



How Our Bodies Respond to Stress



Content on this side is intended for the educator's reference. The information on the back can be photocopied and shared with clients.

Objective: Clients will better understand how their bodies respond to stress during conflict and healthy ways to manage stress and conflict.

Audience: This tool can be used with all clients, regardless of relationship status. It may be particularly useful for clients who frequently report struggling with stressful situations (marital, parenting, co-parenting, work, etc.).

Estimated Time: 10-15 minutes

Educator Instructions: Review the instructions printed on the tool. Note that this tool requires a *stress bottle* prop. This can be made using a clear plastic bottle filled with water and 2-3 tablespoons of dark-colored glitter. If you do not have the *stress bottle*, you may be able to use something similar (e.g., snow globe, certain bottles of salad dressings). When you begin, let the client know that the bottle represents our brain and bodies, and explain that the glitter represents stress hormones. Proceed slowly through each step, and talk with the client about what each action represents. Follow the steps (actions and related discussion points) described on the back of this sheet. If desired, you can create a *stress bottle* for your client to keep.

Important: Certain stressful situations can be extremely complex and personal. The following tool shows one aspect of the physiological impact of stress, but it should not be assumed that all conflict can be easily managed just by waiting until one is no longer stressed. The key is to highlight certain times that are more and less appropriate to attempt to deal with an interpersonal conflict. Also, this tool is not meant to encourage perpetually avoiding an issue, but rather picking wise times to postpone dealing with it.

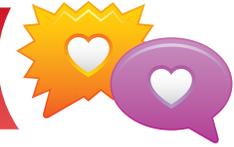
Discussion Starter: If you have ever been in an intense argument or highly stressful situation, you may have noticed that your heart started beating faster or your breathing quickened. The way our bodies react to stress impacts how we respond and behave during intense disagreements or conflict. Here is a simple illustration that can help explain how stress impacts our bodies and our ability to manage conflict in healthy ways.

Follow-up: In future conversations, ask if remembering this example helped them postpone attempting to resolve an issue until they had calmed down. Has there been a time when they did *not* wait but attempted to deal with an issue during the "fuzzy bottle" stage? Have they shared any of this information with another person?





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Stress is something that impacts our entire body. When faced with certain stressful situations, our bodies respond by releasing certain stress hormones. These stress hormones cause us to either “flight” (e.g., turn or walk away and avoid conflict) or “fight” (e.g., engage in an unhealthy, possibly physically or emotionally violent, way). Understanding what is happening inside our bodies can help us know when we need time to calm down before addressing important issues.

Here is a quick three step guide to help you remember how stress can affect us.



Step 1: *Clear plastic water bottle – calm, glitter resting on the bottom.*

- This represents the “normal” state of stress hormones in the brain when we are calm. During these times, we can hear others more accurately, perceive things more clearly, and process information more calmly.



Step 2: *Pick up and shake bottle, so the glitter is swirling around.*

- This represents the “stressful” state (when we are in a conflict, argument, etc.) when the brain has released stress hormones throughout the body.
- As you can see, it is much more difficult to see through the bottle. These stress hormones in our bodies can hinder our ability to think clearly and process information before we speak, which puts us at risk of saying things we may later regret.



Step 3: *Bottle returned to undistributed position, with glitter re-settling to bottom and water becoming clear.*

- This represents a return to the “normal” state, when we are able to see more clearly and process information more calmly.
- In order for the glitter to settle, the bottle cannot continue to be swirled but needs to be set down. Similarly, our bodies need time to calm down.

**Being calm = Clear bottle = Clear thinking
Good time to MANAGE conflict and stress.**

**High stress and conflict = Fuzzy bottle = Fuzzy thinking
Bad time to MANAGE conflict and stress.**

What does this mean for couple relationships?

During a disagreement, if you are beginning to lose your cool, step away and take some time for yourself. Once you and your partner are calm, you may continue the conversation. It takes time for our bodies to “cool” down and the amount of time this takes may differ for each person. During this time, do something that will help you relax and take your mind off the conflict to help your body to return to a calm state.

Knowing the right (and wrong) time to deal with a conflict can help in being able to manage it.