

Resources to address adverse situations

Recursos para enfrentar situaciones adversas

Recursos para enfrentar situações adversas

Verónica Zabaletta
Marcela Carolina López

ABSTRACT: This paper will develop the design and pedagogical-methodological proposal for a workshop aimed at older adults, which addresses the issue of stress and coping strategies. This interdisciplinary workshop aims to capture, in a current issue such as stress, the latest scientific developments in neuroscience. The approach is from a biological, psychological and social point of view, as we understand that the stress process is in itself a coping strategy. Stress is not exclusive to a specific life stage; however, there are situations that most frequently happen in old age, as widowhood, retirement, illness, the awareness of one's own finite existence. These situations make this period of life potentially vulnerable to stress. As a pedagogical approach, we suggest a classroom-workshop format, which allows individual and group work interaction among participants. It also creates a dynamic, participatory and reflective environment where seniors have access to current content and have the possibility to share their own experiences and their functional or dysfunctional solutions, which may promote peer bonding.

Keywords: Elderly People; Stress; Coping Strategies.

RESUMEN: *En el presente trabajo se desarrolla el diseño y la propuesta pedagógica y metodológica de un taller, destinado a adultos mayores, que aborda la temática de estrés y estrategias de afrontamiento. Esta propuesta interdisciplinaria plantea plasmar los últimos desarrollos científicos de las neurociencias en un tema de actualidad como es el estrés. El abordaje de la temática se realiza desde una aproximación a la vez biológica, psicológica y social, en la certeza que comprender el proceso de estrés es en sí mismo una estrategia de afrontamiento. El estrés no es privativo de una etapa vital específica, sin embargo hay situaciones que se presentan con mayor frecuencia en la vejez, como la viudez, la jubilación, enfermedades, crisis vital propia de la finitud; situaciones que convierten a este período de la vida en una etapa potencialmente vulnerable al estrés. Como propuesta pedagógicas se plantea la labor a partir de la modalidad aula-taller, la misma permite emplear consignas de trabajo individual y grupal que facilitan la interacción entre los participantes, generando un espacio dinámico, participativo y reflexivo en el que los adultos mayores pueden acceder a los contenidos más actuales y relevantes en la temática y compartir sus propias experiencias sobre situaciones y resoluciones que hayan sido tanto funcionales como disfuncionales, propiciando la vinculación entre pares.*

Palabras clave: *Estados de estrés; Afrontamiento.*

RESUMO: *Este artigo irá desenvolver o projeto e a proposta pedagógico-metodológica para uma oficina destinada a adultos mais velhos, que aborda a questão do estresse e das estratégias para seu enfrentamento. Esta oficina interdisciplinar tem como objetivo capturar, em uma edição atual, o estresse e os últimos desenvolvimentos científicos em neurociência. A abordagem é de um ponto de vista biológico, psicológico e social, pois entendemos que o processo de estresse é em si uma estratégia de enfrentamento. O estresse não é exclusivo de um estágio de vida específico; no entanto, existem situações que mais frequentemente ocorrem na velhice, como viuvez, aposentadoria, doença, a consciência da própria existência finita. Estas situações fazem este período de vida potencialmente vulneráveis ao estresse. Com uma abordagem pedagógica, sugerimos um formato de sala de aula-oficina, que permite a interação do trabalho individual e de grupo entre os participantes. Ele também cria um ambiente dinâmico, participativo e reflexivo, em que os idosos têm acesso ao conteúdo atual e ter a possibilidade de partilhar suas próprias experiências e suas soluções funcionais ou disfuncionais, que podem promover a ligação dos pares.*

Palavras-chave: *Pessoas idosas; Estresse; Estratégias de Enfrentamento.*

Introduction: on the topics addressed and the staff

We begin this chapter by introducing the instructors, as their interdisciplinary work was decisive for this workshop, not only in its design but also in its subsequent development. The instructors are trained in two basic disciplines, biology and psychology; however, in recent decades, the borders of the training disciplines have become more flexible, creating new fields of work.

Cognitive Neuroscience has emerged from brain functioning research and its relationship to behavior, receiving input from multiple disciplines, including biology and psychology. From this merging of disciplines and within a cognitive neuroscience framework, we presented *stress* as a leading topic of the workshop.

A biological, psychological and social approach was proposed, addressing the issue from the complementarity of the professionals. The latest research suggests stress is multidimensional. An integrative and comprehensive model, as part of the transaction model, supports it. This model includes an explanation of the analysis of these three dimensions. Following this approach, stress is defined as the result of an imbalance between the demands of the context and the individual's resources to face them. The cognitive assessment of both demands and resources are essential to the person involved (Barraza-Macias, 2006; Cohen, and Lazarus, 1983; Sandin, 2003). Thus, the title of the workshop: *Resources to Cope with Adverse Situations*

Why stress?

Stress is not exclusive to a specific life stage, however, there are situations that occur most frequently in old age, as widowhood, retirement, certain diseases, the awareness of one's own finite existence, among others that make this life stage potentially stressful.

However, stress is not only harmful. Some authors define stress - in ideal amounts - as being the "spice of life". We need a share of stress to make us mobilize resources and be ready to face challenges.

However, when this stress response, which is favorable in controlled conditions, extends over time, it ceases to be beneficial and can become harmful. The key is to prevent this phenomenon from becoming a detriment.

Therefore, the balance of these responses will be fundamental. The first tool to learn in how to manage stress is learning about it, understanding its bio-psycho-social effects. This understanding will enable us to check the most suitable tools with which to face stress, trying to incorporate new strategies into our repertoire.

The participants and the pedagogical approach

This workshop environment was designed for participants with diverse educational backgrounds, age and life story. Therefore, to address these characteristics, from the pedagogical approach, this workshop was chosen as a working ground where we can jointly create knowledge. The workshop was planned as a four-month session with two-hour weekly meetings. The classroom-workshop format allows individual and group work, which facilitates interaction among participants. It creates a dynamic, participatory and reflective environment where seniors have access to current and relevant content and have the possibility to share their own experiences and their functional or dysfunctional solutions.

The identification with peers facilitates reflection on the tools to face stress as a way of acquiring new resources and/or boosting those people already have.

This design allows for the development of close affective bonds among participants in the workshop, reinforcing their social bonds. This situation is a strategy in itself to cope with stress, i.e. social support.

Development

The general objectives of the workshop are as follows:

- To understand the concept of stress, differentiating processes of eustress and distress.
- To understand the concept of coping strategies and their importance in the assessment of stressful situations.

- To learn about the different types of coping strategies.
- To value the importance of implementing appropriate coping strategies.
- To promote the use, in older adults, of new strategies for coping with situations that make them feel threatened.

The following activities and strategies were carried out in the workshop:

- Theoretical-practical presentation on the stress process (eustress and distress) and the concept of coping strategies.
- Film resources, cartoons, to recognize and exemplify the theoretical presentations.
- Discussion on the use of strategies in what can be considered threatening situations for the elderly.
- Time for reflection as needed by the group.

Activities' record

The use of a group log book, as a blog or a roadmap was suggested so that each participant could alternatively narrate, through his/her eyes, what was going on in each meeting. The proposal was that at the end of each meeting, a participant would voluntarily become a chronicler writing the meeting's development in the log book.

The following meeting the participant would read aloud his/her notes. This was important to resume the thread of the subject, by picking up from what was dealt with in the previous meeting. Every year at the end of the workshop, participants receive a copy of the complete record, as a tangible epilogue of the work accomplished.

In addition, this system allows those who were absent – because of health problems, travels etc. - to keep track with what was worked in the meetings.

The first meeting

The first meeting not only establishes the basis for the group relationship, but also determines the continuity of the participants; therefore, it has a particular dynamic. We consider important to achieve a pleasant environment, creating a positive, dynamic, participatory and reflective space where seniors may feel comfortable to share experiences and queries. The idea is that they can express themselves without confrontation.

The workshop was planned in three stages. In the first meeting, the teachers and then each workshop participant were introduced.

Several introduction techniques were used: the web, chain of names, among others. In a second meeting, the participants were asked about their expectation as regards the workshop. Since the work in workshops is dynamic, each encounter is adapted to the participants' expectations, to motivate them to attend the meetings. Also, the implications of group work were defined together with the participants, stating that although there might be different points of view, it was important that the work be collaborative and participatory, respecting diversity. The activity ends with a brief reflection, which enables teachers and students to design rules of coexistence together. Finally, the topic of the workshop is introduced by asking, "What is stress for you?" The answers are written down to be used in the development of future meetings.

Next meetings

From the second meeting on, we worked with the following generic structure:

- Introduction:
 - Reading of previous meeting records.
 - The participant who made the record is in charge.
- Recovery of the main concepts contributed by the participants to continue with the last meeting's topic.
 - The teaching staff is in charge.

- Development:
 - Theoretical explanation of the topic of the meeting.
 - The teaching staff is in charge.
 - Presentation of a triggering topic.
 - The teaching staff is in charge.
 - Group work on the topic of the meeting.
 - Participants, coordinated by the teaching staff are in charge.
- Closing
 - Highlighting of key work concepts dealt by the participants and closing of theoretical presentation.
 - The instructor is in charge.

Theoretical development of the workshop topic

In the first meeting, no theoretical concepts were worked on, as the aim was to get information on the participant's prior knowledge about the topic.

In the second meeting, the bio-psycho-social human being concept and its relationship with health was addressed. It was highlighted as a dynamic concept in which these three areas are interrelated, and how the loss of balance in any of them alters the other. It is important for participants to understand the importance of maintaining a personal balance from the knowledge acquired. A basic premise of this workshop is to *acquire knowledge to understand and be able to take good care of oneself*.

In the following meetings, we work with the questions "How do our brains process the information we receive?" This allows us to recognize the differences in the perceptual process. "What do we really know?" "How much do we infer?" "How can past experiences affect perception?" It is important that the workshop participants realize that there are differences in the way each person perceives. These differences are linked to the processing of a biological structure (brain) and to one's own experiences that shape the personality structure with which one addresses the personal world. We work on the cognitive flexibility concept and the importance of having an active attitude towards incoming information.

To complete this, we analyze the brain structure - its neurons and its chemical messengers- to understand how communication takes place. Then we see the upper structures, cerebral cortex, the limbic system, and its relation to perception, memory, and emotions, among others. The dynamic concept of brain processing and the ability to modify brain circuits are prioritized.

With this knowledge, in the next meetings, we go deep into the meaning of the term *stress*. First, we worked with the concept of General Adaptation Syndrome by Hans Selye (1935) and its three phases – alarm, resistance and exhaustion - in order to understand the evolutionary importance of an alarm reaction involving the autonomic nervous system.

The alarm phase starts when the threatening factor is detected and the body tries to defend itself. We work on the recognizable biological signs (dilated pupils, dry mouth, increased blood flow, tachycardia etc.) to enable participants to recognize them in their own bodies. The biology aspect is a warning that should be taken into account.

Next, the resistance phase is conceptualized, emphasizing the increase of glucocorticoids and its effects as autonomic response boosters, holding the activation which started in the alarm phase. Thus, the body tries to overcome, adapt or face the threatening presence of factors. This phase implies a high-energy demand and it is only adaptive for a short time. Finally, we analyze the exhaustion phase, which begins when there is a frequently repeated or long lasting aggression. In this case, the person's resources for adaptation are depleted and damage at a biological level occurs due to the sustained increase of glucocorticoid, which causes an imbalance in the biological area and, therefore, in the other two (psychological and social) spheres.

Subsequently, we reviewed the theories of stress based on response, the ones based on stimuli, until we reached the interactionist theories and the stress process model.

To address the theories based on stimuli, we worked with Holmes and Rahe's scale of recent life events (1967), taking an individual and later a group consideration on the scale event, where interpersonal differences are pointed out. This aims at relating what was worked on the perceptual information processing topic and observing differences in participants' answers; taking the questionnaire as merely indicative of an orientation. On the other hand, to address the theories based on the answers we worked with Sandín, and Chorot's (1995) somatic symptoms scale, following the same dynamic, that is, individual response and group work, paying attention to the signs that could indicate the presence of alertness, resistance or exhaustion.

Finally, Lazarus, and Folkman (1986) theories based on interaction are addressed. We prioritize the cognitive assessment concept, understanding stress as a set of special relationship between the person and the situation. In this sense, the person values stress as something that exceeds his/her own resources, putting at stake his/her personal well-being. Thus, we analyze the stress process model (Sandin, 1995) to understand the human body as a system where all the parts are interrelated, requiring a dynamic balance between them to remain healthy. The *allostasis* concept coined by Sterling (1988), and McEwen (1999) is introduced, understood as an active process by which an organism maintains its physiological stability by appropriately changing the parameters of the internal environment to the demands of the external environment. Likewise, the concept of *allostatic load* is presented, where the cumulative physical wear from chronic hyperactivity to suit the constant demands is identified. This is understood as the price the organism has to pay when being forced to adapt to adverse psychosocial or physical situations.

Finally, all the concepts dealt with helped differentiate between eustress - a process necessary for the adaptation of an organism to the environment- and distress - as adaptive failure.

While analyzing the concept of stress, we deal with the responses that arise in all three areas (biological, psychological and social), going further into problems in the biological area, to foresee their possible consequences and imbalances in health.

In the last meetings, having already introduced the procedural model of stress, (Sandin, 1995) we take up and deepen the concepts of this model to address the coping strategies. Although the workshop is framed from the aforementioned scientific knowledge, this time is more experience-based. We start working from the participants' own situations and also through films that allow shelling the coping strategies in both their own experience and in the reflection or identification with others. Participants work in groups, sharing their thoughts.

These final moments of the workshop are possible, first, by understanding the different ways of processing of information, a fact that is reflected in the dissimilar views and behaviors that are evident in the situations addressed. Moreover, we must remember that during the workshop, we worked on values such as respect, caring, intimacy and trust, which allowed for group consolidation and participants' bonding.

The importance of the title

Our workshop was called "Resources to face adverse situations". It was hard to find a title that encompassed in a few words what we expected to give: - Shall we call it *stress*? - Yes, but it is not just stress in itself, - What about *coping strategies*? – It seems kind of "empty", as if explanations are missing.

From these discussions emerged the title finally chosen. After some meetings, we began to notice that despite the group differences, participants had something in common related to difficulty, frustration and fear.

This made us reflect on the title, concluding that it did not sum up those people who would like to have resources for future adverse situations, but those who were going through difficult situations at the moment.

Several times, we had to work simultaneously with the contents of the workshop and with those unexpected situations in which a participant shared his/her emotional burden with the rest.

However, these unforeseen situations, which were unplanned, brought something very important to the topic itself: the possibility for the participants to find a group of peers to share problems with, allowing them to experience social support as a means to face adverse situations in the workshop environment.

Conclusions

To conclude, we want to share some thoughts from participants:

"The workshop made me wonder: Is there a possibility of change in the brain structure? Is what we perceive an absolute truth or is it built according to our life background? ... There are no certainties in our assessment. It is important to stop and reevaluate with a broader vision. Each demand can damage my physical and mental health. If I involved, my well-being is at stake and I deal with things that I do not seek."

"I admit that when I started this course I did not have the tools acquired here. I learned the reason for my feelings and I learnt that I can potentially address the problems, whether I'm wrong or not."

"We must stop the circle in which we get involved without realizing it ... it's difficult but not impossible. It is something we learn how to face every day, "just for today". Although sometimes we do not succeed, we should not stop trying. With perseverance we reach the goal ... not to get on the "carousel" on an impulse ... evaluate when to do it and the potential consequences for that decision."

"Our life is like a movie where one should be an actor and director, get in and out, be flexible. We do not know if the best personal conception of a scene is best for everyone. We often get tempted to believe that 'my' vision of a situation is the best and so we proceed, however, being flexible in our way of thinking allows us to listen to each other and to negotiate avoiding conflicts that alter relationships."

In addition to these words, it seems relevant to say that we, as instructors, were witnesses of the participants' changes in the workshop, as we saw how those who had trouble expressing themselves, started to do so. Even those participants who were shy, are currently meeting for coffee with their new partners.

The elderly had the possibility of giving and receiving affection, changing from confrontation to dialogue and finally recognizing that these spaces were intended as a possibility for sharing and socializing, going beyond the specific content of the workshop.

References

- Barraza-Macías, A. (2006). *Un modelo conceptual para el estudio del estrés académico*. Recuperado el 28 diciembre, 2008, en URL: <http://www.psicologiacientifica.com/bv/psicologia-167-1-un-modelo-conceptual-para-el-estudio-del-estrés-academico.html>.
- Cohen, F., & Lazarus, R. S. (1983). Coping and Adaptation in Health and Illness. En: Mechanic, D. (Ed.). *Handbook of health, health care, and the health profession*, 608-631. New York, EUA: Free Press.

Holmes, T. H. & Rahe, R. H. (1967). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 11(2), 213-218. Recuperado el 28 diciembre, 2008, en URL: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/6059863>.

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1986). *Estrés y procesos cognitivos*. Barcelona, España: Martínez-Roca.

Mcewen, B. S., & Seeman, T. (1999). Protective and damaging effects of mediators of stress: Elaborating and testing the concepts of allostasis and allostatic load. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 896, 30-47. Recuperado el 28 diciembre, 2008, en URL: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10681886>.

Sandín, B., & Chorot, P. (1995). *Escala de Sintomas Somáticos (ESS-R)*. Madrid, España: UNED.

Sandín, B. (2003). El estrés: un análisis basado en el papel de los factores sociales. *Revista Internacional de Psicología Clínica y de la Salud*, 3(1), 141-157. Recuperado el 28 diciembre, 2008, en URL: http://www.aepc.es/ijchp/articulos_pdf/ijchp-65.pdf.

Selye, H., Collip, J. B., & Thomson, D. L. (1935). *Proceedings of the Society for Experimental Biology and Medicine*, 32, 1377-1387.

Sterling, P. & Eyer, J. (1988). Allostasis. A new paradigm to explain arousal pathology. En: Fhiser, S., & Reason, J. (Eds.). *Handbook of Life Stress. Cognition and Health*. Chichester, John Wiley, 629-649. New York, EUA: Free Press.

Recibido el 17/12/2015

Aceptado el 30/12/2015

Verónica Zabaletta - Lic. en Psicología - Docente investigador Facultad de Psicología.
Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata. Argentina.

E mail: vzabaletta@gmail.com

Marcela Carolina López - Lic. en Ciencias Biológicas - Docente investigador Facultad de Psicología. Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata. Argentina.

E-mail: mclopez@mdp.edu.ar