

Referral—connecting people to health, mental health, social support, and financial services
 Validation—providing formal and informal education to affirm the normalcy and value of each person's reactions, concerns, and ways of coping

Techniques for Reducing Stress



EP 4c

LO 5

A very effective way to respond to trauma and disaster is to deal with the stress that has built up within a person. There are a number of stress reduction approaches, some involving medication, others using mind-body work, and some combining both. Approaches that combine interventions that address both the mind and body are advantageous. The risks involved are minimal, and the interventions can be taught easily. Research suggests that mind-body interventions improve psychological functioning and can help people cope with chronic conditions and stress (National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, 2007; Benn, Akiva, Arcl, Roeser, & Eccles, 2012).

Mindfulness and stress One approach that is often successful in preventing and reducing stress is the application of **mindfulness**, the state of being aware of everything in the present moment, and doing so without judgment or analysis. Our bodies are hardwired to respond to stress with an immediate sense of urgency and alert, and this can act to save us from danger. However, once the emergency is past, bringing down this level of alert from the acute state is difficult. In order to do so, a person might use some of the following techniques:

- Becoming aware of his or her thoughts, feelings, and fears
- Breathing slowly to reduce the state of arousal
- Reframing the event to calm him- or herself
- Seeing options and alternative behaviors (Napoli, 2007)

The goal of mindfulness and the techniques listed is to take action to reduce stress and deescalate the body's pattern of responding in a hyperstate of readiness and stress. When a person is in a state of distress, mindfulness training can offer an alternative that once learned can be practiced by the individual in any setting at any time those symptoms emerge.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy **Cognitive behavioral therapies (CBTs)** are among the most researched and most used treatments for stress and trauma, including PTSD (Dobson, 2002). For example, one study demonstrated the efficacy of CBT in alleviating post-traumatic stress symptoms among adolescents after a catastrophic disaster (Shooshary, Panaghi, & Moghadam, 2008). According to the National Association of Cognitive Behavioral Therapists, CBT is not a distinct therapeutic technique, but instead a group of therapies that share certain common elements. The central premise of CBT is that thoughts, rather than the external environment, cause emotions. CBT therapies are relatively brief in duration and usually involve the client practicing outside of sessions what he or she has learned. The therapist usually has a structured agenda

for each session. The discussions of CBT and crisis intervention in Chapter 6 reflect these approaches from a general practice standpoint. These forms of intervention provide social workers with excellent treatment choices to use with people exposed to significant stress and trauma.

Emerging techniques—energy psychology and trauma-releasing exercises

Energy psychology includes several therapeutic techniques that focus on recalling past trauma combined with physical stimulation. The therapies include thought field therapy (TFT), emotional freedom techniques (EFT), and Tapas acupressure technique (TAT). Each of these therapies is relatively new, and continued research is needed to determine their effectiveness to address stress, including PTSD. However, some of the early research suggests that they may provide promising alternatives to more conventional treatments. One study examining the effectiveness of EFT on people with PTSD found it to be 33 percent more effective than using cognitive behavioral therapy combined with anti-anxiety drugs (Rowe, 2005). All of the techniques claim to reduce trauma symptoms in a shorter period of time than traditional therapies, and they are structured in such a way that they can be taught to groups of people suffering from the effects of trauma, and then can be continued without the need for a professional to be present. This can be important in situations where there is mass trauma and not enough trained practitioners to address it all.

Trauma-releasing exercises (TREs) were developed by David Berceli (2007), a social worker who worked with people around the world suffering from trauma-related stress and PTSD. TRE is a set of exercises premised on the understanding that healing from PTSD requires involvement of both the mind and the body. The technique is based on the fact that humans seem to react similarly to other mammals, following trauma. After a traumatic experience, mammals tend to shake or shiver. It is common to see pets shake after an event that frightens them. One theory is that this shaking allows the animal to release the trauma from its muscles. TRE uses a set of exercises that cause slight fatigue in the leg and pelvic muscles. Following the exercises, clients experience tremors that allow the body to release stress from the traumatic event, thus relieving symptoms of PTSD. Like the energy psychology techniques described earlier, TRE can be taught to large groups of people who can do the exercises on their own and reduce problems associated with PTSD without ongoing need of a therapist.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing **Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR)** was developed by Francine Shapiro in 1987 and is increasingly used to treat stress and trauma. It incorporates components of several therapeutic techniques, including cognitive behavioral, psychodynamic, and body therapies. EMDR involves paying attention to past and current experiences while simultaneously focusing on an external stimulus. During the treatment, clients focus on troubling memories, images, or feelings while they follow an external stimulus, usually the therapist's fingers, with their eyes. They also identify alternative positive beliefs. Adding eye movement to other therapeutic techniques has been found to be effective in reducing stress and