

Stress and PBS

Most people with PBS recognise that symptoms can worsen during times of stress. We can't necessarily control the causes of stress but we can control the effect it has on our bodies and minds.

COPING WITH STRESS, by Mike McKinney (Clinical Psychologist)

Ong, Lindon and Young (2004) have recently completed a review of academic papers related to stress management. They found that the majority of studies endorsed either a cognitive-behavioural (CBT) approach to *coping skills* training or an approach that emphasised *relaxation* (including imagery or meditation). Some examples of CBT approaches identified were: emotion and problem focused strategies, self-monitoring of stress intensity, thought record keeping, thought stopping techniques, cognitive reappraisal, time management and also assertiveness training. Some examples of relaxation approaches identified were: progressive muscle relaxation techniques, diaphragmatic breathing and autogenic training. In addition to the above skills, some authors also promoted making changes to the external, social, environmental or political factors that can contribute to stress. The latter approach may also involve modifying family dynamics and personal relationships that can cause or exacerbate stress.

SOME OPTIONS FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

Clarify for yourself which events, situations or emotions are provoking the stressful responses. Once you begin to monitor them, you may find there are patterns and repeated situations in which you find yourself anxious and tense.

Try and identify the small changes within you that herald a reaction to the situation. The earlier you perceive these changes in your own emotional state (and your muscles), the better you can use techniques to manage the situation. Once your stress levels go beyond a certain point, your techniques are much less powerful.

Start pacing your activities at work *and* at home. This is so you can achieve a sense of control, and minimise build-up of tension. It is also important to allow yourself to have breaks when doing your activities.

Inhibit the stress response. Just as the nervous system is geared to mobilize a stress response, it can also organise an opposite relaxation response. The specific relaxation or distraction technique you choose is not as important as the principles involved. The aim is to reduce various signs of physiological and cognitive (within your mind) arousal. Relaxation-type approaches are helpful, as they influence both physical and psychological mechanisms promoting and/or maintaining stress. The skill offers you an active way of exerting some control on a situation that was felt to be out of your control. Thus, you are actually minimising the

stress response. This is often more profitable than trying to simply minimise exposure to stressful situations. The key of course is in knowing how to use this skill effectively and in identifying the situations where you need it. A regular time to use relaxation and/or calming imagery, will be of great use in dampening the pain and your reactions to the stressful events.