

# idea corner

## Stress Management Workshops

Last year we completed a mail survey to determine stress experienced by a selected group of adult Californians. Names for this survey were drawn primarily from a Cooperative Extension mailing list. Sixty-three percent of the respondents were women, 37% men. Of the almost 2,000 respondents, 22% frequently reported being too tense. This degree of tension was reported by both men and women and people in all age and income groups.

In the stress survey, we asked respondents to indicate from a list of eight human relations topics<sup>1</sup> those subjects about which they'd like more education or training. The topic most frequently checked (34%) was "Handling Stress and Tension." Responses to this item weren't significantly related to respondent's age or sex, nor was there much difference between the responses of employed and unemployed women (.05 level of significance).

As a result of the survey, our human relations staff developed and led two-hour stress management workshops. To date, we've led 38 workshops for about 1,400 people in 15 different California counties. Most (63%) of these workshops were given to general audiences. Thirty-six percent were presented to Cooperative Extension or other agency employees at their place of employment.

The purposes of the workshops are to provide information on stress

and its effects, and to teach stress management skills. The program consists of three main parts:

1. Information about stress, its effects on the body, and principles of stress management. This is presented either by brief lecture or by a 15-minute slide-cassette program we developed.
2. Assessment by participants of their own level of stress. For this, we may use the Holmes and Rahe Life Stress Index<sup>2</sup> and/or one of several self-assessment forms we've developed.
3. Information and training on ways of managing stress—including ways of maintaining physical and psychological strength to reduce vulnerability to the damages of stress, ways of recognizing early warning signs of stress, and techniques to use when the stress cycle has started (breathing exercises, progressive relaxation, tension-reducing exercises, mind vacations, and the relaxation response).

At the end of each workshop, we asked participants to evaluate the usefulness of the session. Ninety percent reported they intended to use one or more of the stress management techniques taught in the session. An additional seven percent reported they "might" use the techniques. Participants were asked to indicate the techniques

they were most likely to use. The techniques most frequently checked were breathing and relaxation exercises.

How many people actually used the information from the workshop to improve their own stress management? To answer this question, we sent follow-up questionnaires to 180 people who'd participated in stress management workshops in the previous 19 months and had agreed to be contacted for follow-up evaluation.

Forty percent returned questionnaires, and of these respondents, 75% indicated they'd advantageously changed the way they managed their personal stress. Only 17% said they weren't using any stress management techniques taught in the workshop. The most common techniques being used were breathing and some tension-reducing physical exercises.

Seventy-four percent of the respondents reported making some post-session change in their environment to reduce stress. Eighty-three percent reported they had "looked for ways to limit stresses on me from others" to help manage their own stress more effectively.

Forty-six percent said they taught stress management to others, mostly spouses and children. Thirty-three percent of the respondents reported doing stress management with others, usually with family members.

Our stress management workshop has been "packaged" so it can be led

by county Cooperative Extension home advisors and others who've received training in its use. The package consists of a 27-page leader's guide, a 15-minute slide-cassette presentation—"Coping with Stress," and a cassette of stress management maneuvers.

Home advisors in California have received training in teaching stress management and are beginning to lead workshops in their counties. We're working on developing an advanced stress workshop and a stress workshop series.

Our program isn't perfect. We constantly revise it. Nonetheless, we're convinced that, at least for California Cooperative Extension, stress management workshops can be a useful and viable part of our program.

#### *Footnotes*

1. Topics included: midlife/midcareer decision making, time management, personal growth and life planning, marital relations and family communication, handling depression, home management, parenting and child development, and handling stress and tension.
2. T. Holmes and R. Rahe, "The Social Readjustment Rating Scale," *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, XI (1967), 213-18.

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