Lesson 9: Unhealthy Coping

**Slide 1: Objectives**

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Discuss common unhealthy coping behaviors.
- Illustrate why these behaviors are not generally helpful in managing stress.
- Identify campus resources that may help address these unhelpful responses and assist students in fostering more helpful coping strategies.

**Slide 2: VIDEO: Unhealthy Coping**

What are some unhealthy ways of dealing with stress?

I used to cry a lot when I got stressed out. I’d just cry, was emotional, I just couldn’t handle anything, couldn’t, and that just made my work even more stressful.

Not using the mental health benefit center at the, at the university campus. They, they have pretty good resources there.

Not talking about it, just holding it in.

Video games. That can help, but if you're on there for three hours it's kinda not helping the situation.

Binge eating and smoking.

Yeah, smoking is a huge one.

Depending on how much stress, you know, the person’s going through and, you know, they might go to certain unhealthy foods to help make them feel better.

You definitely see the freshman fifteen around here this year.

Or they won't eat. I know people who don't eat when they’re stressed as well.

Freaking out, taking, you know, medicine to enhance their study methods. Or drinking a lot. Just letting life beat ‘em up.

Going to the extreme. Like, you’re gonna study all day and then it's weekend time.

In college I absolutely see people abusing alcohol and drugs on a large scale.

Like it's, oh I'm stressed, I'll just go get completely wasted and then forget about it. But still, I mean, sure, you forget about it for the night, but you wake up and then it's still there.

**Slide 3: How do you cope?**
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*Competent coping* involves strategies that result in retaining optimal health and maintaining control while helping you meet life’s demands. This is the type of coping we’ve been recommending throughout the course. It can take many different forms, but, in the end, these strategies help you reduce and manage stress.

*Incompetent coping* results in sacrifice of health and control and the inability to meet life’s demands (Girdano, Dusek, & Everly, 2009). These strategies can create additional consequences and stress and invoke feelings of guilt or shame. They do not remove the stressor or stress; thus, it continues to affect you and may actually render you less capable of healthy coping.

Throughout this course, we’ve asserted that every person should choose the coping strategies that work best for him or her. What works well for one person may not work well for another. We’d be irresponsible, though, if we didn’t mention the fact that some coping strategies really don’t work for anyone. In fact, they often serve to create more stress than they alleviate!

This is why what you choose to do to cope with stress really matters. In this lesson we’ll discuss a few of the most common unhealthy coping techniques people choose and suggest some healthier alternatives.

**Slide 4: Your Anger Management**

As we’ve already noted in our discussions, anger is an unfortunate but common response to stress. College students in particular may “experience stress and anger related to the numerous developmental milestones they face, including identity formation and adjustment to college curricula and class expectations” (Winterowd, Harrist, Thomason, & Worth, 2005, p. 516).

Sometimes, anger can be motivating and result in positive outcomes. All too often, though, it can cloud our judgment, cause us to make quick, rash decisions, and lead to regrettable consequences. In these instances, anger does not often serve to solve our problems. In fact, it may make a situation worse or even create additional stressors! Additionally, uncontrolled anger can lead to verbal or physical abuse of others, which is never positive or acceptable. This just leads to harm, regrets, ruined relationships, and other awful consequences. Thus, it’s a good idea to pinpoint what makes you angry and devise a plan for diffusing or preventing an angry response.

You could try tracking your anger with a log. After you’ve tracked a good number of anger instances, take a moment to reflect on them:

- What appears to trigger your anger?
- How can you prevent angry reactions?
- How can you diffuse your anger when it occurs?
- What more positive thoughts and actions could you utilize instead of anger?
- How can you channel your anger into creative, constructive action?

Finally, don’t hesitate to ask for help in managing your anger. Sometimes, all we need is support and advice from friends and family. Other times, though, counseling or professional intervention is warranted. It is never a sign of weakness to admit that we might need help in some area of our lives; rather, it is a sign of strength and commitment to a better way of living – for yourself and others.

Resource Links:
UMN Student Mental Health Resources: [http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu/](http://www.mentalhealth.umn.edu/)
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**Slide 5: VIDEO: Keep Your Cool**

How do you keep your cool when you're angry or frustrated?

I go in the bathroom, close the door, and scream.

The best thing is just to kinda take a cool breather. Step away from the situation and then, you know, get back into it after you've taken a outside perspective a little bit.

Just try not to dwell on it so much and start focusing on, you know, what you’re doing at the time because if you, if you’re in your head, if you’re living in your head too much that can cause you to lose focus on other things and think more about what you're stressed about.

I, um, will call my mom and I will cry. That’s how I deal with it.

I usually just tell them, like, hey, you know, I’m kinda stressed out a little bit, like, can you just please, like, bear with me here? I think that’s one of the biggest things ’cause you can get help from other people when you're stressed out.

**Slide 6: Alcohol and Stress**

Many people in the U.S. use alcohol as a way to relax - and some people even use it as a “stress reliever.” This is not the best idea. Now, we’re not arguing that no one should ever drink, but we would not recommend using alcohol as a means of coping with stress. It would be a good idea to find a healthier strategy and here’s why: According to the 2010 College Student Health Survey (Lust, Ehlinger, & Golden, 2010), 69% of college students report drinking at least monthly and 46% of students report binge drinking (consuming 5 or more drinks in a row within the previous 2 weeks). At the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, many students reported experiencing negative consequences associated with alcohol use within the previous 12 months. For example,

- 60% experienced a hangover
- 41% got nauseated or vomited
- 27% did something they later regretted
- 25% experienced memory loss
- 21% missed a class
- 19% had their drinking behavior criticized by someone they knew
- 18% got into an argument or fight
- 18% performed poorly on a test or important project

A thoughtful look at this list will instantly reveal that none of these effects can really be viewed as positive. We've never really met anyone who hopes to have a hangover, throw up, do something regrettable, or do poorly on a test. So, if we were truly being honest here, we’d have to admit that using alcohol as a way to cope with stress may instead cause more. Plus, we haven’t even mentioned other issues like health problems and addiction risk that can result if you decide to use alcohol excessively over the long-term.

The point here is that it’s not a great idea to use alcohol to manage stress. It’s not a solution. If you do choose to drink socially, it’s wise to do so responsibly and safely.
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Resource Links:
Alcohol and College Life (PUBH 1003): [http://www.acl.umn.edu/](http://www.acl.umn.edu/)
Boynton Chemical Health Assessment: [http://www.bhs.umn.edu/programs/assessments.htm#chemicalhealth](http://www.bhs.umn.edu/programs/assessments.htm#chemicalhealth)

Slide 7: Tobacco and Stress

The 2010 College Student Health Survey (Lust, Ehlinger, & Golden, 2010) revealed that about 18% of college students reported that they had used tobacco within the previous 30 days. This means “of the 15 million college students in the United States, an estimated 1.7 million will die prematurely due to smoking-related illnesses” (p. 13). This is a very high price to pay for a habit that literally has no health benefits—only health risks.

It’s interesting to note that many tobacco users claim that their habit “helps them manage stress.” Any stress management benefits, though, stem from factors unrelated to the nicotine. Consider the following:

- Some tobacco users say that their tobacco use gives them an opportunity to take a break from their studying or work. Taking a break is definitely a fabulous idea, but smoking during that break is not! Try taking a break without the smoke or chew; even take a stroll outside. You’d be amazed to find out that you might feel even more relaxed without the nicotine and other carcinogens tobacco gives you.
- Much of the stress reduction from smoking in particular probably comes from taking a deep breath, which smokers do when they inhale. But you can practice deep breathing as a stress management technique without smoking. In fact, it’s one of the best and easiest stress reduction options available to all of us! It’s just much healthier to breathe deeply without tobacco smoke in your lungs.
- Smokers also claim that their smoke break gives them an opportunity to chat with friends. It’s true that talking with other people can be a very effective tool in managing stress, but do you have to smoke to be able to access this opportunity? In fact, you might find that you’re able to meet and associate with more people if you *don’t smoke*.

Smoking tends to cause more problems than it solves. In addition to the long-term health concerns, smokers also experience a greater number of acute illnesses as well like colds, allergies, and congestion, in addition to the financial cost. There are much better – and cheaper -- options for managing your stress.

We recognize that quitting tobacco can be difficult. The withdrawal symptoms are uncomfortable and it can be a stressful process – at least in the beginning. Using a nicotine patch or gum can be helpful as you taper off. If you’ve been a long time tobacco user, you may need to seek professional help.

Resource Links:
Minnesota’s Quit Plan: [https://www.quitplan.com/](https://www.quitplan.com/)
Become An Ex Program: [http://www.becomeanex.org/](http://www.becomeanex.org/)
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Slide 8: Drug Use and Stress

In addition to alcohol and tobacco, some people may use other drugs to manage their stress. We’re not talking about medicines for which many people have a legitimate need and a doctor’s prescription. We are referring to the unauthorized and nonmedical use of drugs like marijuana, hallucinogens, stimulants, narcotics, and tranquilizers. While these may seem to help temporarily, for the most part, they do more harm than good.

First, using drugs which are illicit or for which you do not have a prescription is illegal. Thus, there’s a certain amount of stress involved in simply gaining access to the drugs. Additionally, the penalties for possession of these substances can range from a hassle to a significant charge.

Secondly, many of these substances cause short-term effects that are highly unpredictable. This unpredictability may be due to the drug itself, or potential contaminants. You can never be fully certain about the safety or purity of the substance you ingest, inhale, snort, or inject. This scenario seems more worrisome than relaxing. If you think you don’t have to worry about this unpredictability because you’re taking a pill, you’re wrong. Unless a doctor has written a prescription for you for that drug, you cannot verify what the drug actually is or whether or not it’s safe for you to take.

Many of these drugs have long-term effects as well. Some are addictive and others just hinder the pursuit of a productive life. The point is simple: if you are using chemicals to relax, to escape from stress, or to stay awake, you'll find that they create more problems than they solve. Instead try going for a walk, meditating, or grooving to your favorite tune.

Resource Link:

Slide 9: Emotional Eating and Stress

Do your eating patterns change when you’re feeling stressed? Stress-related eating behaviors are actually quite common. Some people eat more when they are feeling stressed, while other people eat less. Some people crave chocolate when they’re upset, while others want a salty snack. In all of these cases, emotions are influencing food choices and eating habits.

If this happens occasionally and doesn’t get out of control, it’s probably not something to worry about. If, however, you find that your eating patterns become unhealthy when you’re stressed, you might want to evaluate them further. This may mean eating too much, eating too little, or eating a very unbalanced diet. For many people, simply becoming aware of these tendencies helps a lot. It might be a good idea to keep a food diary for a few days to help you get an accurate picture of your habits. Track not only what you eat and when you eat it, but also how you’re feeling at the time. This will help you become more aware of emotional eating and enable you to effectively address it.

When your stress and emotions become the most significant influences on your eating habits, it would be good to try to determine why. This is important because emotional eating can lead to disordered eating and related behaviors like over-eating, binging, starving, or even purging. You’ve probably heard that obesity is increasing in the United States, but have you also heard that other eating disorders and disordered eating are increasing as well? These issues can cause significant health problems and increased stress. Just like the other unhealthy coping strategies we’ve discussed in this lesson, they create more stress than they relieve.

If you feel that your eating habits are unbalanced, or if you’d simply like more information about healthy, balanced diets, we’d recommend that you consult a dietician at your college health service, or even take a course focused on nutrition.
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Resource Links:
- Emily Program (Treatment for Eating Disorders): http://www.emilyprogram.com/
- Boynton Mental Health Services: http://www.bhs.umn.edu/east-bank-clinic/mental-health-services.htm
- Boynton Nutritional Services: http://www.bhs.umn.edu/east-bank-clinic/nutrition.htm
- PUBH 1005: Sleep, Eat and Exercise: http://www.see.umn.edu/

Slide 10: Gambling and Shopping

Gambling and shopping have a few things in common...
- Both involve money
- Both require you to give up some of your money in exchange for something else (in the case of gambling, the chance to win more money; in the case of shopping, material goods)
- Both provide temporary satisfaction, as you’re often left wanting more of whatever you gained
- Both can be fun diversions, if limited
- Both are popular among some college students
- Both can become compulsions, get out of control and lead to debt and many other problems
- Both are cited as “stress relievers” by some but often create more stress than they relieve!

It has been estimated that approximately 1 in every 20 college students has a gambling problem (Yang, 2006). Online gambling in particular is quite popular among college students. It’s especially problematic because it’s hard to detect and control: online gamblers spend hours in front of their computers and this can look similar to college students who are studying!

According to Dr. Donald Black (2009) from the University of Iowa, up to 16% of all college students may be excessive or compulsive shoppers (a.k.a. “shopaholics”). The incidence of compulsive shopping is greater among college students than it is in the general population - about 6%. Shopaholics typically shop in person and on the Internet. When shopping, they report the same feelings gamblers do when winning: happiness, elation, a sense of power, gratification, and even a release of tension. Similar to the way gamblers feel after they lose, shopaholics report that they feel guilt, sadness, anger, frustration, and worry about money troubles after a shopping spree.

If you’re concerned about your gambling or shopping habits, Dr. Black (2009) recommends asking yourself the following questions:
- Do you feel overly preoccupied with shopping or spending or gambling?
- Do you ever feel that your shopping or gambling behavior is excessive, inappropriate, or uncontrolled?
- Have your shopping or gambling desires, urges, behaviors, or fantasies been overly time-consuming, caused you to feel upset or guilty, or led to serious problems in your life?

If you answered, “yes” to any of these questions, you should evaluate your habits further and talk to a counselor or a trusted friend or family member for guidance.

Resource Links:

Boynton Nutritional Services: http://www.bhs.umn.edu/east-bank-clinic/nutrition.htm
Boynton Mental Health Services: http://www.bhs.umn.edu/east-bank-clinic/mental-health-services.htm
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Slide 11: Gaming Addiction & Stress

Surfing the Internet, playing video games, watching TV or movies, and exploring Facebook are other common means of stress release or escape. These activities, when done in moderation, are not all that worrisome but, if you find that you're spending way too much time on any one of those things, you might want to take a careful look at your behavior. At the very least, each of these activities can become giant time wasters or means for procrastination. At the worst, they can become obsessions or even addictions. For instance, in a recent study of social media habits of young adults, 39% of respondents categorized themselves as “Facebook addicts” (Webley, n.d.). Like drugs, it’s possible to become hooked on games, TV, the Internet, or Facebook. Addicts would show signs that include:

- Engaging in these activities almost every day
- Doing so for 4 hours or more
- Getting restless or irritable if they can’t play, surf, or explore
- Sacrificing other social activities in favor of time spent in front of their favorite screen

If you feel like your “screen time” is becoming excessive, it would be good to assess it. If it’s very worrisome and hard to control, it is wise to seek help from your parents or the counseling center at your college.

Resource Links:

Slide 12: Warning Signs

There are many forms of addiction and they may be manifested in different ways. However, all forms of addiction have the following factors in common:

- A preoccupation with the activity
- Lying about or hiding the activity
- Significant time spent on the activity, causing disruption to other activities and obligations
- Social withdrawal from family and friends
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Slide 13: Moving Forward

In this lesson, we’ve highlighted several examples of unhealthy coping behaviors. You may be able to think of more. What all of these behaviors have in common are that they:

- Don’t solve your problems;
- Often don’t reduce your stress; and,
- Generally create more stress.

Anything you can do to become aware of these unproductive, unconstructive responses is a step in the right direction. In fact, as we’ve stated many times, awareness is the first step in changing and improving your behavior. None of us manage stress perfectly. We all need encouragement and help in this area. It’s not always fun to admit that we might need to change the way we react to and cope with problems, but enjoying less stress and a happier life in the long run is well worth the effort!

Slide 14: References


