





S.O.B.E.R. Stress Interruption

Coping

 Exercise

 3 min

 Client

 No

While stress has been defined in many ways, it is, in essence, a feeling of emotional or physical tension in response to a perceived challenge or threat to one's survival [1]. We are unlikely to encounter the same life-threatening situations as our ancestors. However, our evolutionary response to stressful stimuli produces a physiological reaction that reflects the demands of these earlier environments [2]. Long-term stress is a maladaptive state that precipitates a hyper-activation of the sympathetic nervous system, which may lead to acute or chronic physical, psychological, and behavioral impairment if left unattended [3]. Common reactions to stress include changes to the immune system and immune response [2], excessive worry, rumination, and sleep disruptions [4], increased heart rate and blood pressure, and diminished efforts to be physically active [5].

Increasingly, research has suggested that even short-term stress should be managed. Indeed, the pathogenic effects of stress are evident not only over long intervals of months or years but also on a day-to-day basis [2]. One approach to reducing and managing short-term stress is the S.O.B.E.R. stress interruption technique. S.O.B.E.R. was initially developed as an informal mindfulness practice within addiction treatment programs to help break addictive processes and, over time, has been adapted for use in a range of therapeutic interventions.

S.O.B.E.R. consists of five steps: **S**top what you are doing, **O**bserve what is happening around you, **B**reathe, **E**xpand awareness to the whole body, and **R**espond with awareness. When utilized for stress interruption, the S.O.B.E.R. technique helps reduce habitual reactive behaviors to stressful stimuli and encourages more adaptive responses by expanding behavioral repertoires to include intentional and mindful choices [6]. This exercise will help clients take a moment to pause, step out of autopilot mode, and respond to stressful experiences with mindful awareness.



Author

This tool was created by Elaine Houston.



Goal

The goal of this exercise is to help clients reduce stress by intentionally interrupting their chronic stress response. In utilizing the S.O.B.E.R. stress interruption technique, clients can learn to step out of autopilot reactions to stress, take a mindful pause, and deliberately choose a more helpful response to less emotionally reactive stressful stimuli.



Advice

- It may help to start practicing the S.O.B.E.R stress interruption technique at random times throughout the day or in moderately stressful situations. With practice, clients will become more familiar with the steps and learn to draw upon this technique in more stressful situations.
- A printable card is provided in Appendix. This card serves as a reminder of the S.O.B.E.R. acronym and steps. Clients may print this card out and keep it in a location that is easily accessible, such as a purse, wallet, or notice board.
- The building blocks of this exercise are awareness, observation, and mindfulness. Developing these areas may not be easy. However, clients should understand that the mind is easily distracted - this is completely normal. The key is to acknowledge that one's focus has slipped and redirect attention to the exercise.



References

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S.O.B.E.R. Stress Interruption

Stress is your body's reaction to feeling threatened or being under too much mental or emotional pressure. It is easy to react out of habit in times of stress rather than thinking carefully about the situation and choosing the most helpful response. The problem with this is that you react in autopilot mode, with no real awareness of the situation. This exercise is all about interrupting stress by taking a moment to pause and step out of autopilot before responding with awareness. This technique is called S.O.B.E.R. Stress Interruption.

A way to remember the steps involved in this exercise is the acronym S.O.B.E.R. which stands for:

Stop - whatever you are doing

Observe - what is happening in your body and mind

Breathe - pay attention to your breathing

Expand - awareness to your whole body and your surroundings

Respond - with awareness rather than in autopilot

With practice, you will become more familiar with these steps, and using the S.O.B.E.R. technique in times of stress will become second nature.

Step 1: Stop

We spend much of our lives on autopilot, so stop whatever you are doing. When you take a moment to stop, you interrupt your usual reaction to stress - this will help you step out of autopilot and keep your mind in the present moment. Whether you are sitting, standing, or walking, take a few seconds to stop where you are. Relax your posture so that you are not tense or stiff, and allow yourself to be right here in the present moment.

Step 2: Observe

You will now turn your attention to what is happening in your body and mind. Imagine you are standing back from the situation, like sitting on a wall observing the events as they unfold in front of you. Notice the sensations happening in your body. What emotions are you experiencing right now? What thoughts are going through your mind? Observe your body. Is there any tension? Where in your body can you feel it? Notice any unpleasant sensations and, rather than trying to push them away or shut them out, acknowledge them. Just observe this moment. You can perform this step in your mind.

Step 3: Breathe

You will now allow your attention to settle on your breath. This will help you slow your thoughts and relax your body. Remember, your posture should be relaxed and comfortable.



Breathe in gently through your nose and hold for 3-5 seconds. Gently exhale through your mouth and hold again for 3-5 seconds. Repeat this 5-10 times.

As you breathe, notice the movements of your body with each breath. Notice the air coming in and out as you inhale and exhale slowly. Notice how stress leaves your body with each exhalation. Listen to the sound of your breathing and place your hand on your chest to feel it rise and fall. If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to your breath.

Step 4: Expand awareness

In this step, you will practice broadening your awareness to see the bigger picture and understand the stressful experience for what it is. In the previous step, you focused your attention on your breathing. Now, you will extend your awareness to include the rest of your body, your experience, and everything that is happening around you at this moment.

Begin to think about your body and mind as a whole. What feelings are present for you right now? Do you feel any tension in your shoulders, neck, back, or face? Become aware of this tension, observe it, and allow yourself to let go of it, feeling your muscles loosen and relax as you do so. What sensations are present right now? Are they the same, or are they different than earlier? Now, expand your awareness of what is happening around you. What else do you notice?

Step 5: Respond with awareness

You have a choice in how you respond to stressful situations. This step is all about learning to respond with awareness rather than having a knee-jerk or automatic stress reaction. Now that you have taken a moment to observe and assess the situation, you will be in a better position to logically consider the responses available to you and the consequences of those responses.

You can respond to stressful experiences by choosing, with awareness, the action you take, even if that action is to let feelings of stress pass on their own, just like waves on the sea.

Now, what response to this situation will be most helpful right now?

Reflection Questions

- How was it to complete this exercise?
- What did you learn from this exercise?
- In what other situations might the S.O.B.E.R. technique be helpful? In what ways would it be helpful in this context?
- What part of this exercise did you find most rewarding?
- What did you find most challenging about this exercise?
- How did it feel to respond to stress with awareness?

Appendix: Printable S.O.B.E.R. reminder

