

helping others manage stress

Jerry W. Robinson, Jr.

This article provides a framework you can use to help others manage stress.¹ However, it's not easy, especially if you're experiencing stress yourself and if you're managing it ineffectively. Also, sometimes we are sources of stress. So, what can we do to help others?

Recognizing Symptoms of Stress

In your work with other people, much can be gained if you're able to recognize certain behaviors as symptoms of stress. As indicated in Table 1, there are many responses to stress. Not everyone reacts the same to any stressor. If you're able to recognize emotions, aggression, and withdrawal as symptoms of stress, you can react to these conditions with more understanding. Instead of merely reacting with disapproval or punishment, you can try to alleviate the feelings of stress to help the other person deal with the pressure. You can help the person see that stress is a response, not a stimulus.

Helping Process

How do we help others adapt to a stress-generating situation? If you're able to recognize when a person is under stress and that he/she is having difficulty adapting to it, you've already taken an important step. But mere recognition isn't enough . . . you need specific skills to help others cope with stress. Four steps can be used to do this: (1) encourage the expression of feelings, (2) identify the source of stress, (3) relieve pressures, and (4) facilitate adaptation.

For each step, we'll emphasize facilitating and compounding behaviors that a potential helper can use. Facilitating behaviors are those "warm fuzzies" that help the other person deal with stress effectively. Compounding behaviors are those "cold pricklies" that add to the stress. Specific behavioral skills for each step are reviewed and examples are given.

Jerry W. Robinson, Jr.: Professor of Sociology and Rural Sociology, Departments of Sociology and Agricultural Economics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Accepted for publication: December, 1979.

Table 1. Common signs and symptoms of stress and depression.

<u>EMOTIONAL CHANGES</u>	<u>BEHAVIORAL CHANGES</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Sadness	<input type="checkbox"/> Crying
<input type="checkbox"/> Guilt	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawal
<input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety	<input type="checkbox"/> Retardation
<input type="checkbox"/> Anger	<input type="checkbox"/> Agitation
<input type="checkbox"/> Daily mood variation	<input type="checkbox"/> Hallucination

<u>COGNITIVE CHANGES</u>	<u>PHYSICAL CHANGES</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Negative self-concept	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sleep disorder
<input type="checkbox"/> Negative view of world	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pupils dilate
<input type="checkbox"/> Negative expectations of future	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Eating disorder
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-blame	<input type="checkbox"/> Constipation or nervous diarrhea
<input type="checkbox"/> Indecisiveness	<input type="checkbox"/> Menstrual irregularity
<input type="checkbox"/> Helplessness	<input type="checkbox"/> Impotence/frigidity
<input type="checkbox"/> Hopelessness	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Cold sweat
<input type="checkbox"/> Worthlessness	<input type="checkbox"/> Weight loss
<input type="checkbox"/> Delusions (of guilt, sin, worthlessness)	<input type="checkbox"/> Weakness, nausea
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Shortness of breath
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Easy fatigability
	<input type="checkbox"/> Pain, unexplained origin
	<input type="checkbox"/> Diminished sexual drive

Generally, we can say that facilitating behaviors are those that communicate an understanding and acceptance of the person and the problem. Unfortunately, being accepting and understanding isn't always as easy as it sounds. Very often, others' problems remind us of our own experiences of which we would rather not be reminded.

Listening to someone under stress often makes us feel uncomfortable. So we react by being critical, minimizing the problem, or just telling the person that things will be all right. In fact, what someone under stress really needs is to have the problem taken seriously. He/she needs someone who's willing to empathize with personal feelings of pain and worry. This means that you can't effectively help others without sharing, to some extent, in their discomfort.

Creating unconscious barriers against others' problems isn't the only source of compounding behavior. Another mistake that you may make is to assume that people expect you to create a solution to their problems. However, what many really hope to find is a sounding board for their feelings and their own ideas, rather than ready-made solutions.

Most people are quite capable of solving their own problems if given the chance to "try out" different alternatives and ideas. Talking about one's worries allows a person to gain a little distance from personal problems, and thus to become more objective about the situation. This, in turn, will facilitate the process of problem solving and adaptation.

Now, let's discuss the four steps in helping others manage stress.

*Step 1:
Expressing
Feelings*

When a person is under stress, it's important to give him/her an immediate opportunity to expend his/her stress energy. You can relieve some of the stress by encouraging that person to express his/her feelings. This means that you allow the person to talk, to be angry, or to cry. Usually this will reduce the feelings of stress temporarily, allowing him/her to look at the situation a little more objectively. This "venting" will facilitate more effective problem solving.

How can you avoid building barriers, though, that make it difficult for others to express themselves? Most people, when talking to someone under stress, like to take a "rational" approach to the problem: they question, analyze, and advise, and tend to focus on the facts. Professional counselors have found, however, that they tend to be much more effective in helping a person cope with stress, if *they focus on feelings rather than on facts*. You can concentrate on a person's feelings by reflecting back the "feeling content" of a person's words. This technique is especially useful when it's important for the other person to release personal feelings.

On the other hand, judging, punishing, or ignoring feelings can only create an unhealthy stress build-up. If you're able to let the other person know that you want to understand and to emphasize, he/she will feel more secure about opening up and talking about the stress.² Specific behaviors that will facilitate the expression of feelings and behaviors that will compound stress are shown in Table 2.

*Step 2:
Identifying
Stress Sources*

Usually, the source of stress will become clear when the person talks about feelings. No probing is necessary under these circumstances. Sometimes, however, the person's expressed source of stress is only "the top of the iceberg." Especially when a small incident triggers an unexpectedly strong reaction, it becomes important to check the possibility of something else bothering him/her, beyond what has been expressed. Frustrations may have been building up for some time, perhaps only now being expressed. But without encour-

Table 2. Encouraging the expression of feelings.

FACILITATING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Short, neutral statements or questions that acknowledge the other's feelings.	"Sure I understand." "I know that." "What's the matter?"
Reflecting the feeling content of a person's words or actions (decoding).	When someone slams the door: "You're really angry." "You're angry at me for asking you that." "You're worried about not getting done."
Relieving feelings of guilt or inadequacy.	"We all have trouble with our work at times." "It could have happened to anybody." "Don't feel bad about it."
COMPOUNDING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Making judgments.	"You're too emotional." "You're too sensitive." "You're immature."
Defending oneself.	"It's not my fault that you're in such a mess." "I haven't been putting pressure on you."
Giving advice.	"Organize your work better and you won't get so behind again." "Go see a doctor if you're tired." "Talk to your brother rather than to me."

agement, a person may still be hesitant to discuss the real sources of frustration.

If you want to find out the real source of a person's stress, it's important to ask neutral, open-ended questions that stimulate conversation. If you ask specific or "loaded" questions, you may never get to the source. In this phase, it's also important to communicate an acceptance of what the person is saying. If you judge a person or make one feel ashamed of his/her stressful condition, you'll only compound the problem. Specific behaviors that help identify the source of stress and those that compound stress are given in Table 3.

Step 3: If the source of stress is something that can be controlled, we should try to reduce the pressure on the person. For example, if the stress-producing situation is related to work,

Relieving Pressure

Table 3. Identifying stress sources.

FACILITATING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Asking neutral, open-ended questions.	"What exactly are you worried about?" "Is there something else that is bothering you?" "What annoys you so much about that?"
Communicating understanding.	"I can see why that would bother you." "I understand your feelings." "I've felt that way sometimes."
Testing reality.	"What are the odds that that might happen?" "What would be the consequences, if it happened?" "Will it really be as bad as you think it will?"
COMPOUNDING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Judging and blaming.	"It's silly to worry about that." "Why do you get so upset about a small thing like that?" "You know it's all your own fault, don't you?"
Asking specific or loaded questions.	"Is it your job you're worried about?" "Are you too scared to say something to your client?" "Why do you always hang around with such irresponsible friends?"
Invalidating fear.	"That's unrealistic." "You know that would never happen." "There's no reason to feel that way."
Making unfavorable comparisons.	"That happened to my father once and it did not bother him one bit." "That certainly would not bother most people."

the stress can be reduced by giving more time or less to do. But even if the stress isn't related to work and stems from a situation at home, you can sometimes relieve the pressure if you're willing to be flexible, supportive, and understanding. Ways to relieve pressure or to compound it are listed in Table 4.

*Step 4:
Facilitating
Adaptation*

If no control over a person's problem is possible, you can still be helpful by facilitating the process of adaptation. Adaptation can take place in different ways by: taking

Table 4. Relieving pressure.

FACILITATING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Reducing work pressures.	Decrease a person's work load. Make fewer demands in other areas. Talk to others who have been applying pressure.
Modifying environment.	Reduce noise level. Do something about heating, cooling.
Giving support.	Stop criticizing. Reinforce good points. Praise work. Arrange a more flexible time schedule.
COMPOUNDING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Failing to act.	Not keeping promises. Forgetting to talk to others. Failing to alleviate mental strain.
Adding responsibility.	Giving more work. Adding other responsibilities. Increasing psychological pressures.

action, redefining the situation, and finding temporary outlets. This means that you can help a person by exploring the situation and helping him/her find ways to adapt.

Often, when a person has been allowed some relief from immediate pressures by expressing deep feelings, he/she may have a better idea about what to do to help. Or the person may spontaneously develop more of a philosophical attitude, accepting the situation for what it is and trying to live with it.

When you work closely with people, it's important you recognize behavior problems as symptoms of stress and react to them appropriately. If you're able to communicate your understanding and empathy for a person's state of stress, you can be helpful in facilitating effective adaptation to it. . . .

Adaptation, however, doesn't come spontaneously. Some exploration of the problem is usually necessary. In that case, it's important to leave the initiative up to the person with the problem, so he/she doesn't feel pressured into a decision that's not his/her own. You can be most

helpful by suggesting possible alternatives that haven't yet been explored and by asking open-ended questions that focus on personal problems and feelings.³ Taking the lead in such an exploration by advocating your own views will only compound the stress. Examples of facilitating and compounding behaviors are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Facilitating adaptation.

FACILITATING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Letting the other person take the lead.	Asking open-ended questions. Encouraging a person to go on. Asking for his/her ideas and suggestions.
Suggesting possible alternatives.	"Have you thought of . . . ?" "You might want to consider" "Maybe you could"
Giving information and reinforcement.	Give own information. Refer to an expert or library, specific books, or source materials.
COMPOUNDING BEHAVIOR STYLES	BEHAVIOR BITS
Taking the lead in the exploration.	Doing all the talking. Coming up with all the alternatives. Limiting the discussion to one alternative.
Pushing own views.	"Now in my opinion, you ought to" "Now, listen to me" "I think you should definitely do that."
Information overload.	"Snow job." Ignore feelings. Logical arguments, rational discussion.

Summary

Practicing socially acceptable behavior is difficult for people when they're under stress. Their state of excess energy is uncomfortable, and the most natural response is to quickly expend the extra energy through aggressive behavior. If aggression is impossible because it's not socially acceptable, a person may choose to withdraw and slow down the creation of surplus energy. Aggression and withdrawal, however, don't attack the source of stress in a problem-solving manner, and both are usually considered unacceptable in our society.

When you work closely with people, it's important you recognize behavior problems as symptoms of stress and react

to them appropriately. If you're able to communicate your understanding and empathy for a person's state of stress, you can be helpful in facilitating effective adaptation to it. If you're judgmental or advance your own views, you'll only compound a person's stress, rather than relieve it. By practicing the skills presented in this article, you can become more effective at helping others manage stress. However, if you discover someone is under severe distress, you shouldn't hesitate to refer them to a professional counselor for help.

Footnotes

1. Adapted from Jerry W. Robinson, Jr., *Managing Stress and Conflict* (Arlington, Virginia: U.S., Department of State, Foreign Service Institute, 1980).
2. Carl R. Rogers, "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, XXI (1957), 95-103.
3. J. Rappaport, T. Gross, C. Lepper, "Modeling, Sensitivity Training, and Instruction: Implications for the Training of College Student Volunteers and for Outcome Research," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, XL (1973), 99-107.