

STRESS AND THE DHHS PERSON TAKING CALLS ON THE FLU HOTLINE

“You are working the standard two hour shift taking calls from the public regarding their frustration and concerns regarding the swine flu. This is not the first unhappy customer you have had today. Your stress may not even end when your shift is over. It may continue at home. You may be tired, unable to satisfy some of the callers and ready for a break. Here are some helpful hints on how to manage stress, simple relaxation techniques and some suggestions as to how to manage these difficult calls. These techniques can be done in a few minutes, either during your break, at the end of your shift or whenever you have a few minutes”.

General information about stress

Stress is a response to change, threat or long term frustration. Some stress is good. Too much stress can cause medical or psychological problems. Some warning signs of stress may include: being argumentative, excessive worrying, over/under eating, restless/disturbed sleep, apathy/withdrawal, constant headache/backache or excessive drinking/use of drugs.

Anxiety and stress trigger the autonomic nervous system’s “fight or flight” response. Physiological changes associated with stress include: increased blood pressure, shallow breathing, muscle tension, elevated heart rate, increased blood flow to the arms and legs and dry mouth. Some of us function at high levels of stress as part of our daily work. In your role of fielding call from the general public and their fear of a shortage of vaccine, even well adapted professionals can be challenged. It is important as you function in this role to be aware of your stress level and take some time for self-care. Our bodies are always ready to fight or run away. When this state becomes chronic, it affects our state of well being. It is essential to spend some time each day in a state of relaxation. There are several techniques for relaxation that you can learn that will lead to a general lowered state of tension and anxiety Here are a few.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Muscle relaxation reduces tension, reduces pulse rate, blood pressure and decreases perspiration and respiration rates. Here is how it works.

1. Sit in a relaxed position, eyes closed. Breathe naturally.
2. Clench fists hard so that your arms feel tense. Ease your tension as you breathe out.
3. Do the same with your lower legs, thighs, trunk, stomach, back and head. End with your whole body.
4. After a few rounds, don’t tense first, just relax.
5. Feel heavy, then relaxed.
6. You can add visualization to this technique.

Visualization

Visualization is a way of simulating the experiences you have when you are in a calming environment. If you think anxious thoughts you become tense. In order to overcome negative feelings, you can use the power of your imagination to refocus your mind on positive healing images.

1. **Get into a comfortable position. Close your eyes.**
2. **Imagine a place that feels serene, relaxing, and safe. It doesn't matter what you visualize as long as it is calming to you. This can be a place in nature or a cozy room. You can recall a place in memory or create your own ideal place in imagination. Include as many of your senses as possible. See the place... Smell its smells... Hear its sounds... Feel its texture... Taste it, if possible.**
3. **Develop the details of this place and mentally return there in times of stress.**
4. **As you relax your mind, your body also relaxes.**

Deep Breathing

Most of us when we are under stress breathe poorly. We tense up and either hold our breath or we tend to have rushed, shallow breaths. We tend to pull upwards with our shoulders and upper chest to inhale. When we do this, less oxygen reaches our bloodstream and brain than our body likes. The result is our heart rate goes up and we become tense. The purpose of this technique is to counteract the tendency to hold your breath while under stress.

1. **Sit in a comfortable position.**
2. **Take deep, measured breaths, slowly**
3. **Inhale while counting up 1.2.3.4-in through the nose**
4. **Exhale while counting down 4.3.2.1- out through the mouth.**
5. **Do this 5-10 times.**
6. **Imagine the air you are breathing in, giving oxygen to every muscle in your body. Deep breathing assists in relaxation by increasing the amount of oxygen in the body.**

TIPS FOR STRESS FREE LIVING

1. **Breathe-take a deep breath when you are stressed, into the depths of your stomach and then to slowly breathe out.**
2. **Take a break-sit and relax and take your mind off what is bothering you.**
3. **Talk it out-with a fellow worker, supervisor, friend or family member. Listen to what they say about how you are handling stress.**
4. **Spend time with positive people or read/listen to something positive.**
5. **Watch your diet. Often when we are stressed we neglect health foods and grab something that is quick and easy. Try to have a balanced diet of fresh fruit and vegetables, some lean meats, some dairy products and cereal and grains. Raw cauliflower and broccoli are excellent stress busters.**
6. **Get enough sleep-sleep is the great healer of our time. When we sleep, our body rests and restores itself to greet the challenges of the next day. If you have trouble sleeping, try some relaxation techniques or meditation to help you relax.**
7. **Get enough exercise- Exercise releases endorphins, which make us feel good.**
8. **Separate yourself from the situation. The majority of callers are appreciative of what you are trying to do and understand your limitations. You will NOT be able to satisfy every caller. Try to look at the big picture and remind**

yourself of all the people who are receiving the vaccine, which will minimize their health risks.

In Summary:

Your role, answering calls from people who are frustrated about their difficulty getting the flu vaccine, is a stressful role indeed! The truth is, in most cases you won't be able to help the caller get the flu shot. If that is your expectation, then you can survive better emotionally. The caller needs your compassionate presence to do the following:

- ❖ **Be a good active listener...listen to the callers concerns without needing to find solutions. Let the caller be heard.**

Tips for active listening:

- Allow the caller to say what is on their mind without interruption
- Paraphrase back what the caller has said, to make sure that you truly understand what they are saying (e.g. 'So what I hear you saying is that you have called 6 places, and none of them have been able to help.')
- Ask clarifying questions, when necessary, to show the caller that you are really seeking to understand the 'facts' and feelings that they are trying to present

- ❖ **Provide accurate empathy...let the caller know that you 'get it'. Acknowledge the difficulty of dealing with the fears, doubts and insecurities. Help them focus on skills to deal more effectively with the stress.**

Examples of accurate empathy:

- "I bet that this is making you feel really scared..."
- "Most people would feel anxious in your position..."
- "Your reaction is really understandable, under the circumstances."

- ❖ **Non-possessive warmth...Give the caller the attention and respect that they deserve, without becoming so 'enmeshed' with each caller that you become so emotionally overwhelmed that you are unable to help the next caller, *who also needs your help*.**

Note: Allow the caller to experience you as a caring, supportive professional. If you move too closely towards assuming a different role, such as a 'friend', you may not be able to reclaim the role, which you were intended to provide.

Take care of yourself. If you don't prioritize self-care, you will become ineffective. Your physical, mental and emotional wellbeing will support an effective role. Not attending to these pieces of yourself, as a helper, will only serve to neutralize your opportunity to serve your callers.

