

Taking Care of You: Self-Care for Community Health Workers

Your 5-year-old daughter Vicky is sick and crying. You have to get to work and your mom is running late in order to take care of the kids; the kitchen sink is leaking; and now Vicky's school is calling. You feel like there's a knot in the pit of your stomach, your heart seems to be beating out of your chest, and that headache is starting up again as you dig through your purse to find your ringing cell phone. These are all examples of daily stressors and the sorts of stress reactions that we all experience on a daily basis.



As human beings we have a built-in stress response to help us stay out of danger. Imagine being chased! Your body revs up its engines to run fast to get out of harm's way. People also feel a similar "charged up" response when they experience something positive in their lives – like winning the lottery, getting a promotion, accepting an award, etc. Your body responds to situations when it detects potential danger and helps you to address this danger head on with an army of

responses that kick in to protect you. Unfortunately, in our modern world, these responses might be more than we really want or need. In fact, these responses often get in the way of living a full and meaningful life. Stressful events (good and bad) are unavoidable; however, you can stay ahead of the impact of these stressful situations by learning how to take better care of yourself.

Stress affects our health, thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

When left unchecked, stress contributes to diseases such as high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity and diabetes. Self-care—taking care of your own physical, mental and spiritual needs—is important for keeping yourself healthy. It involves eating well, exercising, and staying positive.

Practicing self-care will help you protect yourself from the effects of daily stress.

In this article, we will look at the effects of uncontrolled stress and present the dos and don'ts of stress management. We sat down with Rasheeda Jamison, MPH, Program Support Specialist of Clinical & Community Health Programs at Rutgers School of Nursing, to get her take on stress and hear about her recommendations for stress management.

“Everyone sometimes feels anxious or stressed. You are not crazy to feel these emotions. There's not a person on this planet that doesn't feel stress at times. Feeling stressed out doesn't mean something is wrong with your head – it means you are human. We all need help getting the right balance in our lives.”

—Rasheeda Jamison

Common Effects of Stress

You may be surprised by the many affects that stress has on people. See the table below for examples of how

stress affects our physical health, our feelings and even our behavior.

EFFECTS OF STRESS: BODY, MOOD, BEHAVIOR

On your body	On your mood	On your behavior
• Headache	• Anxiety	• Over- or undereating
• Muscle tension or pain	• Restlessness	• Angry outbursts
• Chest pain	• Lack of motivation or focus	• Drug or alcohol abuse
• Fatigue	• Irritability or anger	• Tobacco use
• Change in sex drive	• Sadness or depression	• Social withdrawal
• Stomach upset		
• Sleep problems		

—Mayo Clinic Website, 2015

Unhealthy Ways of Dealing with Stress

Unfortunately, many people cope with stress in ways that make their problems worse. Certain stress coping strategies make you feel better for a short while, but in the long run, they

will become harmful. Read the list below. *How might these actions make your situation worse down the road?*

UNHEALTHY WAYS OF DEALING WITH STRESS

On your body	On your mood	On your behavior
• Using pills or drugs to relax	• Binging on junk or comfort food	• Smoking
• Sleeping too much	• Procrastinating	• Lashing out (angry outbursts)
• Zoning out for hours in front of the TV	• Being busy all the time	

Appropriate Strategies for Coping with Stress

Although you cannot always change your life circumstances, you can take charge of your lifestyle, thoughts, and the way you deal with problems. By taking good care of yourself, you

can reduce the harmful effects of stress. Let's look at some positive strategies to help you take better care of yourself and your family.

STRATEGY 1 GET MOVING

You don't have to run a marathon or go to the gym to experience the benefits of exercise. Exercise releases chemicals that relieve stress, boost our mood, and make us feel happy and relaxed. Regular physical activity also helps prevent a wide range of health problems that commonly occur in African American women, including stroke, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and depression. Regular physical activity raises the level of

brain chemicals that control mood and affect anxiety and depression. Many studies show that all types of physical activity, including walking, yoga, and Tai Chi, help reduce anxiety. Aim for at least 30 minutes of physical activity five times a week. Walking is a great exercise—all you need are a pair of good shoes (or umbrella when it rains). On weekends, get your kids to join you.

“It is important to find a physical activity you like—whether it's skating, bowling, walking or biking. Do physical activity alone (for a little “me time”) or with family members and friends. The most important thing is to find a routine and stick to it.”

—Rasheeda Jamison

WHAT EXERCISE CAN YOU COMMIT TO?

STRATEGY 2 EAT HEALTHY

When we are feeling stressed, we often turn to “comfort” food such as burgers, fries, doughnuts, fried chicken, and ice cream. In addition, many of us are so tired at the end of the day, that instead of cooking a meal, we pick up fast food and sit in front of the TV while eating.

One way to eat better is to make cooking a family affair. Plan at least one night a week for a healthy sit-down meal with your family. This is a good time to check in with each other. Turn off the television and put cell phones away.

SOME FOOD TIPS

The federal dietary guidelines advise people to make these foods and beverages part of their meals:

- Fruits and vegetables
- Seafood, lean meats and poultry, eggs, beans, and unsalted nuts and seeds
- Fat-free or low-fat milk and dairy products, including fortified soy beverages
- Whole grains like oatmeal, whole-wheat bread, and brown rice

The federal dietary guidelines advise people to make these foods and beverages part of their meals:

- Cover half of your plate with fruits and veggies and choose high-fiber foods like beans and whole-grain breads and cereals. Fruits and veggies may be fresh, canned in 100 percent fruit juice, frozen, or dried, and may be whole, cut up, or pureed. Look for low- or no-salt options when buying canned or frozen veggies.
- Choose a healthy option like salad topped with grilled chicken (not fried) or ask for a side of steamed veggies instead of fries when you eat away from home.
- Choose water, fat-free milk, or sugar-free coffee or tea rather than sugary beverages.

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease

WHAT HEALTHY FOODS CAN YOU TRY?

STRATEGY 3 PRACTICE POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Positive self-talk means trying to stay positive even when things aren't going great. Learning to think positively helps you feel calmer and relaxed. Being positive means hoping for the best, instead of focusing on everything that is wrong. When your thinking is negative and getting you down, make an effort to change your thinking to be more positive. If you notice yourself having negative thoughts, like "I am not good

enough," replace them with positive ones, "I am good enough." Some people find it helpful to write positive statements on sticky notes and place them around the house - on the refrigerator, the bathroom mirror or even your bedroom wall. See below for examples of the kind of positive self-talk that is sure to boost your mood.

PRACTICE POSITIVE SELF-TALK

Instead of saying this to yourself	Say this
I am so dumb; I was always bad in school	It may take me a little longer than others, but I always figure things out
Nothing ever goes my way	I have many wonderful things in my life for which I am grateful
I never get what I want	I often get what I want
Everything is going wrong	Things always work out for the best
I'll never have enough money to rent a decent apartment	I will figure out a way to get a nicer apartment
I hate myself for letting this happen	Just because this didn't work out, doesn't mean it's the end of the world

WHAT IS POSITIVE STATEMENT YOU CAN TELL YOURSELF?

STRATEGY 4 DO THINGS YOU ENJOY

Doing something you enjoy also takes your mind off yourself and helps improve your mood. And when you find something you enjoy, it sets a good example for your children. For example, listening to your favorite music may help you to

relax. Instead of doing unhealthy things like eating junk food or smoking, try doing something positive for yourself every day. *Here is a list of simple, but enjoyable, things that can offer a temporary escape from your worries and cares.*

ENJOYABLE ACTIVITIES

Listen to your favorite music on the radio or iPod	Schedule a weekly dinner date
Sew, knit, crochet, make a scrapbook, frame a photo, or do a project	Meditate
Have coffee or a meal with a friend	Rent a video
Put on some music and dance	Take a short nap
Join a club that meets weekly	Go to the library
Read a book or magazine	Play cards, bingo, or a board game with family or friends
Clean out a closet, drawer, or take on the house	Read a cookbook and plan a nice meal

WHAT WORKS FOR YOU?

STRATEGY 5 GROW YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK

We all need friends—someone we can confide in about our daily ups and downs. Opening up to someone does not mean you are weak. Of course, you will want to confide in someone you know you can trust.

Surrounding yourself with positive people is one of the best ways to take care of yourself. Good friends make us feel safe, secure and understood. Reach out to family and friends and connect regularly in person.

“If someone is always negative, it may be time to form new friendships. A friend who puts you down, criticizes you, or doesn’t keep your secrets isn’t worth the effort.”

—Rasheeda Jamison

“Remember: people just want to be heard, you don’t always have to give advice.”

—Sherrie Gartrell (CHW)

THINK ABOUT A PERSON THAT YOU FEEL THAT YOU CAN DEPEND ON? WHAT ARE THAT PERSON’S SPECIAL QUALITIES? WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU CONNECTED WITH THIS SPECIAL PERSON?

STRATEGY 6 DEEPEN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

Spirituality is about connecting with your faith, finding a higher purpose, and feeling that your life has meaning.

Many people find that an attitude of gratitude helps them stay positive and open to life's joyful experiences. You may find it useful to keep a notebook, or a gratitude journal, where you can jot down what you are grateful for every day. Some people like to send inspirational text messages to their friends and also to receive them. These messages can often give us hope and lift our spirits when we are feeling down.

Other people find that thinking quietly and deeply about something, meditating, breathing rhythmically, or saying a prayer helps them to relax and connect with what's really important in life. When we meditate, we try to empty our minds of negative self-talk. Daily meditation practice is a great way to find peace and contentment as well as reduce stress. Studies show meditation may improve anxiety. Regular meditation may help by boosting activity in the area of your brain that is responsible for feelings of serenity and joy.

“A lot of times I like to block out all the negative chatter by closing my eyes to meditate and I feel calmness afterwards.” —Michelle Harrison (CHW)

A SIMPLE WAY TO MEDITATE

- Sit comfortably in quiet place of your choice.
- Close your eyes.
- Find your comfort zone.
- Picture yourself in a peaceful place. Hold this scene in your mind.
- Focus on breathing slowly and deeply. Pay attention as your breath goes in and out.
- Your mind WILL wander. When you notice that your mind has wandered, come back again to your breathing.
- Continue to breathe slowly for 10 minutes or more.
- When you are done, you should feel more relaxed, which is good for your mind body and soul.
- Remember, it takes some practice to meditate.

WHAT STEPS WILL YOU TAKE TO DEEPEN YOUR ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE?

STRATEGY 7 TAKE A TRIP WITH YOUR KIDS

You want your kids to be safe, but keeping them inside the house with nothing to do all day can be stressful. Take advantage of all the wonderful family activities that Newark and

other large cities have to offer. Many of these activities are a short bus ride away. Spending time together on weekends can renew your spirits and expose your kids to new experiences.

Family activities include:

- Baking cookies;
- Painting or making holiday decorations;
- Going to recreational centers;
- Going to the movies

THINK ABOUT AN ACTIVITY THAT YOU MAY WANT TO TRY WITH YOUR FAMILY. WHAT IS STOPPING YOU FROM DOING THIS?

Additional Resources:

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