent)

Compared to men, women say they place more importance on having healthy relationships, healthy lifestyles and managing stress. At the same time, women tend to place more importance on healthy living goals. Yet, they are on-par with men when it comes to their ability to achieve these goals, which demonstrates “a disconnect” for women between what they think is important and what they are able to achieve.

Women are more likely to say that having good relationships with friends (70 percent vs. 63 percent), getting enough sleep (67 percent vs. 55 percent) and eating healthy (64 percent vs. 55 percent) are important to them.

Women and men are similar in their ability to achieve the healthy living goals they set for themselves. They say they are doing an excellent or very good job at having a good relationship with friends (53 percent of women vs. 49 percent of men), getting enough sleep (32 percent of women vs. 34 percent of men) and eating healthy (36 percent of women vs. 33 percent of men).

Women and men who have been recommended to or have attempted to make a lifestyle or behavior change cite lack of willpower (33 percent for women vs. 28 percent for men) and lack of time (22 percent for both women and men) as the top barriers preventing them from making a change.

Though women and men both turn to their social networks for support in making lifestyle and behavior changes (12 percent vs. 9 percent), women report getting more value from them. Sixty-three percent of the women who turned to social networks found those networks helpful in making lifestyle changes compared with only 36 percent of men.

While only 6 percent of men and women alike report they have seen a mental health professional or a psychologist to manage their stress, women are more likely to believe that psychologists can help manage stress (52 percent vs. 41 percent) and make lifestyle and behavior changes (45 percent vs. 38 percent).

The UMC Health Ministry Network is providing this information in this publication as an educational service to illustrate some practices that may have positive impact on well-being. The Network’s sharing of this general information should not be construed as, does not constitute, and should not be relied upon as medical advice nor legal, counseling, accounting, tax, or other professional advice or services on any specific matter.
Contact _________________, your Faith Community Nurse, for helpful ideas on how to “Stop Stressing and Start Living!”
Don’t let work stress control you!

Contact________________________, your Faith Community Nurse, for tips on managing work-related stress.
Learn how to

“Laugh Your Stress Away!”

Contact______________________, your Faith Community Nurse, for tips.