

Stress Management: Your Lifelines¹

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People who deal with stress have “lifelines” to others who can help. Support is very important. People with support have fewer stress-related health problems.

Social Support

These “lifelines” are systems of **social support**. Social support is help given by friends, family, and neighbors in times of crisis or emergency, or on a daily or occasional basis. Community services and religious congregations are also sources of social support. Table 1 displays examples of social support.

Table 1. Examples of Social Support

family member or friend you can talk to	agency that provides food stamps and financial aid
neighbor who checks on your home and pets while you are away	health clinic
child care provider	child’s coach or other mentor
religious leader and congregation	teachers or guidance counselors
crisis hotline	support groups that focus on a problem (e.g., Alcoholics, or Gamblers, or Overeaters Anonymous)
counselor	

There are many different sources of social support. They provide different types of aid. These include:

- Emotional: help with feelings
- Instrumental: practical help and resources
- Informational: help with career and education

In the example that follows, Mary uses several types of support.

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Mary is going through a divorce. She talks to her girlfriends about what she is going through (*emotional support*). Since she has been at home taking care of her young children, she needs to develop more current job skills. Mary takes courses at the community college (*informational support*). Her mother helps with child care and buys the children’s clothes (*instrumental support*).

Lifeline Exercise

Think for a moment about your own lifelines.

Who can you call on for support? <i>List 5 people who are your Lifelines and the kinds of help they give.</i>	
1.	4.
2.	5.
3	
Who can call on you for support? <i>List 5 ways you could be a Lifeline for others.</i>	
1.	
2.	4.
3	5.

Communicating with Others

When you are under stress, having someone to talk to about your feelings is very important. Having just one person to confide in and ask for help makes a difference. It reduces your stress and improves your health. It also gives you a feeling of being accepted and respected.

Many people who are under stress may not reach out to people. They may feel insecure and afraid of friends' reactions, or have difficulty talking about feelings. They may be afraid of being a burden. People take a risk when they express feelings. The information in the sections below can help you express your own feelings.

Some friends and family members feel uncomfortable with feelings. Or, they may not know how to be of use. As a result they don't listen in ways that help. If you want to help people under stress, you can open up communication by showing you are available and understanding.

Verbal and nonverbal communication

When communicating with others, you use verbal and nonverbal communication.

Verbal communication is the words you use to describe your thoughts and feelings.

Nonverbal communication is any way of interacting that does not involve words.

The best **verbal communication** is direct: You say what you mean and mean what you say. You can be honest without trying to hurt the other person. The first step in being a direct communicator is *knowing* what you want. Think about what you need. Do you have a problem to solve? Do you need to get your feelings off your

chest? Is there a decision you must make? Are you there just to listen with an open mind? Then you can let *others* know your thoughts and feelings...they won't be guessing what you mean.

The best **nonverbal communication** is clear and honest. Touch, facial expressions, and body position are used sincerely. Also, nonverbal messages are consistent with the verbal message. They are not "mixed messages" where what a person says in words is different from what they say nonverbally. This confuses people about what the speaker really means.

You do not have to use much verbal communication to be a good listener. A lot of listening is done nonverbally. It involves watching the speaker's face, eyes, and body posture, and paying attention to their tone of voice as well as their words.

Listening

Listening helps you provide help to people under stress. They feel less lonely and more able to handle pressures and strains.

Even though half of communication is listening, often people do not listen well. We tend to pay attention to the beginning and end of statements because we are thinking about how to respond. Good listening involves tuning in to the other person and hearing all of what she or he is saying—thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Listening to feelings is very important when people are under stress.

Listening is a *skill*, and takes time and practice to develop. Try these listening skills.

- Clear your mind of other thoughts.
- Keep good eye contact.
- Prompt the person to talk with expressions like "uh huh," "mmm...." and "oh?"
- Repeat what the person has said, in your own words.
- Ask questions if you don't understand.
- Use compassion to show you understand the person's feelings.
- Avoid giving advice or opinions, unless asked. Then, avoid being critical.

Exercise—Watching a Good Listener

Watching people who are good listeners helps build your own communication skills. Think of someone you consider to be a good listener and ask them to do this exercise with you. Choose something meaningful to discuss with that person, face-to-face. Describe your feelings as well as the facts about a situation. Be aware of the feelings you are trying to communicate. These might be joy, anger, helplessness, fatigue, loneliness, love, sadness, and so on. When you talk to your friend, notice his or her *nonverbal* communication.

How does this listener sit? Look for:

- leaning forward with interest
- an open posture, where arms and legs are uncrossed
- eye contact, looking in your eyes and holding your gaze when you are expressing emotion
- tone of voice is even and warm
- touch to your arm or shoulder, a caring hug, or a warm smile

What about your friend's verbal communication?

- rephrases what you say
- identifies the feelings you express

After you have finished your observation, practice these skills with a friend or family member.

Listening Exercise

How would you respond to each of the following statements? Write out or share your responses to each of the following:

	Your 5-year-old has just broken one of his favorite toys. He comes to you with the broken airplane in hand, sobbing, "I want it back! Please fix it."
	Your spouse is trying to make a deadline for an important project. She has been working all day with papers spread out in the family room. At about 10:30 p.m. you hear, "That's it! I've had it! I'll never get it done, so forget it!" Then you hear sobbing.
	You see your neighbor at the supermarket. She comes to you, and her voice is shaking. She tells you, "We lost our farm. The bank is calling in our loan and we can't pay. That's it for us."
	You get a call from a friend who tells you, "Guess what, I got that new job I wanted!"

Check your answers. Do they show understanding of feelings and content? Go over each situation, trying to show more understanding and support, if possible. Keep in mind that effective emotional support involves verbal and nonverbal language. Select the best mix of responding verbally to content and feelings, and picture the eye contact, touch, tone of voice, and body posture you would use.

Working Things Out

We communicate constantly. Experts figure that we spend three-fourths of our days communicating with others. Some of these interactions are stressful. Different styles of communicating may cause friction. When people are stressed, their differences may lead to conflict. One misunderstanding leads to another.

You can work things out! You can use conflict and problem-solving skills to open up positive channels of communication. This usually starts with expressing yourself through "I-messages."

I-Messages

An "I-message" is a statement that describes your feelings about the effect that a situation or behavior has on you. Do this without hostility. For example, you might say to your spouse,

"When we are with friends I get embarrassed when you criticize my driving. I would appreciate it if you would not criticize my driving while we are with other people."

This message is more effective than "You always criticize me." The I-message states your perception as a fact. It is less likely to hurt the other person. And it can open up communication for problem-solving.

You may want to practice I-statements using the following formula:

"I feel _____ when (you) _____."

This phrase can be followed by an explanation of what you would like to see changed, as in the previous example.

Communicating to Resolve Conflict

Follow these steps to work out conflicts with others.

Be calm. When you are calm you can think more clearly. Calmness will make it easier to discuss a problem. You may want to wait until intense feelings subside before addressing a problem.

Define your needs. Decide exactly what is bothering you, and what needs to be changed so that you will feel the situation has been resolved.

Communicate your needs. Make sure the other person is aware of how you feel. Use I-statements to clarify your feelings and needs.

Listen. Make sure you understand and respect the other person's point of view and feelings. Give your full attention and use your listening skills. Be open--don't argue mentally.

Brainstorm. Once everyone understands each other's needs, work together to generate as many solutions as possible. Don't criticize any ideas that could sidetrack you and send you back to conflict. Keep the tone open, fun, and lively.

Check alternatives. When you run out of brainstorming ideas, go over the list of suggestions. Keep in mind that the solution should help everyone involved. Discard those that are not mutually acceptable. Determine which ones meet everyone's needs and wants. At this point compromise may be the best solution.

Try your solution. Once you have found a suitable solution, put it to the test. Uphold your end of the agreement. Keep a positive, hopeful attitude.

Re-evaluate. A week or two later, after you've had a chance to try your solution, discuss how it's working. You may need to make some changes in your agreement to better meet each other's needs.

Professional Help

There may be a time when you or someone you know is unable to prevent or manage stress and it becomes a real problem. Chronic anxiety, depression, and absenteeism from work are signs of distress. At these times, professional assistance may be needed. Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and counselors are trained to help with these and other stress-related problems. You or your friend will want to find someone you can feel comfortable talking to, so ask your physician or a trusted friend for suggestions.

Conclusion

This publication covers the importance of lifelines in managing stress. These lifelines give you the support you need from others in stressful situations. Having lifelines and *being* a lifeline for others requires good communication skills. Here we review effective listening skills, I-statements, and steps for resolving conflict. For more information about other stress management skills, see the other publications in this series.

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Publications in the Stress Management Series

For more information see your county Extension Agent and related publications in the Stress Management series:

- *Stress Management: Strategies for Individuals.* Pergola, Joe and Suzanna Smith. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2077A, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY515>
- *Stress Management: Preventing Stress through Lifestyle Management.* Smith, Suzanna and Joe Pergola. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2077B, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY516>
- *Stress Management: Ways to Cope.* Smith, Suzanna and Joe Pergola. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2078, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY517>
- *Stress Management: Understanding Stress.* Smith, Suzanna and Joe Pergola. (2006). EDIS. Florida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2077B, FCS2080, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY518>
- *Stress Management: Your Lifelines.* Pergola, Joe and Suzanna Smith. (2006). EDIS. StateFlorida Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida. FCS2081A, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/FY519>