

STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES (IDD)

Managing stress is a problem for all people as it can cause anxiety, headaches, and tension, to name just a few things. We also know that when stressed, we are less likely to handle difficult situations well. Think about the last time you had a bad day at work, were you pleasant when you got home? It is no different for many of the people we support. People with IDD, however, often have a much harder time with managing stress than other people. There are a few reasons for this. First, people with IDD often have more stressful lives than typical people. Second, people with IDD often don't have as many good things going on in their lives that would help them take their minds off of stressful things. Third, people with IDD haven't learned (or had the opportunity to learn) how to manage stress. These things all go together to say that people with IDD don't have as much "wellness" in their lives.

In this Tip Sheet, we will review some strategies that can be used to improve stress management among people with IDD. The purpose of teaching stress management is to support somebody in being calmer overall, and to build skills so that people can handle stressful events better when they do occur. Remember that life is stressful. For people with disabilities, and especially people who have challenging behaviors, we often try very hard to insulate people from any and all stressors. That can be very difficult, though, and even when we are successful in doing that, it results in people only having a small world where they can be successful. The long-term goal is to have people be able to do well in the most typical environments.

One of the keys to teaching Stress Management is to teach people how to relax. Many people quite simply don't know how to relax, or may only have one strategy to relax, which may not work in all circumstances. Stress Management is a crucial piece of promoting mental wellness – please also refer to the Tip Sheet we developed regarding mental wellness; the online link to it is at the end.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF STRESS?

Stress can make it tougher for a person to handle things. How do you know when somebody is stressed? Reactions to stress are different for each individual, and may look different for people with IDD. Look for a different reaction to a common issue or changes in patterns of behavior. Ask the person how they feel, and teach people to recognize when they are feeling stress. Find out what is normal for that person. Out of the ordinary events are stressful for anyone!

HOW TO TEACH LEARNERS WITH IDD

General teaching tips: Everybody has a different way that they learn best. Always see if you can figure out how a person learns best before starting to teach. One trick is to teach the person a simple, fun thing (like making a paper airplane), and see if they learn by watching, listening, or by trying it themselves. Demonstrating the skill first while the person watches is often a great strategy. Some people will learn better when you point out exactly what you are doing. Some people with IDD need to try things more times in the learning process than other people. Breaking the skills down into small steps is often needed.

Tips specific to Stress Management: When teaching or practicing Stress Management, always teach and practice during times when the person is not stressed out. Build the skill when the person is not stressed. Don't turn stress management into something that a person only does when they are angry. Teaching stress management must never turn into a power struggle with the person. Stop immediately if that happens. It is often best to model it yourself as you teach. This isn't just because it is an effective teaching strategy, but also because it makes Stress Management into something that we all have to do. Teaching Stress Management should not be handled in a manner as to make people feel like it is something they have to do because there is something "wrong" or "bad" about them.

RELAXATION STRATEGIES

What do you do to manage stress? Think of all of the different things you do. If you have trouble answering this, try some of these yourself. For people with IDD, it is safe to assume that

stress management will need some support and intervention from you. Help the person to identify healthy ways that they can relax, and support them so they can relax more. If people have difficulties with stress it helps to teach alternative responses and make a plan before stressful events happen. Recognize when the person makes a positive choice when they are stressed. Have staff model healthy stress management and practice with the person. Stress relief can benefit staff also!

DEEP BREATHING

Teach the person to take long, slow, deep breaths. Count to at least 5 for each in-breath and each out-breath. Generally, starting with demonstrations works well. Some people will raise their hand while breathing in, and lower the hand while breathing out. That visual often helps. Some people also point in or out of their mouths while deep breathing to help cue inhaling and exhaling. Even doing this for a few moments can really help a person to relax. It doesn't have to be for long times to work.

VISUAL MEDITATION

Find a picture of something that the person finds calming. Examples would be a picture of the person's favorite place, a picture of an animal, or a picture of a favorite thing. You also can find a picture with some motion in it, if that works better for the person, such as a fireplace video or a waterfall video. These can be found for free on video-streaming websites.

Create a brief routine with the person in which you talk about all of the things in that picture that are good. For example, with a picture of a cat, talk about all of the things that are loved about a cat. As you talk through the things that are loved, involve other senses as well. Continuing with the cat example, talk about hearing the cat purr or how good cats smell.



If the person doesn't have a favorite picture, try showing the person different pictures. Landscapes, especially traditional Asian landscape paintings are very calming. People also seem to like pictures that show water. Videos of waves can be pleasant, too.

LONG WALKS WHEN YOU TEACH DEEP BREATHING RELAXATION DURING WALKING TIME

Many people have a lot of nervous energy, and going for power walks can be really calming. Walking around an enclosed track or on a circular path can make this easier at times. This strategy is often of extra help for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Walk with the person, and while you are walking demonstrate for the person doing deep breathing, and tell the person what you are doing. You can encourage the person to deep breath with you as you walk. This works best when it is not described as exercise. Simply ask the person to go on a walk with you. Tell the person that the walking feels really good and is calming.

AQUATICS FOR PEOPLE WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

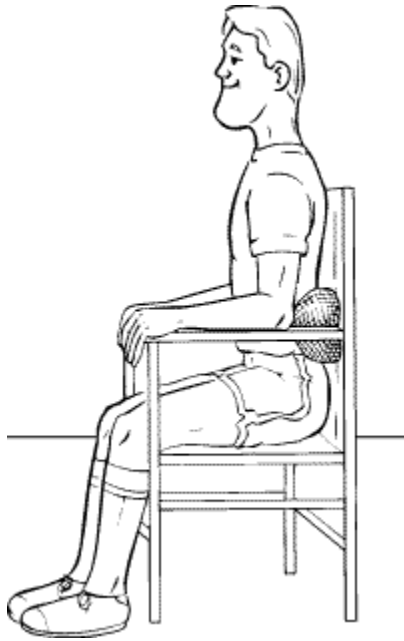
Many people with physical disabilities as well as IDD have never been in water. Aquatics can be an excellent part of a relaxation program. Many pools now have lifts to assist people with disabilities to get in and out of pools. Simply being in the water can be relaxing, but stretching in the water might be good as well.

LISTENING TO MUSIC

Many typical people find listening to music relaxing, and this can be true for people with IDD as well. Deliberately make times to do nothing but listen to music, as opposed to having music on in the background. Remember that different people find different kinds of music relaxing. Try different kinds of music. One particularly helpful thing about using music to help relax is that it helps distract people from things that they are worrying about.

SIMPLY ADOPT A RELAXED POSTURE

Teaching a person how to adopt a relaxed posture, as shown in this picture, can be an effective means of reducing stress. Key elements are: (1) feet on the floor, (2) knees at a 90-degree angle, (3) back straight, (4) shoulders straight to the side, (5) head balanced and pointed up. Sit across from the person, and adopt the posture yourself. Show the person exactly what you are doing. The exact posture can be modified if the person has physical challenges. These different strategies can be combined. For example, adopting a relaxed posture and listening to music can be done together.



PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

Tighten and release muscles one at a time, starting from toes and moving all the way up to the person's scalp. Only use the body parts that the person can understand. For example, if a person doesn't understand the concept of scalp muscles, stop with the face. Please note that this should not be used with somebody who has muscle spasticity (tightness) who might find releasing too difficult.

WHICH DO I PICK?

The easy answer is to try all of the ones that might help. You probably don't just have one thing you do to manage stress. This list just includes some of the simplest and most straightforward strategies. There are any number of options.

STEPS TO TAKE

1. Figure out how you will evaluate if your stress management program is working:
 - Figure out what you will track to tell if the program is working

- Does the person have less challenging behaviors or signs of stress?
 - Does the person like the stress management options offered?
2. Are the stress management options readily available?
- If the person has to ask for an item, it is not readily available
 - Provide more than one option for stress management at a time
 - If something did not work, try it again later. Preferences change.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STRESS MANAGEMENT

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/Coping-with-Stress-2013-508.pdf>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/node/93437>

<https://www.stress.org/management-tips/>

<http://www.apa.org/topics/stress/index.aspx>

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT AVAILABLE SUPPORTS IN MN

<https://mn.gov/disability-mn/>

<http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c36.pdf>

<https://www.minnesotahelp.info/>

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