

**Two experiential activities about stress (that are not very stressful for instructors)**

**Abstract**

This session demonstrates two experiential activities for teaching about stress. One activity is a series of role play scenarios that have been used successfully in undergraduate and MBA courses in both synchronous classrooms and asynchronous online courses. The second activity is a fast-paced, hands-on activity best suited for in-person classes that quickly generates student engagement. Both are suitable for facilitation by new and experienced instructors. Come learn more about these experiential activities so you don't stress out when teaching about stress!

**Keywords:** Stress; Experiential exercises; Active learning

**Two experiential activities about stress (that are not very stressful for instructors)**

**Session format:** Activity / Exercise

**Classroom style:** Either classroom or online format

**Session level:** Open to all levels of experience

**Time requested:** 45 minutes

**Introduction**

Topics related to stress and well-being are typically included in management courses like Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management. These topics are also practically important to employees and organizations, as evident by three of the 2022 SIOP top ten trends being related to stress and well-being (SIOP, 2022). Nonetheless, there seem to be fewer experiential activities about stress and well-being available for educators compared to more popular topics like motivation, teams, communication, conflict, cultural differences<sup>1</sup>. In addition, most activities that exist focus on stress reduction techniques like meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, gratitude journals, and deep breathing (e.g., Flinchbaugh et al., 2011). The teaching activities presented in this session encompass multiple components of the stress process, ranging from identifying causes of stress, reducing feelings of stress, and minimizing outcomes of stress (strains). These activities can be used in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

**Theoretical Foundation / Teaching Implications**

A fundamental framework for teaching about stress is the stressor-stress-strain model (Colquitt, LePine, & Wesson, 2022). Stressors are the causes of stress, and are differentiated between challenge stressors (e.g., time pressure, work responsibility) and hindrance stressors (e.g., role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict; LePine, Podsakoff, & LePine, 2005). Stress is a psychological and/or physiological response to a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Strain are

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on first author's search for stress-related class activities published in the past decade (2012-2022) in Management Teaching Review and the Journal of Management Education.

the short-term and long-term negative physiological and psychological outcomes caused by stress (Ganster & Rosen, 2013).

### **Learning Outcomes**

These activities help students:

- Identify stressors, stress states, and strains
- Practice conversations about stress and reducing stress

### **Exercise Overview**

This session will demonstrate two short activities about stress with attendees participating in the activity and the debrief.

#### ***Activity 1: Role Play Scenarios***

This activity provides three related scenarios with three roles: an overworked manager, a Vice President of Human Resources, and a new employee. Each scenario has two individuals role play a conversation for different situations. The scenarios allow for participating students (those doing the role play) to learn how to have conversations about stress. Each scenario also focuses on separate aspects of the stressor-stress-strain model so that students watching the scenario will identify 1) stressors in the situation, 2) how to reduce stress, and 3) how to reduce strains.

To run this activity, I create groups as small as four students and as large as ten students. A minimum of three students and a maximum of six students can participate in the role play scenarios, with the rest of the students actively watching and providing feedback. Each scenario consists of a short introduction and letting students read their role information (just a few sentences), students interacting during the role play, and a debrief. Each scenario lasts about three to five minutes, with a final debrief at the end. I have used this in both synchronous

classroom settings and online synchronous settings (i.e., students separated into multiple Zoom rooms). The scenarios are flexible, such that one individual can play the same role for all three scenarios (three role play participants), or different students can be in the role in different scenarios (six role play participants). The role play information provided to students is in Appendix A.

### ***Activity 2: Operation Game***

The activity is based around the classic board game “Operation.” To run this activity, I create groups as small as four students and as large as seven students. The minimum and maximum number of participants serving in each role as well as suggestions for how each role can be manipulated can be found in Appendix B. Students are instructed that they are members of an Emergency Room team; as such, they are provided a game of Operation and assigned to one of three roles: Chief of Surgery, ER Doctor, or Head Nurse. In addition, one to three students may be assigned to miscellaneous roles external to the operating teams; in the event there are not students available to fulfil these miscellaneous roles, the instructor can fulfill these functions. Sample descriptions for each role can be found in Appendix C.

The activity consists of two, 5-minute rounds. The time limit can be manipulated depending on class length, team size, and skill; the 5-minute interval seems adequate to simulate a challenge-inducing level of time pressure. In Round 1, each surgery team is instructed to “cure” their patient of as many ailments as possible (i.e., remove the objects from the board without hitting the buzzer). In Round 2, each surgery team is instructed that the team that “cures” their patient the fastest will be eligible for a life-changing promotion and bonus (challenge stressor). Other than the competition element in Round 2, the rules across both rounds are the same. Specifically, only individuals assigned to the ER Doctor role can “perform surgery” and

they must take turns doing so. Those serving as ER Doctors are also required to address the concerns of family members (which are used to simulate role overload) and/or deal with personal issues such as a sick school-aged child (which is used to simulate work-family conflict). The Head Nurses of each team are responsible for preparing the patients for surgery (i.e., readying the board). To simulate daily hassles, the various boxes of Operation that are distributed are equipped with differing quantities of supplies and differing levels of readiness. For example, some Head Nurses receive “complete” boxes with the batteries installed and the board ready to use, others have batteries and a screwdriver but must install them, and still others must search for a screwdriver and batteries in order to “ready” the patient. In addition, the Surgery Log (Appendix D) can be complicated (simplified) to increase (decrease) the level of role overload experienced by Head Nurses. The Chief of Surgery serves in a leadership capacity, which can be manipulated based on course content previously covered (e.g., autocratic versus considerate).

### **Session Description**

The focus of this session is to briefly present two experiential activities. Attendees will participate in the activities and a debrief, with time for questions after each activity. We will conclude with a brief discussion about adapting activities for an online class (the role play activity has been used in an online Zoom class) and ideas for improving activities. The overall session plan is:

Introduce speakers, purpose of session, & stress topic	5 minutes
Activity 1: Operation activity, debrief, & questions	15 minutes
Activity 2: Role play activity, debrief, & questions	15 minutes
Discussion & questions	10 minutes
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>45 minutes</b>

**References**

- Colquitt, J., Lepine, J. A., & Wesson, M. J. (2022). *Organizational Behavior: Improving Performance and Commitment in the Workplace (8<sup>th</sup> edition)*. New York, NY, USA: McGraw-Hill.
- Flinchbaugh, C. L., Moore, E. W. G., Chang, Y. K., & May, D. R. (2012). Student well-being interventions: The effects of stress management techniques and gratitude journaling in the management education classroom. *Journal of Management Education*, 36(2), 191-219.
- Ganster, D. C., & Rosen, C. C. (2013). Work stress and employee health: A multidisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 39(5), 1085-1122.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.
- LePine, J. A., Podsakoff, N. P., & LePine, M. A. (2005). A meta-analytic test of the challenge stressor–hindrance stressor framework: An explanation for inconsistent relationships among stressors and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48(5), 764-775.
- SIOP. (2022). *Top ten work trends 2022*. Retrieved from <https://www.siop.org/Business-Resources/Top-10-Work-Trends>.

## **Appendix A: Role Play Scenarios**

### **Scenario 1**

#### **Role: Manager**

You are the manager of a busy call center for a large cable company, and currently work 25 hours of overtime each week because two employees quit. You asked human resources for help because you feel extremely stressed. You are about to have a discussion with your Vice President of Human Resources. Think about how you will explain your sources of stress and how you want the company to help.

#### **Role: Vice President of Human Resources**

You are the Vice President of Human Resources for a large cable company. The manager of the main customer call center for the entire company asked for help because they are feeling extremely stressed. Your job is to figure out what is causing the stress and brainstorm solutions about what the company can do to fix the issue(s).

### **Scenario 2**

#### **Role: Manager**

You are the manager of a busy call center for a large cable company. You were extremely overworked. After talking with the Vice President of Human Resources, you were able to hire a new employee. Today was the employee's first day. Unfortunately, today was extremely busy because a hurricane passed through the city and disrupted the cable service of 100,000 customers. This new employee had never worked in a call center before, and the only training they received were to "ask about the customer's problem and then type the problem into the search function in the computer help database". At the end of the workday, this new employee tells you "I'm so stressed out". Your job is to figure out why this employee is stressed and discuss ways to reduce this stress in the moment (during job time).

#### **Role: New employee**

You are a new employee at a call center of a large cable company. Today was your first day. Unfortunately, today was extremely busy because a hurricane passed through the city and disrupted the cable service of 100,000 customers. You have never worked in a call center before. The only training you received was to "ask about the customer's problem and then type the problem into the search function in the computer help database". At the end of the day, you told your manager "I'm so stressed out", and now you are about to meet with this manager.

### Scenario 3

**Role: New employee**

You are a new employee at a call center of a large cable company. Even after talking with your manager, you continue to feel a high level of stress. The Sunday night before you went to work on Monday, you couldn't sleep, and you felt sick to your stomach. On Monday morning, you got into work 45 minutes late because you couldn't get out of bed. It's now the end of the day, and you are about to meet with someone from Human Resources at the organization.

**Role: Vice President of Human Resources**

You work in Human Resources for a large cable company. One of the new call center employees met with their manager last week because they were feeling very stressed. Today, this employee showed up to work 45 minutes late and said it was because of stress. Your job is to figure out what is causing the stress and brainstorm solutions about what the company can do to fix the issue(s).



**Appendix B: Summary of Jobs and Possible Manipulations for Operation**

<b>Job Roles</b>	<b>Min Per Team</b>	<b>Max Per Team</b>	<b>Manipulations</b>
Chief of Surgery	1	1	Leadership Style (e.g., Participative, Authoritative)
ER Doctor	2	5	None
Head Nurse	1	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-work hindrance stressors (e.g., family-work conflict)</li> <li>• Work hindrance stressors (e.g., role overload, role conflict, daily hassles)</li> </ul>
Family Member	0*	1	
Other Patients	0*	1	
Teacher of ER Doctor's Child	0*	1	

\* If there are not enough participants, this role can be played by the instructor at various points throughout the activity.

## Appendix C: Sample Job Descriptions for Operation

### **ROLE: Chief of Surgery, ER Team #1**

**Instructions:** You are in charge of ER Team 1. *Your leadership style is very encouraging. You want to do as much as possible to motivate your team of surgeons to cure the patient of his ailments. Encourage them. Cheer them on. Do anything you can to make their jobs easier. Give them the space they need to do their jobs.* Remember, you cannot actually assist with, or do, any surgery. **Do not show these instructions to anyone else.**

### **ROLE: Doctor, ER Team #1**

**Instructions:** You are a doctor on ER Team 1. You are a skilled surgeon. Your job is to cure the patient of their ailments, one at a time. This is tedious, painstaking work. You must tell your head nurse and the other doctors what ailment you're trying to cure ahead of time. Then, attempt to cure it. If you do not succeed, stop your attempt immediately. The patient is in immense pain – you can tell from the red nose and buzzing sound that they aren't doing well. You may begin operating again after the other doctor has tried his/her hand at curing an ailment. Take turns with the other doctor so neither of you get too tired. In addition, you're on call today. If you hear your beeper ring, make sure you leave the surgery room to attend to the problem. **Do not show these instructions to anyone else.**

### **ROLE: Head Nurse, ER Team #1**

**Instructions:** As head nurse of ER Team 1, your job is critical. You must make sure the patient is scrubbed in and ready for surgery. Make sure his pain sensors (e.g., his light up nose and buzzer) work. Make sure the team of doctors has everything they need to do their job. Make sure they can see all the ailments and are able to start diagnosing the patient. *In addition, you must keep a log of all of the doctors who have attempted to cure an ailment and whether they were successful.* Use the log sheets (provided) to note the doctor's name, the ailment he/she attempted to cure, and the result of the attempt (success or failure). This log is critical so that your team of surgeons can bill out the right amount of fees to the insurance company and get paid the right amount of money for your efforts. In addition, you have other patients under your watch and care. Make sure you're checking on them and tending to their needs as well. Finally, don't forget to keep the patient's family informed about how the patient is doing. They are in the waiting room and boy are they worried about their dearly beloved. **Do not show these instructions to anyone else.**

Note. *Italicized text* indicates the part of the description that can be manipulated across teams.

