

Stress Management Education: A Life Skills Approach For Health Promotion Professionals

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Article:

Introduction

Stress is an inevitable and necessary component of life--to a degree. Excessive stress can become a disease promoting agent and constitutes a major health concern today. While some stressors can be avoided and others need to be confronted, in the end, a good balance of stress in one's life can be healthy, and growth promoting in terms of one's physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.

Stress occurs through the life span of an individual. From birth to death numerous life stressors (events) occur affecting people in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity. Many of these stressful life events are analogous to one another and repeated throughout the life course. How one copes with such an event, regardless of the stage of development to a great extent, is determined by the coping repertoire developed from previous similar experiences. Likewise, future coping responses may be selected from a previously acquired coping repertoire associated with an analogous situation. For example, the death of a pet may be the first loss or death situation experienced by a child, thus, his or her coping responses may be very limited. This situation can provide a basis for the development of appropriate coping skills for future inevitable loss or death situations.

Stress coping strategies acquired through experience, vary individually, with some appropriate and successful, and others inappropriate and unsuccessful. Many of these coping strategies, however, are learned during the formative years of development. In essence, how appropriate an individual deals with stressful life events at various stages of development is determined, to a large extent, by what was learned and reinforced during previous developmental stages. It is necessary, then, that timely and effective stress management education be provided and continued during the early stages of development (childhood through adolescence) to insure positive coping responses as adults.

Life skills can be taught to assist individuals successfully deal with stressful life events, even before they occur. Successfully coping with stressful events at an early age can minimize the acquisition of unhealthy stress coping responses which could promote illness and disease. This paper will address the basic concept of life span intervention, discuss some life skills related to stress coping, and provide example points of intervention.

Life Span Intervention

The basic concept of the life span theory of human development is that development occurs during each stage of life (infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age), with specific incidents or critical tasks evolving within each phase. The theory also suggests that developmental change is not con-lined to any particular stage and that significant behavioral changes can be pervasive and rapid at all ages. With this in mind, the life span view of human development suggests that stress coping behaviors of all ages are the result of each person's developmental history. Therefore, the stress coping repertoire of an individual is based on what stress management techniques or coping skills have been developed throughout the life course.

Danish and D'Augelli (1980) advocate the use of life span intervention education to increase an individual's ability to deal constructively with stressful life events. Experience with similar life events, according to the same authors, increases one's competence and awareness to cope successfully with a wider range of

environmental and social demands. In essence, the nature of a life event may vary considerably from stage to stage, but the associated response repertoire (skills, emotional capabilities, and attitudes) necessary to appropriately deal with the event may overlap in terms of their usefulness. How we learn to adapt and cope with various incidents and events early in our development directly influence our positive adaptation to similar events at later stages. The goal of stress management life span intervention, then, is not to teach avoidance or total prevention of crisis, but rather to provide the students with relevant experiences to encourage the use of viable, constructive, coping alternatives.

Life Skills Related to Stress Management

A variety of planned activities that incorporate cognitive, affective, and behavioral components need to be tailored to provide students with techniques and coping skills to deal effectively with stressful life events prior to or concurrent with the onset of such experiences. Skills for handling real life situations (peer pressures, demands of job and school, injury or illness, death of loved ones, economic pressures, divorce, and others) need to be developed in a stress management education program to enhance the coping repertoire of the student. There are numerous strategies which can be used to enhance an individual's ability to cope with stressful life events and act as a buffer to the stress response (i.e., self-esteem, self-concept). However, this article will discuss the utilization of four life skills appropriate for stress coping intervention. These skills include values clarification, decision making, communication skills, and coping behaviors.

Values Clarification

Many stressful life events are value laden. For example, an unwanted pregnancy provides a situation in which several options are possibly available to those involved. Selection of the best alternative such as keeping the child, giving the child up for adoption, or abortion are all value laden solutions, and one must be selected. The decision process may be quite difficult due to the imposed values placed upon the involved persons by society, family, religion, etc. Those imposed values may not be the accepted values of those making the decision. Health educators need to strengthen values clarification skills by providing an atmosphere where an individual can assess opinions and beliefs on value laden issues such as an unwanted pregnancy and arrive at a personal position statement which will guide future actions.

Decision Making

Decision making, or the process of selecting an alternative, or course of action from two or more possible choices, is a crucial life skill to be developed by students. It has been suggested that individuals are more likely to be satisfied with their decision if they use such a process. Kime, Schlaadt, and Tritsch (1977) state that there are three basic assumptions related to the decision making process:

1. There is more than one alternative. If there is only one alternative, there is no need to use a decision-making model.
2. For decisions there are consequences. The consequences are the result of the outcomes of decisions and vary in complexity and severity.
3. For every decision, there is a degree of risk involved. The purpose of the decision-making process is to help individuals reduce the risk of making a bad decision.

Many stressful life events require the use of appropriate decision-making skills. Death situations (i.e., selection of a casket, writing a will, etc.), divorce or marital separation decisions (division of property, child custody, etc.), selection of a college or university and its associated lifestyle, and many others can produce an tremendous amount of stress. This stress perhaps can be lessened if skills are acquired in the process of effective decision-making.

Decision-making in many stress-filled situations can be a difficult task due to heightened emotion, extraneous influences, etc. It is, therefore, important that an individual have previous experience with decision-making related to other analogous life events of comparable intensity.

Communication Skills

Effective communication skills are a vital component in dealing with potentially stressful situations. Many life events are interpersonal in nature (making friends, dating, marriage, employment, education, etc.) and if effective communication skills are not developed, expression of personal feelings (i.e., interest, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, loneliness, frustration) cannot take place, thus, cultivating a potentially stressful environment.

Communication skills activities in the classroom or group setting can greatly enhance a "sharing" atmosphere, however, activities must be voluntary and students must be allowed to "pass" and not participate.

Coping Skills

Crowder (1983) suggested that the most important stress coping skills are physical exercise, proper diet, relaxation, and meditation, talking about one's problems, setting realistic goals, and self-responsibility. The health educator can provide a wide range of activities which focus on the development of any of the above mentioned coping skills to enhance the uniqueness and variety of stress management techniques available.

Behavior modification techniques may need to be introduced or incorporated into the coping skill development at this time. Inappropriate health behaviors in response to stressors may have been previously established by some students or clients at the time of intervention. If the ultimate goal of health education is to lead individuals toward desirable health behavior (i.e., positive stress coping) then desirable behaviors need to be reinforced and strengthened and undesirable behaviors weakened and removed. In essence, if positive stress coping skills are learned, practiced, and reinforced during the early years and likewise negative coping skills discouraged and unlearned, hopefully the acquired awareness and coping skill repertoire will carry over into succeeding life stages.

Table I provides some examples of stressful life events from across the life span. These represent potential points of intervention. Table I also highlights how the aforementioned life skills articulate with these sample life events.

Implications for Health Promotion Professionals

The health promotion milieu provides an excellent opportunity for intervention to help clients and students to develop life skills necessary to cope more effectively with stress and stressful life events. Table I highlights a variety of sample life events across the life span for which the health promotion professional could assist in the development of these coping skills.

The employment setting of the health promotion professional will determine the specific points of intervention. For example, school health educators and other school personnel can have significant impact on the students ability to cope with stressful life events. Hopefully, these skills will transfer to other current and future analogous life events. Also, as an example, health promotion professionals dealing with aged populations can help their clients develop the communication skills necessary to discuss their health related problems and concerns with their physician and health care providers.

Summary

The goal of stress management education is not to shelter clients/students from stressful situations, but to help them develop the ability to respond to stressful events in a positive, constructive way. Confrontation with stressful situations need to be encouraged rather than avoided.

Through the implementation of a comprehensive stress management education program (life skills approach) it is hoped that individuals will be more adept at coping and handling stressful life events, throughout the life span, due to practice and positive reinforcement of earlier, analogous stress related responses.

References

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Table I
Potential Stressful Life Events and Related Coping Skills
Life Skills

<u>Life Events</u>	<u>Value Clarification</u>	<u>Decision Making</u>	<u>Communication Skills</u>	<u>Coping Skills</u>
Death of a Pet (early childhood)	Discussion of positive aspects of the pet and whether the pet could be replaced by another might be appropriate here	Discussion of how the remains will be disposed can promote discussion of various burial methods and the pro's and con's of each	Communicating thoughts and feelings may help buffer the anxiety and depression assoc. with loss or death situations	Loss or death of a loved one can lead to the discovery of personal strengths & abilities. Developing hobbies or interests may circumvent the associated depression of loss or death situations
Unwanted Pregnancy (adolescence)	Discussion of viable alternatives and their implications for the teen mother, unborn child, family, society, etc. is necessary before the decision-making process takes place	Carefully evaluated decisions on pregnancy outcome (i.e., have the baby and keep it, adoption, abortion) need to be made as soon as possible. Selection of birth control methods is also appropriate here	Support from family, friends, health professionals, and counselors are needed for effectively dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. The Teen mother must know to whom and where to seek advice and assistance	The personal response to the pregnancy before and after the value clarification and decision making process should be examined in terms of the significance of this event in the individual's life
Divorce (middle adulthood)	The impact of this event on the couple and their family and friends needs to be assessed. Also, the role of religion, marital status, and social expectations in other settings outside the home	How one conducts his or her life after a divorce depends a great deal on the alternatives, consequences, and risks associated with role decisions, career options, future social relationships, and others	Involved individuals will need to assert themselves in a variety of new life exp; those perhaps once handled by the former spouse. Seeking support persons & friends were an inevitable part of the divorce process	Decreased self-esteem and self-concept are not uncommon in a divorce situation. Behaviors which enhance these perceptions will improve coping ability
Retirement (later adulthood)	Regarding retirement as a value issue may assist the retiree in selection of viable retirement options	The retiree must determine the pro's and con's and alternatives to retirement	Assertiveness skills will enhance autonomy for the retired individual	Retirement many times means role & responsibility changes the individual must cope with. Positive coping behaviors (i.e. hobbies, exercise, travel, etc) can enhance the retired years