

Stress and Spasmodic Dysphonia

Working through stressful situations to help your SD

Goal: Acknowledge the negative effect stress can have on the SD voice and determine ways to reduce stress overall and as it directly relates to SD.

Introduction

Stress can have many negative side effects. For the SD patient, stress can adversely affect the sound of the voice. Since the SD patient may perceive this as a negative event, the sound of their own voice can also be a source of stress for the SD patient.

Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of your thoughts, your emotions, your schedule, your environment, and the way you deal with problems. Stress management starts with identifying the sources of stress in your life. This isn't as easy as it sounds. Your true sources of stress aren't always obvious, and it's all too easy to overlook your own stress-inducing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

To begin the process of learning to identify the true sources and to manage stress, start with a stress journal. A stress journal can help you identify the regular stressors in your life and the way you deal with them. Each time you feel stressed, keep track of it in your journal. As you keep a daily log, you will begin to see patterns and common themes. Write down:

- What caused your stress (make a guess if you're unsure).
- How you felt, both physically and emotionally.
- How you acted in response.
- What you did to make yourself feel better.

Dealing with stress

If your methods of coping with stress aren't improving to your greater emotional and physical health, it's time to find healthier ones. There are many healthy ways to manage and cope with stress, but they all require change. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. When deciding which option to choose, it's helpful to think of the Four A's: Avoid, Alter, Adapt, or Accept. The first two deal with changing the situation. The last two deal with changing your reaction. Since everyone has a unique response to stress, there is no "one size fits all" solution to managing it. No single method works for everyone or in every situation, so it may be helpful to

experiment with different techniques and strategies, and focus on the ones that help you to feel calm and in control.

The four techniques can be explained this way:

1. **Avoid** unnecessary stress. Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.
2. **Alter** the situation. If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the problem doesn't present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.
3. **Adapt** to the stressor. If you can't change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.
4. **Accept** the things that you can't change. Some sources of stress are unavoidable. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change. Yes, life can be unfair, but you are only on this planet once.

Four A's in action

AVOID unnecessary stress. Eliminate stressors when possible.

Learn how to say "no" – If agreeing to a request will create stress and you cannot alter the situation, feel free to reply, "No". Example: if asked to make phone calls for a non-profit organization during a "bad voice" time, suggest that you could help in another way by recording results, assembling a direct mailing, etc.

ALTER the situation. Change things so the problem doesn't present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

- **Be more assertive.** If you will be dining out with others, share your needs with the group and suggest a quiet environment. Ask the waiter to seat you away from noise if possible. Let others know your needs and how they can help make a situation less stressful.
- **Take control of your environment** – If you will be speaking in front of a large group, arrange a good microphone system. Memorize your speech so that you are not trying to think about what you are going to say. Get plenty of rest the night before.

ADAPT to the stressor. If you can't change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.

- **Reframe problems.** Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Example: Rather than fuming about not being able to converse freely at a social gathering, look at it as an opportunity to listen and allow others the valuable opportunity of having someone really listen.

- **Look at the big picture.** Assess the stressful situation. Ask yourself how important it will be in the long run. Will it matter in a month? A year? Is it really worth getting upset over? If the answer is no, focus your time and energy elsewhere. Example: If you cannot order through the drive-thru window, could you go inside instead to speak face-to-face to the cashier?
- **Adjust your standards.** Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. Stop setting yourself up for failure by demanding perfection. Set reasonable standards for yourself and others, and learn to be okay with “good enough.” Example: your voice may not sound “normal”, but you have valuable insight and thoughts to share. Be willing to allow others to hear the content of your ideas and see past the sound of your voice.

ACCEPT the things that you can’t change. Some sources of stress are unavoidable. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are.

- **Don’t try to control the uncontrollable.** Example: You may not be able to control the results of every botulinum toxin injection, but you can enjoy the good injections and accept the not-so-good ones. Your voice may not work well enough for you to continue in your current career, but there may be other ways to work in that area. Example: You may not be able to teach in a classroom, but you could teach an on-line course.
- **Focus on the positive.** When facing major challenges, try to look at them as opportunities for personal growth. Take a moment to reflect on all the things you appreciate in your life, including your own positive qualities and gifts.

Resources

Ideas for this meeting topic were found in the article, *Stress Management: How to Reduce, Prevent, and Cope with Stress*, by Melinda Smith, M.A., Ellen Jaffe-Gill, M.A., and Robert Segal, M, December 2008 http://helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm



National Spasmodic Dysphonia Association
Dedicated to improving the lives of people affected by spasmodic dysphonia and related voice conditions through research, education, awareness and support
www.dysphonia.org