Success Over Stress
Distress-Prone Behaviors

Slide 1: Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe common distress-prone behavior patterns.
- Illustrate the connection between distress-prone behaviors and stress and health outcomes.
- Identify ways to change distress-prone tendencies in your own life.

Slide 2: Distress-Prone Patterns

By the time you reach college, you are well into the process of developing into your own person. There will be much more to learn about yourself and the world during your college years, but some of your habits, likes and dislikes will be fairly well defined. In many areas, this is a good thing! You no doubt have adopted some helpful attitudes and learned some very positive behaviors thus far. However, if you’re like most of the human population, you’ve probably cultivated some less-than-positive attitudes, perceptions, and actions as well. These are called distress-prone behavior patterns. More often than not, when it comes to stress, these attitudes, thoughts, and actions fail to solve our problems and usually lead to more stress.

Sometimes, we’re not even aware that we exhibit these less-than-positive behavior patterns. In fact, we can become so used to responding to and approaching life in a given way that our reactions become automatic and subconscious. In fact, some people find that their automatic reaction to life is governed by a distress-prone pattern. These individuals often find themselves in constant distress because of habitual reliance on their maladaptive coping styles. Their lives are far from tragic, but they behave as if life is a constant crisis, largely of their own making.

As we explore some of the more common distress-prone patterns, take an honest look at your attitudes, reactions, thoughts, and behaviors and ask yourself if you exhibit any of these traits. The good news is that if you do recognize some of these patterns in your own life, you have the ability to change these tendencies.

Slide 3: Type A and Research
At some point you’ve probably heard about type A personality. Though the phrase Type A is often used in casual conversation, most people aren’t even aware of where the term originated, or what it implies.

The Type A Behavior Pattern was first identified by two researchers associated with the Framingham Heart Study. This on-going study began in 1948; it examines cardiovascular health and risk factors involving the population of Framingham, Massachusetts. The researchers noted that not all of the variance in cardiovascular health could be explained by typical risk factors such as high blood pressure, smoking, and elevated cholesterol levels. After further investigation, they hypothesized that the behavior pattern of some individuals could actually contribute to cardiovascular risk due to an increased perception of stress. Further, they noted that this behavior pattern manifested in some consistent traits throughout individuals who exhibited it. Thus, “Type A Behavior Pattern” was hypothesized to be a possible risk factor for cardiovascular disease (Friedman & Rosenman, 1974).

The researchers did correlate the two but experts and researchers have debated the connection between Type A Behavior Pattern and heart disease for years. Regardless, Type A is definitely characterized by some unhelpful tendencies. It is apparent that these tendencies often serve to increase the stress of the person exhibiting the behavior, as well as increasing the stress of those around them. Thus, making it one example of a distress-prone behavior pattern.

Slide 4: Type A’s and Health

So, what does Type A look like? People who are Type A are often characterized as impatient, extremely time-sensitive, and easily aggravated. They tend to try to tackle multiple projects at once and always seem to be moving at warp speed. They walk, talk, eat, work and do pretty much everything else in a hurry. Type A’s are also often described as exhibiting perfectionism and competitiveness. Cynicism toward others’ motives and values is often present. They tend to have high expectations for themselves and others and can become easily frustrated and irritable if things don’t go as planned. In fact, they often exhibit aggressiveness, anger, and even hostility. This is especially true when they are upset by someone or by a situation. Ideally, they would like to control the actions of others and the flow of events in their environments, but we all know that this isn’t realistic! Life doesn’t always progress just as we’d like it to, and it’s certainly not always fair. For the Type A person, lacking this control results in negative and passionate reactions (Friedman & Rosenman, 1974).

All of these Type A-prone responses can result in increases in perceptions of stress. Think back to the stress process. An increase in the perception of stress usually leads to an increase in strain - the short-term responses to stress. So, if you think about it, you can see the connections between Type A behavior pattern
and physical reactions like increases in blood pressure, cholesterol levels, glucose levels, and cortisol. Additionally, it’s quite possible to find potential correlations between Type A behavior and emotional responses such as anger and hostility.

**Slide 5: Behind Type A**

As is true with all behavior patterns, with enough repetition comes habit. In this case, that leads to a vicious cycle of impatience, stress, frustration, anger, and then more stress. To top it all off, Type A’s are not necessarily more productive or efficient than people who exhibit other behavior patterns. In fact, you could probably argue that they limit productivity because of all the time and energy they spend on being upset, impatient, and angry. They may also reduce the productivity of others around them because they are stressful to be around!

So, if Type A behavior involves all of these negative aspects, could it be that Type A people are doomed? The answer to that question is “no” – there is more behind Type A behavior than you might assume at first glance. So far we’ve given an extreme description of what Type A might look like but keep in mind that it may manifest differently in different people.

Type A behavior seems to stem from a very strong achievement drive, a high need for positive regard from others, and a low sense of self-worth. In other words, many Type A individuals really don’t believe in their abilities and live constantly in fear of not measuring up to someone else’s expectations. Thus, they compensate for this by attempting to accomplish more than they reasonably should and setting unrealistically high expectations for themselves and others. Then, when they don’t achieve these expectations - because hardly anyone ever could - they react with impatience, aggravation, aggression, and hostility. While Type A’s may seem overconfident or conceited, it could just be that they have low opinions of themselves and their abilities while wearing the mask of being self-assured.

**Slide 6: Managing Type A**

While a fairly small segment of the population is truly and completely Type A, many of us will exhibit some of these tendencies from time to time in given situations. The key is recognizing this tendency and then intervening in your thought process before you react. Many of the cognitive coping strategies we have already covered are very effective in addressing Type A behaviors. Simply taking a break and thinking rationally about a situation for a few minutes can do wonders. Additionally, it’s important to recognize how ineffective these behaviors are in achieving your desired results. Perhaps check in with yourself and ask the following questions:
Distress Prone Behaviors

- Will pounding on the steering wheel and screaming at the drivers around you make the traffic move any faster?
- Will becoming angry with a co-worker really help improve his productivity?
- What is the worst-case scenario if the dishes aren’t done immediately?
- Does becoming overtly irritated with the clerk at a grocery store ever get you better service?
- If you don’t accomplish project X, will you really be viewed as a failure?
- Is your self-worth really defined only by what you accomplish?

It’s really hard to reflect on our own behavior and evaluate it honestly. In the case of Type A behavior and other distress-prone behavior patterns, this self-evaluation is necessary. You can’t change something for the better if you don’t recognize it in the first place. If you are curious, take a few moments to complete the Type A Assessment. You may learn if you have any of these tendencies and it may be the first step in making a change.

If you find that you are having some Type A tendencies, take a few moments to think about your positive attributes. If you have trouble recognizing your positive traits, ask close family members and trusted friends to help you with this. You may also utilize one of the many strengths-based inventories available. Engage in a thorough self-appraisal and remind yourself that you don’t always have to be first, best, or perfect to be successful. It’s difficult to un-do some attitudes and habits you’ve practiced for years, but you do have the ability to change, as do we all. Try to cultivate and nurture relationships and spirituality. Make amends for any past conflicts and move forward with tolerance for others. Celebrate your achievements along the way! Always remember that you are a lovable, worthy person, regardless of your accomplishments. Allow yourself to believe this!

Slide 7: Perfectionism

Even though perfectionism can be a component of Type A behavior, it can also be exhibited independently of other Type A traits. However, even though anger and hostility may not be present, perfectionism is still a distress-prone behavior pattern. There are generally two types of perfectionists: external perfectionists and internal perfectionists.

An external perfectionist is someone who has very high, often extremely demanding, expectations of others. They expect perfection in others’ work.

An internal perfectionist is a person who places unrelenting and excessive demands on him or herself. They desire to be perfect in all that they do.
Often, people who have perfectionist tendencies exhibit traits of both internal and external perfectionists, but it is possible for a person to express only one type.

All forms of perfectionism are based in irrational beliefs. For example, perfectionists might say to themselves:
- Mistakes are not allowed.
- There is always a right way that things should be done; other options are inferior.
- If something goes wrong, it is totally ruined.
- Other people should meet my expectations or they are failures.
- I must be perfect, or I am a failure.

**Slide 8: Students and Perfectionism**

Have you ever met a fellow student who exemplifies some of these beliefs? We’ve heard students say things like:
- Any grade less than an A is the same as an F.
- I have to maintain a 4.0.
- If I make a mistake on my project, it’s ruined.
- I really hate group projects because I can never depend on other students to do things right.

If you really think about it, each of these statements has an unrealistic element or two! In reality, a B is not the same as an F. Also, why would someone need to maintain a perfect GPA? We can’t think of many programs that require that. Mistakes are allowable and sometimes, expected. That’s why we have erasers for pencils and spell check for computers. Some of us don’t really care for group projects, but they are an excellent snapshot of the real working world. To succeed in most careers, you have to learn to work well with others. This involves learning how to motivate others in a positive manner and it also involves being open to new ideas and compromise. Having an “It’s my way or the highway” attitude often hinders progress.

**Slide 9: The Origin of Perfectionism**

Just like people who exhibit Type A behavior, people who have perfectionist tendencies often suffer from low self-esteem. They are greatly concerned with maintaining an outward image of doing everything right and they are terribly afraid of embarrassment. They are preoccupied with shoulds. Additionally, they tend to overgeneralize from single events and tend to view mistakes or problems as all-encompassing. Because of these tendencies, perfectionists are often lonely and isolated. They may choose to isolate themselves—or other people may avoid them. Either way, it makes for a stressful existence coupled with very little social support.
So, what can you do about it if you think you might have perfectionist tendencies? Well, the same strategies we recommended for dealing with Type A behavior would work here. The first step is to identify and challenge your irrational beliefs. Why do you expect perfection? Is it absolutely necessary? Is it the only way you can identify success? If you make a mistake, is it really the end of the world? Will your project actually be ruined? Is it really true that you can never depend on other people to do their work?

Next, try to think of more reasonable and feasible attitudes that you could adopt in place of some of these irrational beliefs. What really are the hallmarks of success other than perfection? How do people learn from mistakes? Can you focus on the overall quality and outcome of a project, rather than zeroing in on a couple of errors? Other people often have good ideas; would you be open to considering them?

Changing perfectionist tendencies isn’t always easy, but it is possible. It all begins with changing the way you view the world and think about things. Sometimes, talking with a counselor can help with this immensely. Perfectionism has roots in self-esteem, your sense of identity, and self-acceptance. Don’t be afraid to ask for help in exploring the origin of and contributors to your own perfectionist tendencies, if you have them. It will be easier to change perfectionist habits if you better understand where they started.

Slide 10: Type E Behavior Pattern

Another distress-prone behavior pattern is called Type E. The E means that this is a person who tries to be everything to everyone. Maybe you know people like this. They are probably really, really nice and involved in all sorts of things. They are a good friend, a responsible, trustworthy person, and probably also a great student and worker. In fact, they try to fulfill all roles in life as well as possible. Often, the more they do - and do well - the more others demand of them. And, they just can’t seem to say, “No.” Thus, they are probably exhausted and frazzled, although they will try not to show it!

The Type E person experiences chronic overload and role conflict on a continual basis. They have taken on too many things and said, “yes” to too many people. Hence, a good amount of stress comes from the necessity to juggle all of the demands from the competing roles that they play.

Sometimes, the toll of stress for the Type E person won’t be apparent on a daily basis; they may be able to handle their commitments and function pretty well for periods of time. But then, when things finally become too overwhelming, things start to break down. Maybe they get sick every now and then – like, really sick – because their immune system is shot due to lack of sleep and poor eating habits. Or, maybe they just simply have to take a break for a day or two to sleep and recover. It’s possible, too, that the effects of stress will be exhibited in an emotional way, when they start to feel like they are in over their head. Sometimes, the stress of a Type E lifestyle can be manifested in chronic physical
pain as well; it's not uncommon for Type E's to experience chronic backaches, headaches, or stomachaches. All of these effects are simply the outcomes of trying to conduct life at warp speed for days on end – and trying to be everything to everyone.

**Slide 11: Addressing Type E Behavior**

As with any behavior pattern, it is possible to change. If you are a Type E person, the first step in changing the behavior is realizing that what you are currently doing is simply not working. No one can meet everyone else’s expectations all of the time and do so perfectly. There’s a price that’s paid for this, and generally it’s paid in your physical, emotional, spiritual, social or occupational health. It’s also critically important that you honestly explore why you feel the need to serve and please other people. Where do those tendencies come from?

Once you recognize the need for change, the next step is to identify your priorities. Recall the ABC Technique. This can work quite well. For many Type E’s, it’s quite eye-opening to list all of their obligations and then realize that many of them aren’t even tied to their most significant priorities in life. When the priorities have been established, then it’s time to weed out any activities that hold the least meaning for you. Disentangling yourself from some activities and obligations may prove to take a bit of creativity, assertiveness, and diligence, but it is worth it. Remember that you’ll be able to devote more time and energy to your priorities and your health, and that will make you better in all of the roles you play in life. You may also need to redefine some of the roles. For instance, maybe you can delegate a greater portion of the responsibilities for a group project. Or, maybe at work you don’t need to be known as the person who will always switch shifts or work overtime for someone else. Try telling your friends that you’ll go out with them every other weekend, so you can plan a little more down time or study time.

You’ll need to practice saying no to new requests, too. This can be hard, but you can do it! Stay firm in your commitment to lead a less frenzied, less stressed, and more balanced life. And, do not feel guilty about your choices. Practice positive, realistic self-talk to keep yourself on track. Relax a bit more and enjoy life. You don’t always have to be accomplishing something to be worthwhile—you’re worthwhile just because you’re you.

**Slide 12: Pessimism and Helplessness**

All behavior patterns are grounded in our attitudes and beliefs – and our approach to life. This is certainly true for a person who exhibits learned helplessness and pessimism. People who possess these traits tend to view circumstances in a more negative light than others and they also often feel as though their resources for coping with life’s stressors are inadequate. They tend
to interpret bad events as personally caused and good events as simply luck or chance. Thus, they’re quick to find fault in many situations and can literally make themselves terribly unhappy.

There are three basic dimensions to learned pessimism: personalization, permanence, and pervasiveness. When something stressful or undesirable happens, this person tends to hold the following beliefs:

- **Personalization:** “This happened to me because I’m an unworthy person.”
- **Permanence:** “This is just awful, it will stay awful and will never get better.”
- **Pervasiveness:** “This is just typical; everything I do always turns out terribly.”

In reality, though, we know that bad or stressful things happen to everyone, regardless of who they are. We also know that one small problem does not need to ruin an entire project, event, or day. And, finally, if we think about our lives, virtually all of us would be able to find some positive aspects. Thus, the thinking patterns of a person with learned pessimism are often what sets him up for experiencing more stress than is warranted.

The helplessness piece can be seen when the pessimist gives up prematurely on things like projects, activities, or relationships because he does not believe in his ability to address them adequately. He may be likely to assume that no personal effort on his part will make any difference in a given situation leading him to feel overwhelmed quite quickly. Pessimists often perceive themselves as lacking any control over or power to influence events.

**Slide 13: Pessimism in Research**

The traits and resultant consequences of learned pessimism and helplessness have been studied extensively. Some of the research findings are quite compelling (Monmaney, 2000). An optimist is a person predisposed to take a favorable view on life. When compared to optimists, pessimists tend to:

- Experience sickness more often.
- Perceive more stress in their lives.
- Have shorter life spans.
- Earn lower grades.
- Report achieving their goals less often.
- Suffer from depression and anxiety more often.

Of course, these findings are all merely correlations, but they are worth consideration nonetheless. They indicate compelling reasons to try to move to the more optimistic side of things!

**Slide 14: Addressing Pessimism**
So, what should you do if you find yourself lapsing into pessimistic thinking? It might be easy to say, “Look at the bright side!” but this is difficult to do if you’re not accustomed to it. As with all of these behaviors, aim for gradual change. First, try to catch the negative thoughts when they start. If you let yourself go on a downward spiral of negativity, it will be harder to change course. So, try to recognize this as quickly as possible when it happens.

Next, challenge these thoughts. Replace them with realistic assumptions. Evaluate the situation and speculate on the reasonable outcome or effect of whatever has happened. Try to replace each negative thought with at least two more positive, rational thoughts. Again, this is easier said than done, but it’s well worth the effort. What you will soon notice is that once you get into the habit of challenging your negative thoughts, you find the rational thoughts come easier. It’s a snowball effect! This takes time and perseverance; ask your friends and family members to help and support you.

Another exercise that’s been shown to be helpful addressing a pessimistic attitude is to engage in a cost-benefit analysis of your mode of thinking. In other words, literally make a list of the pros and cons associated with your thought pattern.

For example, “If I choose to continue to think about this negatively, these will be the benefits . . . and these will be the costs . . .” What usually happens is that you will begin to see that the costs of pessimism far outweigh the benefits (Peterson, 2000).

**Slide 15: Worriers**

Do you know someone who seems to worry about everything and always assumes the worst? Excessive worrying is another distress-prone behavior pattern. Worriers are often very nice, caring people, but they are also very imaginative. They can take any small event and turn it into a tragic catastrophe within minutes! These people tend to suffer from “over-concern” and they ruminate excessively about things. This is obviously very stressful, as the worrying becomes burdensome and all-encompassing. Excessive worrying can also affect relationships with others when worriers have a hard time relaxing and having fun. Others may avoid worriers because they are constantly fretting about something.

Worriers have a lot in common with some of the other distress-prone patterns we’ve discussed in that they practice irrational thinking. In this case, they tend to immediately jump to the absolute worst-case scenario for any situation. For example:

- If a friend seemed to be in a rush, a worrier would automatically assume that the friend was angry for some reason and the friendship was in jeopardy of ending.
- If planning a big event or a trip, a worrier would lose sleep for days and be consumed with thoughts of everything that could possibly go wrong.
• If a family member doesn’t call, text, or e-mail when anticipated, a worrier would automatically assume that something horrible happened.
• If a group were considering a new activity, a worrier would be hesitant to approve, given the wide array of terrible things that could occur.

Sound familiar?

**Slide 16: VIDEO: Do You Worry A Lot?**

Do you worry a lot?

I do worry a lot. Um, I worry about, you know, not being able to, to meet my parents’ standards and not being able to get things done on time.

I think a lot about, uh, school family and future.

Just worry about, like, what I'm missing out on if I'm, like, cooped up in my dorm or if I'm out doing things I worry about what I should be doing for classes.

**Slide 17: Addressing Your Worries**

One of the best antidotes for habitual worrying is putting your thoughts down on paper. Rather than simply making a list of worries, though, take it one step further. An exercise in which you not only list your worries, but also evaluate how important they are to you, how realistic they are, and how much control you have over them, can be helpful. You’ll find that you’re often left with just a few things that actually deserve your true concern.

**Slide 18: Procrastination**

Procrastination—putting off doing things until a future time—is a fairly common behavior among college students. However, some people exhibit this behavior so often that it creates significant problems and stress. What often happens to chronic procrastinators is that they end up putting things off until they have to work frantically to complete projects or cram for a test or presentation. Then, their work tends to be rushed, they feel stressed, and the outcome is probably inferior to what they could have produced if they had only started working earlier. Some people might claim that they do their best work in the eleventh hour or under pressure, but research studies on procrastination don’t support this. One study clearly highlights the problems experienced by college student procrastinators (Baumeister & Tice, 1997). The researchers found that “procrastinators reported lower stress and less illness than nonprocrastinators early in the semester, but they reported higher stress and more illness late in the term, and overall they were sicker. Procrastinators also
received lower grades on all assignments. Procrastination thus appears to be a self-defeating behavior pattern marked by short-term benefits and long-term costs” (p. 454).

As with most distress-prone behavior patterns, procrastination often creates more problems and greater stress. But, if this is true, why do people procrastinate? The popular notion is that procrastinators are just plain lazy. While this might be true for a few people, the reason for procrastination is usually much more complex. Some people procrastinate when they perceive a project as overwhelming or unappealing. Others might put things off because they’re afraid of failure—or maybe even afraid of success. In these cases, procrastination allows the person to delay dealing with that feared success or failure. Other reasons offered for procrastination include: a tendency to procrastinate if they don’t feel in charge, enjoyment of that 11th hour excitement, fear of disapproval, fear of uncertainty or catastrophe, low self-confidence or depleted energy.

No matter the reason, most procrastinators struggle with feelings of guilt, shame, and self-condemnation. They feel this way because they often don’t complete tasks on time and, because they’re rushed and stressed, the work they produce is often not their best. All of these issues coupled with the fact that most professors, work places, and fellow students don’t condone lateness serve to create even more distress.

**Slide 19: Addressing Procrastination**

As with the other behavior patterns we’ve covered, the first step in addressing procrastination is to try to understand why you do it. If you procrastinate because a task seems incredibly overwhelming, try dividing the task into smaller segments and then mapping out a plan to tackle each one. This strategy often helps a project appear more manageable and helps you schedule your work so that you stay on top of things. You can’t jump a flight of stairs; you must take them one at a time.

If your procrastination stems from the fact that you just aren’t excited about a project, think about how much more unappealing the task will seem if you have to rush frantically to complete it at the last minute! Again, developing a plan of action will not only help you get started on the project, but it will also help you target a completion date when you’ll be free of it.

Finally, if you’re procrastinating because you’re afraid that you won’t succeed at your task, try to calmly assess why you believe that. What would help you have a better chance at success? Maybe you need to ask for guidance, clarification, or assistance. How about cultivating or accessing other resources? Often, when we view a project as impossible or too demanding, we simply need to step back and devise a new approach. Of course, this requires that you believe in your abilities—and you should!
Slide 20: VIDEO: Advice For Others

What advice would you give to other college students about stress?

Ask for help, that’s a major thing. Human beings are not designed for exclusion. That’s why it’s so hard to be a hermit.

I would have to say I’d just tell ’em to calm down, you know? You can’t be spread too thin and you can see that those people, how they just start to wear away after a while.

Focus on what you’re good at or what you excel at. I think if you try to take on too much or take on things that, um, you see your friends doing as opposed to what you’re interested in, then I think that you’re gonna try to reach for things that might not be to your advantage.

If you consider everything, the teeny things that people stress about all the time really don’t matter that much. That, I mean, stuff can go wrong and it’s not gonna, it’s not gonna mess up your year.

It’s all about kinda just getting your priorities in check. That’s, that’s like, that’s the hardest part.

Stress is, I think, anything that you make it. You can make anything stressful. You can bring it on yourself. But if you just take it step by step it becomes less stressful.

Slide 22: Summary

We’ve covered the most common distress-prone behavior patterns in this lesson; you might even be able to think of a few more! Keep in mind that most people do not perfectly and exclusively fall into one of these patterns. Usually, you’ll find that you might have a few traits from several different patterns—maybe you worry a bit, have a few perfectionist tendencies, and can identify with certain parts of the Type E pattern. No matter what patterns you exhibit, it’s important that you become aware of them and attempt to modify them if they are causing you more stress.

We will also talk about the most well known distress-resistant patterns and explore ways to cultivate them. The one thing that you must keep in mind is that we all have the ability to change our habits and behaviors!

References

