

2.2 Stress Management

What is Stress?

For early man, the biggest challenge was survival. The dangers they had to face were many – extreme weather, wild animals, hostile clansmen and so on. When faced with a given situation, the choice was either "fight" or "flight". A cocktail of hormones including adrenaline and cortisol are released into the blood stream, preparing the body to respond to the threat and take immediate action by increasing the blood pressure, heart rate, breathing speed, muscle tension, and sharpness of the senses. These bodily changes were vital to keep oneself alive in those harsh scenarios long ago.

Thousands of years of progress has made the world a much safer place to live in. The dangers that we face now are much milder in nature. However, the "fight or flight" response that enabled our ancestors to survive are so deeply ingrained in us that we find ourselves responding in the same manner to situations that we perceive as threatening. Our bodies react in the same primitive manner even though the challenges thrown at us are more emotional or cerebral in nature.

Thus, stress is the body's way of responding to any demand or threat that it faces. Even as this response is helpful in facing dangerous situations, when the body starts responding in such a manner repeatedly, stress becomes harmful and causes damage to your health, career, relationships, personality, and quality of life.

Reasons for stress

Several factors – either external or internal – may cause stress. Such situations and pressures are called stressors. Some common stressors are listed below:

- Academic or workplace pressures
- Hectic schedules
- Major life changes
- Financial problems
- Family problems
- Pessimism
- Uncertainty
- Negative self-talk
- Perfectionism

Identifying stress

Stress in itself is not easy to identify as the response to different stressors may seem quite natural. However, stress manifests itself in several forms. The symptoms of stress may be categorized as cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral symptoms.

Cognitive effects include problems with memory and concentration, anxious thoughts, and continuous worrying.

Emotional effects may include feeling unhappy or depressed, anxiety, irritable behavior, loneliness, isolation, and feeling overwhelmed.

Physical effects of stress may appear as unexplained pain, digestive problems, nausea, chest pain, increased heart rate, and frequent illness. Excess stress may also lead to behavioral issues such as disrupted appetite and sleep, reduced social interaction, procrastination, substance abuse, and repetitive behavior like nail biting.

Stress management

While it is near impossible to completely avoid stressors in our lives, it is possible to regulate our response to these. Thus, we can ensure that the stress that we are subject to stays within tolerable limits.

There are several techniques that may be used for stress management, some of which are described in the coming sections.

Stress Diary

The first step in stress management is recording and analyzing stressors and our response to them. It is often difficult to identify the triggers that cause stress responses. In this context, keeping a record of 'anxious moments' helps pinpoint stressful situations, key stressors, and the manner in which we react to these stresses.

Stress diaries are used to record information about stressful experiences on a regular basis either at regular intervals or when a stressor causes you to react accordingly. Although there are several formats available, a typical stress diary records the following details.

- Date and time.
- The most recent stressful experience you had
- How happy you feel now, on a scale of 0 (unhappiest) to 10 (happiest).
- Your current mood
- How effectively you are working now: from 0 (most ineffective) to 10 (most effective)
- Fundamental cause of the stress.
- The physical symptoms that you felt (for example, "butterflies in the stomach," anger, headache, raised pulse rate, sweaty palms, and so on.).
- How well you handled the event: did your reaction help to solve the problem, or did it make things worse?

After a stress diary is maintained for a few days, it can be analyzed. The different stresses experienced, assessment of the fundamental causes, and your responses will give an idea about the major issues that affect you in this regard. The most frequent

and most unpleasant stressors can be identified from a thorough examination of the diary. In addition, you may try to identify wrong responses to stressors as well as how exactly you felt at each instance. The focus of this analysis should be to identify the most potent stressors and modify your responses to them.

Stress diaries form an ideal starting point to good stress management. The key here is to remember the importance of analysis and reflection as simply identifying stressors in itself is not enough to avoid being stressed.

Activity 2.2.1 Prepare and maintain a stress diary for a period of one week. Identify the different stressors that affect you, measures to reduce stress, and measures to manage stress more effectively. Discuss with your classmates and identify the top five stressors that affect your class.

2.3 The four A's of stress management

One of the most comprehensive approaches to dealing with stress can be summarized using the four A's of stress management. These are four distinct yet related strategies that can be put to good practical use.

1. Avoid
2. Alter
3. Accept
4. Adapt

Avoid

The first strategy for stress reduction is to avoid situations and people who cause you to become stressed. This can be done by modifying your circumstances, avoiding people who cause you to become tensed, learning to say no politely, prioritizing, and planning. For example, if you need to take a busy route to college every day, you may plan to get ready a few minutes earlier so that you can avoid the traffic. Similarly, it would help to turn down a movie invitation if you know that it will not leave you enough time to work on an assignment. Prior planning and prioritization will help schedule tasks in such a manner that you can avoid becoming stressed about not being able to do important things.

Alter

The 'alter' strategy involves modifying situations in whatever manner possible to reduce stresses. Communicating clearly, politely, and openly with others, time management, planning, and having a realistic estimate of the situation will help immensely in changing a potentially stressful situation for the better.

Accept

When a stressful situation cannot be avoided or altered, one often has no choice but to accept it. It is important to accept such situations with an open mind. This can be done by practicing forgiveness, acknowledging one's own feelings and emotions about the situation, and trying to maintain a positive outlook.

Adapt

Most situations become stressful because of our high expectations. A very important skill required to navigate life without becoming overly stressed is to learn to adapt to circumstances. Today's world is extremely competitive and teaches us to have very stringent conditions to define success and failure. However, such high standards often lead to unhealthy amounts of stress. Other helpful strategies include stopping negative thought patterns, changing your way of looking at a particular situation by adopting a different viewpoint, and putting the situation in perspective. Asking oneself questions like "Will this matter five years from now?" and "How important is this in the larger scheme of things?" is very important.

2.4 Stress Management Techniques

There are several stress management techniques that can be applied depending on the situation. Some of these are:

- **Breathing Exercises** : These involve regulating breathing and shifting our focus to that rhythm. It works quickly and hence, is suitable for acute stress
- **Meditation** : meditation is a practice or technique by which an individual focuses their attention on a particular entity to attain a calm and clear mental state. The term meditation encompasses a wide range of practices, some of which have roots in religion. However, it is not always a religious practice and is extensively adopted across the world.
- **Cognitive reframing** : Simply put, cognitive reframing is the adoption of a 'different way' of looking at things. It is important to remember that the response of our body is to perceived threats rather than to actual ones. Thus, if we can perceive a particular threat as being less serious, we can minimize the stress response that we experience. This can be done by changing the way we look at a particular situation. It is well known that the point of view from which we view something can make a considerable difference in the way a situation is seen. For example, a tough examination can be seen either as a catastrophe or as a learning experience. We can create more positive experiences through cognitive reframing without making any actual changes to the circumstances.

- Regular exercise and appropriate diet : Physical activity and adequate nutrition help in eliminating stress to a large extent. Research has shown that exercise releases chemicals in the body that reduce stress and promote a feeling of wellbeing.
- Mindfulness : Mindfulness is the practice of being completely aware of and immersed in the present moment. This awareness should be nonjudgmental and complete, and is usually characterized by a heightened receptiveness to sensory stimuli. The focus is on being here 'in the now' without dwelling on the past or having anxious thoughts about the future.
- Better social relationships : 'No man is an island' is a very famous maxim. As human beings, we all need healthy social relationships to survive and thrive. Friends and family can offer support in many ways such as emotional support, giving confidence or encouragement, providing information, and taking on our responsibilities when we need time off.

2.5 Stress management : Approaches

Strategies to reduce stress fall in three categories based on their orientation. They are

1. Action oriented approach
2. Emotion oriented approach
3. Acceptance oriented approach

Action oriented approach

In this approach, the stress is on taking appropriate action to change the stressful situation. Some of the strategies that fall under this category are

- Time management and planning
- Delegating/ Learning to say No
- Managing conflict with other people
- Modifying work/home environment

Emotion oriented approach

A significant portion of the stress that we experience stems from internal factors, mostly from the manner in which we perceive a situation. By changing our viewpoints and paradigms, we can also reduce such stress. Some effective emotion-oriented strategies are

- Cognitive reframing
- Positive thinking

- Being aware of thoughts and thought patterns, thereby avoiding unsuitable thoughts
- Using affirmations and visualizations

Acceptance oriented approach

When a given situation cannot be altered and is genuinely bad, it becomes essential to accept it gracefully. However, acceptance is not always easy. In this approach, the focus is on minimizing stress when changing the situation is beyond us. The following techniques can help in adopting an acceptance-oriented stance to stress relief.

- Meditation
- Physical exercise
- Interpersonal connections and social support
- Coping with change

2.6 Resilience

It is a fact that we cannot go through life without experiencing any setback. The very famous anecdote of Thomas Alva Edison failing over a thousand times before he could make the incandescent lamp stands as testimony to this. Resilience is the ease with which one recovers from the setbacks that life throws at them. Resilient people do not linger on the bad feelings that failure brings. Instead, they view failure as a learning opportunity, reevaluate, and move on. Research says that resilience has three essential components, viz.,

- **Challenge** – learning to see the adverse situation as an opportunity rather than as a catastrophe. The situation is not seen as a reflection of a person's abilities.
- **Commitment** – being resilient means being committed. This commitment may be to a cause, an ideal, an activity, a person or persons, or oneself. Commitment provides the motivation to overcome the current bad situation and move on.
- **Personal control** – resilient people have control over where they focus their thoughts. Typically, they try to dwell on their strengths and take action within their power to mitigate the situation.

In essence, resilient people maintain a positive, goal-oriented, and empathetic approach to life.

Checkpoint 2.1 Identify five people from history who have shown amazing resilience in their personal and public life. Analyze how their attitudes helped.

Identify common traits that helped them do so. ■

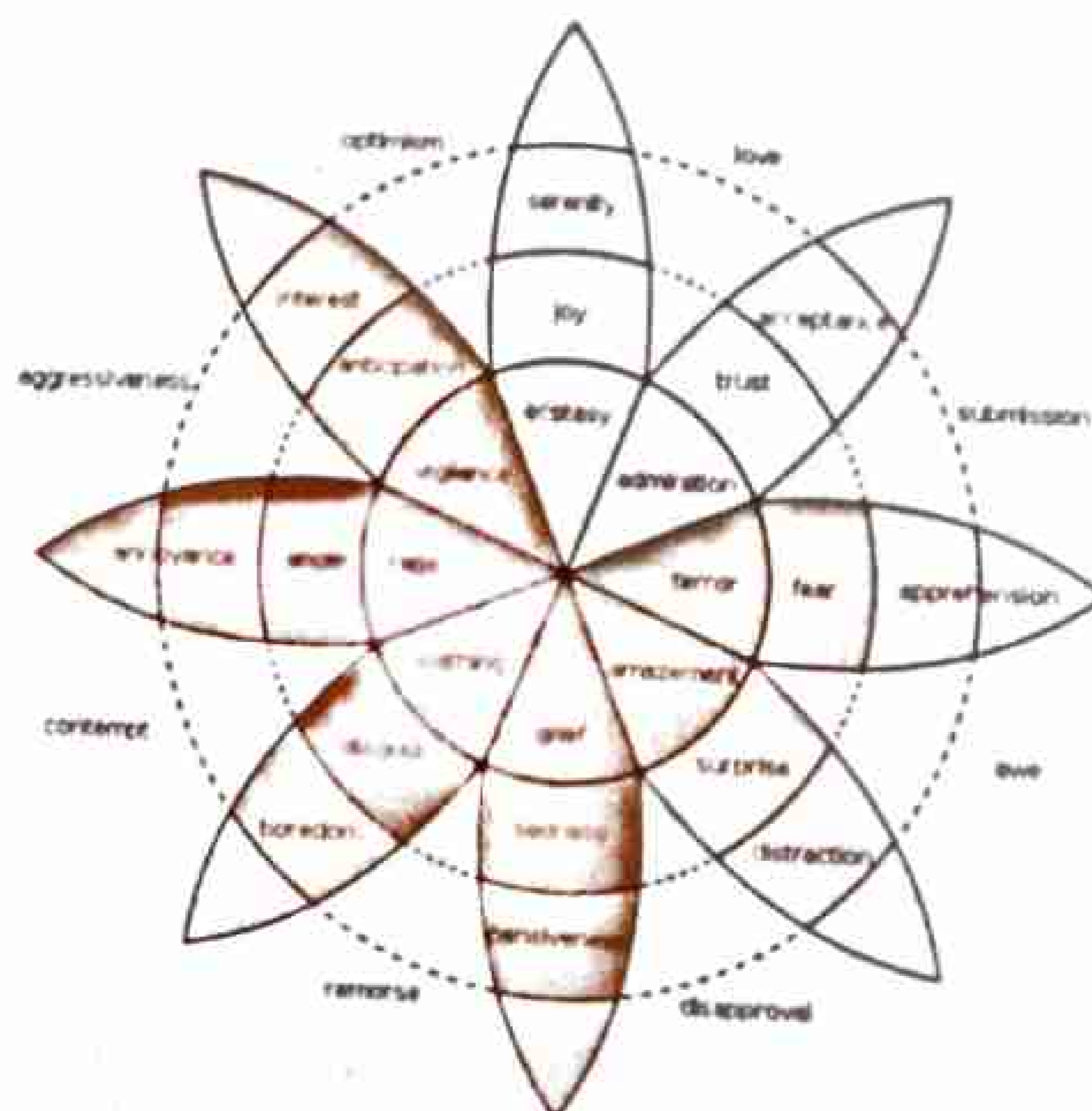
2.7 Gratitude Journaling

One of the most popular and seemingly effective methods to reduce stress is gratitude journaling. This simple strategy involves writing down the things for which we are thankful. When we are faced with adversity, we tend to forget that life has given us good things too. Writing these down forces us to pay attention and appreciate our blessings. A gratitude journal may be written daily or at regular intervals. Along with noting down persons, happenings, things, abilities, and so on that you are grateful for, it is beneficial to make a conscious decision to be happier and less stressed.

2.8 Emotions

Emotions are defined as strong feelings that are often beyond reasoning or knowledge, stemming from one's circumstances, mood, or interpersonal relationships. Emotions are generated by specific chemical activity in our nervous system. Emotions result in psychological and physiological changes that affect our behavior.

The various emotions that we experience are depicted in the emotion wheel given below:



Recognising and Managing Emotions

Once we understand that we are all subject to emotions, the next step is to identify and understand these emotions by asking yourself conscious questions such as

- What am I feeling now?
- What are my senses telling me?
- What is it that I want?
- What judgments or conclusions have I made (and are they accurate)?
- What is this emotion trying to tell me?

In addition, the feelings and emotions of other people should also be considered. You may ask yourself

- How do others feel, and how do I know?

The answers will help us use our emotions positively rather than get carried away. In addition to our words, physiological (body) reactions give indications regarding your emotional state. Nonverbal clues also help identify emotional states to a large extent, as approximately 80 percent of communication is nonverbal.

2.9 Managing Emotions

Emotions are potent forces that can work for or against you. Understanding your emotions correctly is the first step in ensuring that they work for, rather than against, you. For instance, if you identify that you are feeling sad, you can actively take steps to make yourself happier. Identifying other emotions like anger or disappointment may also help in guarding yourself and others against any possible harm.

For example, imagine a situation where one of your friends carelessly tosses away a project idea that you have researched carefully and makes an insulting comment. Your feelings are hurt. Your heart rate increases, muscles stiffen. You feel like yelling at him – causing trouble in the class and probably losing his friendship. A better solution would be to suppress your outburst by actively managing your emotion, respectfully disagreeing with him, and later finding a safe outlet for your hurt.

An emotionally intelligent response would be as follows:

- First, from physiological signs, recognize that you are feeling anger.
- Next, by thinking about your goals with regard to your relationship with your friend (e.g. to maintain a healthy friendship). Although giving your friend a piece of your angry mind would make you feel better in the short term, doing so could ultimately create serious problems.
- Later, after the meeting is done, you can think about ways to handle your friend's tendency to put you down. You may ask other people for opinion. Alternatively, a private conversation with your friend might result in successful resolution of the problem. By actively managing your emotions,

you are taking steps towards becoming more emotionally resilient. You are also taking steps to avoid pitfalls and problems that strong emotions would otherwise push you towards.

Active management of emotions help in becoming more emotionally stable, as well as avoid the pitfalls and problems that strong emotions would push you towards.

2.10 Harmful ways of dealing with emotions

Dealing with negative emotions like fear, sadness, and anger are unavoidable and it is necessary to deal with them. Even though it is tempting to act on those emotions straightaway although this will, likely, not solve the problem.

Some of the harmful ways that people deal with negative emotions:

Denial

When a person refuses to accept that anything is wrong or that help may be needed, they are said to be in denial. Denial often leads to the bottling up of problematic feelings that, beyond a certain point, may cause the person to “explode” or act out in a harmful way.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal is when a person wants to spend time alone and does not want to participate in activities with other people. Some people may withdraw because being around others takes too much energy, or they feel overwhelmed. They may also avoid company because they feel they are disliked or if they have behaviors that they believe others will disapprove of. However, the harmful effects of withdrawal may include extreme loneliness, misunderstanding, anger, and distorted thinking. Interaction with other people is very important to keep us balanced.

Bullying

Using force, threats, or ridicule to exert power over others is known as bullying. Bullies, counterintuitively, feel inferior and try to gain self esteem by making others feel bad.

Self-harm

Self-harm includes errant behavior like cutting, abnormal eating habits, or engaging in undue risks. Self-harm is often used as a temporary means of relieving emotional pain. Such behavior is dangerous and can become addictive, giving rise to more out of control behavior and greater pain.

Substance abuse

Substance use means using alcohol or other drugs to become numb about painful situations. However, alcohol and drug use can damage the brain, requiring higher amounts of substances to get the same effect. This can lead to addiction and more serious complications like suicidal thoughts.

2.11 PATH Method of Emotion Management

PATH stands for:

- Pause
- Acknowledge
- Think
- Help

Step 1: Pause.

Acting on feelings right away is not always advisable. Take a break from the situation so that you may take appropriate action

Step 2: Acknowledge what you are feeling.

Do not deny your feelings. Understand that they are legitimate

Step 3: Think.

Now that you have clarity on what is happening, think what you can do to improve the situation

Step 4: Help.

Based on the thoughts in the previous step take action to help yourself.

2.12 Relaxation Techniques

The following relaxation techniques are helpful to manage emotions.

1. Breath focus.
 - take long, slow, deep breaths
 - gently remove your mind from distracting thoughts and feelings.
2. Body scan.
 - Breathe deeply for a few minutes
 - focus on one part of the body or group of muscles at a time
 - mentally release any physical tension you feel
3. Guided imagery.
 - imagine soothing scenes, places, or experiences in your mind
 - helps you relax and focus.
4. Mindfulness meditation.
 - sit comfortably
 - focus on your breathing

- bring your attention to the present moment
5. Repetitive prayer.
 6. silently while practicing breath focus.

Activity 2.12.1 The Raisin Exercise

Take a raisin. Pretend that you have never seen a raisin before. Pay careful attention to:

- The way the raisin looks;
- How it feels;
- How your skin responds when you handle it;
- Its smell;
- Its taste.

This is an exercise in mindfulness that you can do easily. When you follow these instructions and take notice, it is much easier to focus on what is in front of you. If your mind does wander, that is natural too. Gently guide it back to the exercise.

Activity 2.12.2 Five Senses Exercise

This exercise helps practice mindfulness in any situation. All that is needed is to notice something you are experiencing with each of the five senses.

Follow this order to practice the Five Senses Exercise:

Notice five things that you can see.

Look around you and bring your attention to five things that you can see. Pick something that you don't normally notice, like a shadow or a small crack in the concrete.

Notice four things that you can feel.

Bring awareness to four things that you are currently feeling, like the texture of your pants, the feeling of the breeze on your skin, or the smooth surface of a table you are resting your hands on.

Notice three things you can hear.

Take a moment to listen, and note three things that you hear in the background. This can be the chirp of a bird, the hum of the refrigerator, or the faint sounds of traffic from a nearby road.

Notice two things you can smell.

Bring your awareness to smells that you usually filter out, whether they're pleasant or unpleasant. Perhaps the breeze is carrying a whiff of pine trees if you're

outside, or the smell of a fast food restaurant across the street.

Notice one thing you can taste.

Focus on one thing that you can taste right now, at this moment. You can take a sip of a drink, chew a piece of gum, eat something, notice the current taste in your mouth, or even open your mouth to search the air for a taste.

This is a quick and relatively easy exercise to bring you to a mindful state quickly.

Review Questions

1. Define self awareness.
2. Explain how journaling can enhance self-awareness.
3. Why is self-awareness important?
4. What are psychometric tests? Give some examples.