A decorative graphic on the right side of the page. It features three overlapping circles of varying sizes, each composed of concentric rings in shades of blue. Two thin, light blue lines intersect at the top right, forming a large triangle that frames the circles. The circles are positioned in the upper right, middle right, and lower right areas of the page.

VISTA Leader Stress Guide

Created by Bob Boylan, Nicole Densmore, and Kimberly Jaeger

Coached by Elaine K. Williams

Acknowledgements

The VISTA Leader Stress Guide was designed by three VISTA Leaders from Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. These three leaders researched, evaluated, organized, and put together a final product to be utilized by all VISTA Leaders. A special thanks goes to Bob Boylan, Nicole Densmore, and Kimberly Jaeger for putting this product together.



Bob Boylan is a VISTA Leader at Hands on Birmingham, a program of the United Way of Central Alabama. He graduated from the University of Alabama with Bachelors degree in Secondary Education, but has found his calling in the nonprofit sector. After VISTA he will ideally get a job with a local nonprofit in Birmingham, Alabama as well as pursue a Masters degree in Public Administration.



Nicole Densmore serves as a VISTA Leader at the United Way of Northwest Georgia, in Dalton, Georgia. Nicole graduated from Lee University with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. In the near future, Nicole will be attending Lee University to obtain her Master's in Mental Health Counseling with an emphasis in Marriage and Family counseling. Along with the education Nicole has obtained during her AmeriCorps service, she wishes to eventually open a non-profit counseling center, with a focus on marriage and family counseling.



Kimberly Jaeger serves as a VISTA Leader with Florida Campus Compact in Tallahassee, FL. Kimberly graduated from Indiana University, Purdue University - Indianapolis with a degree in Spanish and Cultural Anthropology. She hopes to use her education combined with her experience from the AmeriCorps*VISTA program to carve out a successful career within the public service sector.

Dear VISTA Leader,

The following guide has been put together to help you better deal with the stress of your VISTA Leader year. Utilizing this VISTA Leader Stress Guide, you will be able to:

- *Assess the degree of stress you are experiencing at any given time during your year*
- *Identify specifically the stressors in your life*
- *Analyze the negative and positive coping mechanisms you possess, and*
- *Learn how to better manage and cope with your internal and external stressors*

*You can find additional assessments and tools in the Appendix to assist you in dealing with your stressors during your year of service. After you feel you can better manage your own stressors, you may utilize this guide as well as a Stress Workshop Kit to lead your VISTA team to better manage their own stressors. Good luck and remember to ‘**stay cool under pressure.**’*

Sincerely,

Bob Boylan

Nicole Densmore

Kimberly Jaeger

Bob, Nicole, & Kimberly

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VISTA
Volunteers In Service To America

Understanding and Recognizing Stress

VISTA Leader Connection:

There will be times throughout your service year when you become overwhelmed, exhausted, or simply frustrated. You may be having a bad day, or your stress level could be silently rising to an unhealthy degree. If you want to learn more about the stress that you are experiencing, take a few moments to work through these assessments. Full versions are located in the Appendix. Please note that this is a sampling of stress quizzes and many others can be found through independent research.

In This Section:

- Job Burnout Quiz: How close are you to burning out?
- The Ardell Wellness Stress Test
- Perceived Stress Scale
- Assess Stress Table

JOB BURNOUT QUIZ: HOW CLOSE ARE YOU TO BURNING OUT? (Appendix 1.1)

Randall S. Hansen designed this quiz to help assess job burnout. He writes, "Job burnout can affect all workers at one point or another. There are many signs of burnout, and if you are feeling fed-up with job burnout, your co-workers, and your employer, you may be suffering from burnout."

* Adapted from "Job Burnout Quiz: How Close Are You to Burning Out? A Quintessential Careers Quiz," by Randall S. Hansen, Quintessential Careers, Copyright by Quintessential Careers. Retrieved from http://www.quintcareers.com/job_burnout_quiz.html

THE ARDELL WELLNESS STRESS TEST (Appendix 1.2)

Don Ardell developed this stress assessment that is unique in its holistic approach to stress. The Ardell Wellness Stress Test incorporates physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social aspects of health for a balanced assessment.

PERCEIVED STRESS SCALE (Appendix 1.3)

Created by Sheldon Cohon, the Perceived Stress Scale can be used to help an individual measure their stress levels. According to Michael Opin, "The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) is a classic stress assessment instrument. This tool, while originally developed in 1983, remains a popular choice for helping us understand how different situations affect our feelings and our perceived stress."

ASSESS STRESS TABLE (Appendix 1.4)

Michael Olpin put together this Assess Stress Table to monitor physiological indicators of stress. Follow the directions to measure your resting heart rate, breathing pattern, and respiration rate. Look back into the past month to score yourself on the stress-o-meter. Finally, compare your results to those of the average, unstressed person to gain a better perspective on how much stress you are experiencing.

* Items 2-4 are adapted from "Self-Assessment," by Michael Olpin, Ph.D., CHES, Health 1110 - Stress Management, 2006 by Michael Olpin. Retrieved from <http://faculty.weber.edu/molpin/healthclasses/1110/bookchapters/selfassessmentchapter.htm>

Identifying Your Stressors

Now that you have identified the degree of your stress, the next step is identifying what is causing your stress or stressors. A stressor is defined as an activity, event, or other stimulus that causes stress.

VISTA Leader Connection

This next section has been developed to help you during your VISTA Leader year. In this section you will find what some of the common types of stressors are, including work and personal stressors. Your ability to analyze your stressors will offer you some choices on how to manage them effectively.

In This Section:

- Table of Common Stressors
- Companion Stressor Table
- VISTA Leader Work Stressor Checklist (Appendix 2.1)
- Ardell Wellness Stress Test Analysis
- Stress Journaling Activity (Appendix 2.2)

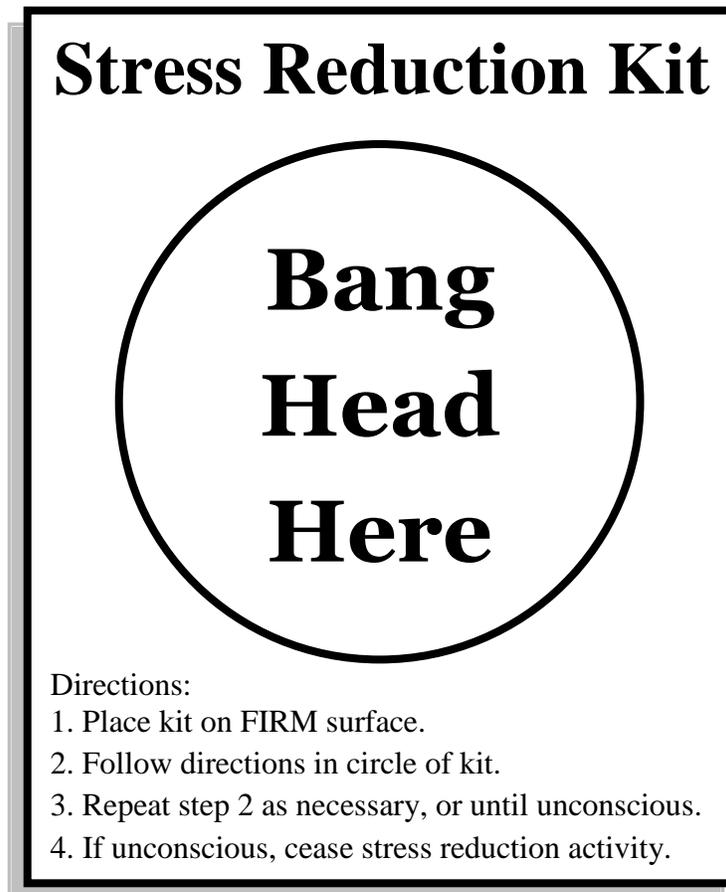


TABLE OF COMMON STRESSORS

Stressor Category	Stressor Explanation
Emotional	This stressor is an internal stressor. The emotional stressor category includes fears, anxiety, and guilt as well as certain personality traits (such as perfectionism, pessimism, suspiciousness, etc.) that can distort your thinking or your perceptions of others. Emotional stressors are very individualized, which means something that stresses you out emotionally may be experienced quite differently by someone else.
Family	This stressor includes changes in your relationship(s) with your significant other, children, other family members, or experiencing empty-nest syndrome.
Social	Social stressors arise in our interactions within our personal community. These can include dating, social events, and public speaking. As with emotional stressors, social stressors are very individualized. For example, you may love speaking in public, but your colleague shakes in his boots at the mere suggestion.
Change	Just like it sounds, change stressors are feelings of stress related to any important changes in our lives. This may include moving, becoming a VISTA Leader, moving in with a significant other, or having a baby. Change also creates different degrees of stress based on whether it is expected or unexpected, desired or undesired, sudden or longer-term, etc.
Chemical	Chemical stressors arise through addictions or abusing things such as drugs, alcohol, nicotine, or even caffeine.
Decision	This stressor is also just what it sounds like. A decision stressor brings about stress by having to make important decisions, such as the choice of becoming a VISTA Leader, career choice following your Leader year, college or career choices or moving to another place or state.
Phobic	Phobic stressors can be a subcategory of emotional stressors, but are based around severe fear. Phobic stressors are caused by situations you are extremely afraid of like public speaking or flying. Phobic stressors frequently impact your physical body as well as your mental and emotional aspects.
Physical	Physical stressors are situations that overtax your body, such as working long hours without sleep, depriving yourself of healthy food, or standing on your feet all day. They may also include pregnancy, premenstrual syndrome, or too much or too little exercise.
Health	Health Stressors, also referred to as disease stressors, are the products of long or short-term health problems and may or may not be related to the constancy of life stressors on you. These may cause stress evidenced by frequent headaches, constant fatigue, or frequent colds or sinus problems. Stress can also trigger muscle and joint pain, herpes flare-ups, or migraine headaches.
Pain	Pain stressors can include acute pain or chronic pain. Like health stressors, pain stressors can cause stress or be aggravated by stress. Some examples include: heightened back pain, allergic reactions causing sinus headaches, etc.
Environmental	Environmental stressors are those stressors that surround us where we live and work. These can include noise, pollution, a lack of space, too much heat, too much cold, poor lighting, etc.

Now that you have taken a moment to read and learn about some of the stressors that affect all people; on the next page take a few minutes to list out where you can see each stressor in your life on the Companion Stressor Table.

COMPANION STRESSOR TABLE

Stressor Category	List Your Stressors
Emotional	Examples: Worrying about managing your VISTA team, worrying about your VISTAs liking you, anxiety about leading your VISTAs from a distance, etc. List:
Family	Examples: Your VISTA Leader role impacting relationships with significant others, a new baby arrives at the start of your VISTA Leader year, a family member becomes ill, etc. List:
Social	Example: Giving a speech about the VISTA program to a local business group, creating a strong, compatible working environment for your members, etc. List:
Change	Example: Moving to a new place for your Vista Leader assignment, adjusting to new roles and/or responsibilities, etc. List:
Chemical	Example: A potential, beginning, or past addiction problem(s), side effects of chronic use of pain medications or allergy medicine, etc. List:
Decision	Example: Deciding to move into a new apartment, city or state for your VISTA Leader term. List:
Phobic	Examples: Heights, public speaking during VISTA Leader year, heightened fear with having to deal with certain personality types, etc. List:
Physical	Example: Not getting enough sleep due to working too many hours at your host site, or insomnia related to anxiety in your new VISTA Leader role, etc. List:
Health	Example: Pregnancy, chronic health problems or new health problems. List:
Pain	Example: Migraine or sinus headaches, back pain, etc. List:
Environmental	Example: New VISTA Leader apartment is near a train track. List:

After completing the stressor chart you should have a better understanding of the stressors in your life. But what about the stressors that affect you at your sponsoring organization? In Appendix 2.1, you will be able to assess some of your stressors at work by completing the VISTA Leader Work Stressor Check List.

ARDELL WELLNESS STRESS TEST ANALYSIS

If you completed the Ardell Wellness Stress Test (Appendix 1.2) then you analyzed the degree of stress you are experiencing. Let's now dig deeper into your results.

Highlight any of the questions to which you assigned a negative number. Now identify which of these items is related to your physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social health. Did you notice any patterns? For example, were more negative numbers assigned to physical health items versus emotional health items? For those items that do receive negative numbers, pay close attention to them and be sure to read the sections on "Identifying Postive and Negative Coping Mechanisms", "External Stress Relievers", and "Internal Stress Relievers" to help you better cope and deal with your negative stressors.

STRESS JOURNAL ACTIVITY

In Appendix 2.2, you will find the Stress Journal Activity which will help you analyze different stressors impacting your daily routines.

* Adapted from:

1. "How Stress Works," by Betty Burrows, Ph.D, Discovery Health, 2010 Copyright by Discovery Communications Inc. Retrieved from <http://health.howstuffworks.com/wellness/stress-management/how-stress-works.htm>
2. "Stress...At Work" from NIOSH Publication No. 99-101. from <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/99-101/>
3. "Self-Assessment," by Michael Olpin, Ph.D., CHES, Health 1110 - Stress Management, 2006 by Michael Olpin. Retrieved from <http://faculty.weber.edu/molpin/healthclasses/1110/bookchapters/selfassessmentchapter.htm>



Identifying Positive and Negative Coping Mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are strategies that people use to deal with stress and stressors in life. They are usually learned behavior patterns we use in order to cope or manage personal and work-related stress. There are both positive and negative coping mechanisms. It is important to decipher what your personal coping mechanisms are and if they actually help you relieve stress or if they in fact cause you more stress. Stress is part of everyday life; there is good stress and bad stress. Depending on the way we each respond to or cope with the stress in our life will greatly determine to what degree we contribute to our own stress.

VISTA Leader Connection

The VISTA Leader role, at times, can be very stressful as the leader tries to navigate VISTA members through a successful year. Knowing how to cope with the stresses of the VISTA Leader roles as well as managing personal stressors will help the VISTA Leader improve their stress management skills and ensure a successful Leader year.

In This Section:

- Examples of Coping Mechanisms
- Negative Thinking Patterns
- Identifying How you Cope (Appendix 3.1)

EXAMPLES OF COPING MECHANISMS

POSITIVE COPING MECHANISMS
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (RUNNING, WALKING, ETC)
VISUALIZATION/IMAGERY
CRYING, LAUGHING , YELLING IN A SAFE PLACE
TALKING IT OUT
YOGA/PILATES
BREATHING EXERCISES
HOBBIES
LEARNING POSITIVE SELF TALK
JOURNAL
LEARN TO FACE ISSUE HEAD ON
PRAY OR MEDITATE
FOCUS
PRIORITIZE
QUIET TIME FOR REFLECTION
BREAKING STRESSORS DOWN INTO MANAGEABLE PORTIONS

NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS
OVERLY HELPFUL (HELPS OTHERS AT COST TO SELF)
VERBAL ATTACKING
BEING PASSIVE (ALWAYS THE VICTIM)
ADDICTIONS
RATIONALIZING
DENIAL
MINIMIZING (THINGS AREN'T THAT BAD)
DEVELOPING A FALSE SELF (ACTING/BEING FAKE)
BUSYNESS
NOT COMMUNICATING
DEPRESSION
BLAMING OTHERS
CREATING CRISIS
PROCRASTINATION
DISASSOCIATION FROM SITUATION (LACK OF CARING)
NO BOUNDRIES (NOT ABLE TO SAY NO)

NEGATIVE THINKING PATTERNS

Negative thinking patterns are one contributor to stress overload. Using the wrong thinking pattern can sometimes be the source of your stress, just the same as using the wrong coping mechanism to deal with the stress. Here are some of the most common thinking traps:

All-or-nothing thinking: You see things in extremes with no middle ground. If your performance falls short of perfect, you see yourself as a total failure. “My Supervisor asked me to re-do a form because of a spelling error. She thinks I can never do anything right.”

Overgeneralization: You see a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat. “You didn’t remember to buy me coffee. This means you don’t care about me.”

Mental filter: You pick out a single negative detail and dwell on it exclusively so that your vision of all reality becomes distorted or darkened. “That VISTA member acted so hurt when I offered her constructive feedback. I will never offer feedback again.”

Disqualifying the positive: You reject positive experiences by insisting they “don’t count” for some reason or other. You maintain a negative belief that is contradicted by your everyday experiences. “She said I helped her, but she just said that to be nice.”

Jumping to conclusions: You make a negative interpretation or come to a negative conclusion about a situation without any supporting facts or information. “I just saw my coworker in the parking lot. She must not be doing her job.”

Mind reading: You think you know exactly what’s going on in another person’s mind and do not bother to check it out. “Don’t even say anything. I know what you are thinking.”

The Fortune Teller Error: You anticipate that things will turn out badly and feel convinced that your prediction is an already established fact. “I’m going to be lousy giving that speech regardless of how hard I work on my presentation.”

Magnification (catastrophizing) or minimization: You make a lot out of your mistakes and little of other’s mistakes. You make little of your own success and a lot out of other’s successes. “I’m such a failure for sleeping through my alarm this morning. I know you did it too, but you are a much better at being on time than I am.”

Emotional reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are: “I’m scared of him, so he must be a bad person.”

Should statements: You make a wish into a moral issue. “I should be in control of things.” “I ought to try harder.” “I should be better at resolving conflicts.” The emotional consequence is guilt. When you direct should statements toward others, you feel anger, frustration, and resentment.

Labels/Name Calling: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Instead of describing your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: “I’m a loser.” When someone else’s behavior rubs you the wrong way, you attach a negative label to him, “He’s a jerk.” Mislabeling involves describing an event with language that is highly colored and emotionally loaded.

Personalization: You see yourself as the cause of some negative external event for which, in fact, you were not primarily responsible. “I was in that car accident because I deserved it.” “That person just left the team because of something I said.”

IDENTIFYING HOW YOU COPE

Survey: Identify if you cope positively or negatively when stressed. (Appendix 3.1)

* Adapted from:

1. <http://changingminds.org/explanations/behaviors/coping/coping.htm>
2. <http://leap.ubc.ca/get-started/coping-with-stress/what-are-negative-thinking-patterns/>
3. <http://www.equaywuk.ca/HFHNDVT/CopingMechanisms.pdf>
4. http://discoveryhealth.queendom.com/cgi-bin/tests/short_test.cgi
5. http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newHTE_00.htm

External Stress Relievers

VISTA Leader Connection

VISTA Leaders and Members face the challenge of living in poverty. One of the consequences of that reality is that we are limited to free and affordable resources to relieve stress. That is, a day at the spa may be in order if we are stressed, but we are more likely to spend a day in the office on the weekend. There are many economical strategies that can be used to relieve external stressors like learning to manage a work load, better diet and exercise, and improved organization, to name a few. Below are a few ideas that Volunteers in Service to America can easily put to use.

In This Section:

- Directions
- The E-List
- The R-List
- The C-List

DIRECTIONS

Put together a list of stressors, or stress triggers, based on your findings from the section on “Identifying Your Stressors” to best take advantage of the advice on this page. Once your list is complete, go back through and mark an E for each item you can *eliminate*, an R for any that you can *reduce* the strength of and a C for all that you can learn to *cope* with. For the items marked with an E or an R, jot down any ideas you have on how to accomplish these goals (for example, sending shirts to the cleaners or buying earplugs). Once you've categorized your list of stressors into Es, Rs, and Cs, you're ready to get busy.

THE E-LIST

Separate out your E-list, the list of stressors you've decided you can eliminate from your life. The goal of this exercise is to be as creative as possible without being extreme. The trick is to measure the impact of your stressors and weigh the costs of eliminating them against the toll they take on your health and well-being. Take a good look at this list. As you do, inhale deeply through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. If you're like most people, you should already be feeling somewhat better.

THE R-LIST

Like the E-list, the R-list is about controlling the external forces that repeatedly get the better of you. Although the E-list offers instant gratification by literally erasing your worries, the R-list requires a bit more creativity. Challenge yourself to reorganize and re-prioritize your stressors. Come up with new behaviors that make those unavoidable stressors seem more tolerable.

Here are some tried-and-true R-list techniques:

- Allow yourself to not be perfect.
- Reassess and update your priorities.
- Maintain both a short-term and a long-term task list.
- Practice completing the hardest task of the day first thing in the morning.
- Combine tasks when possible, both at work and at home, to save energy.
- Seek gentle compromise by negotiating through stressful situations, i.e. extend deadlines, ask for help, know when to say no, etc.
- Give yourself a break each day like taking a morning walk, eating lunch in a park, or going to bed early.
- Utilize an organizer like Microsoft Outlook Calendar or Google Calendar.
- Keep a journal. See Appendix 2.2 for more information on journaling techniques.

THE C-LIST

To learn more about how to cope with the stressors on your C-List, visit the previous section “Identifying Positive and Negative Coping Mechanisms.”

*Adapted from "How Stress Works," by Betty Burrows, Ph.D, Discovery Health, 2010 Copyright by Discovery Communications Inc. Retrieved from <http://health.howstuffworks.com/wellness/stress-management/how-stress-works.htm>

Internal Stress Relievers

Stress and the Body

Stress can trigger the body's internal response to perceived stressors. During this reaction, certain hormones like adrenalin and cortisol are released, which is revealed in bodily functions. During a stressful situation, take time to notice how your body reacts to the stress it is feeling and document that. Some examples of what you might notice include: a rising heartbeat, increased blood flow or blood pressure, perspiration, headaches, fatigue, or chronic body pain. Following the stressful situation, you may notice your body continuing to respond to the stress in ways such as depression, hair loss, sexual dysfunction, ulcers, common illnesses, inability to focus or concentrate, as well as other symptoms.

VISTA Leader Connection

People react in all kinds of ways to stress. How one person's body reacts may not be the same as your body's reaction. It is important for a person to track how their body responds during a stressful situation or period. Tracking how your body acts can be a key factor in learning how to reduce stress.

Often times, we cause stress for ourselves and this can be a snow ball effect. For example: Your supervisor has given you the responsibility of leading an important meeting in the coming week. As you begin to think about the meeting you start to stress about your performance during the meeting, you notice a change in your appetite. You are eating less and not very well. Perhaps, you are also not sleeping and are feeling sudden fatigue. You then start to stress about your health because of the lack of appetite and inability to sleep, in reality the cause of your health concerns began with you feeling the stress of the upcoming meeting. In this situation, managing your stress effectively will also relieve your health concerns. Focusing on your health without paying attention to your stress level will only compound your problems.

In This Section:

- How to Internally Relieve Your Stress (Appendix 5.1)
- Symptoms and Frequency of Stress

HOW TO INTERNALLY REDUCE YOUR STRESS

In order to combat stress, there are certain things we can do physically with our bodies. Stress can be a product of our environment, but it can also be a product of our inner self. Several things we can do to reduce or eliminate our internal stressors include the list below. These are explained more in depth in Appendix 5.1.

1. Breathing exercises
2. Yoga
3. Meditation
4. Reframing With a Sense of Humor
5. Music
6. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)
7. Exercise
8. Guided Imagery / Visualizations
9. Silent time
10. Cognitive Restructuring: Finding Perspective
11. Walks in nature



SYMPTOMS AND FREQUENCY OF STRESS

Please check mark each symptom and the frequency at which you experienced them. This table will tell you the amount of symptoms you have which may be caused by stress.

Symptoms (less severe to more severe)	Frequency of Symptoms						
	Several times every day	Once a day	Several times a week	Once per week	Once a month	Rarely	Never
Headaches							
Tense sore muscles							
Jaw pain							
Fatigue							
Irritability							
Restlessness							
Difficulty staying asleep							
Difficulty falling asleep							
Insomnia							
Overeating							
Under eating							
Digestive/stomach problems							
Hair loss							
Depression							
Racing heart rate							
Heart Palpitations							
Chronic body pain							
Chest Pains							
		Severe symptoms: Doctors attentions needed immediately					
		Moderate-severe symptoms: Medical opinion may be necessary					
		Moderate symptoms from stress					
		Light-moderate symptoms from stress					
	Please note, do not mistake this chart for a medical professionals opinion						

The more often you experience these symptoms of stress, the more likely stress is having a negative impact on your life. The blockbuster movie Titanic has a health lesson for us all. The captain of that mighty ship was warned six separate times to slow down, change course and take the southern route because icebergs had been sighted. But, he ignored all six specific warnings, lulled into complacency of believing that the ship was unsinkable. The lesson is to listen to your body when it sends you signals. Symptoms and changes are warnings that you should slow down, change course, or take another route.

* Adapted from:

1. <http://faculty.weber.edu/molpin/healthclasses/1110/bookchapters/selfassessmentchapter.htm>
2. http://www.stressfocus.com/stress_focus_article/stress-signs-symptoms.htm
3. <http://stress.about.com/od/stresshealth/a/stresshealth.htm>
4. <http://www.businessballs.com/stressmanagement.htm>

Congratulations VISTA Leaders,

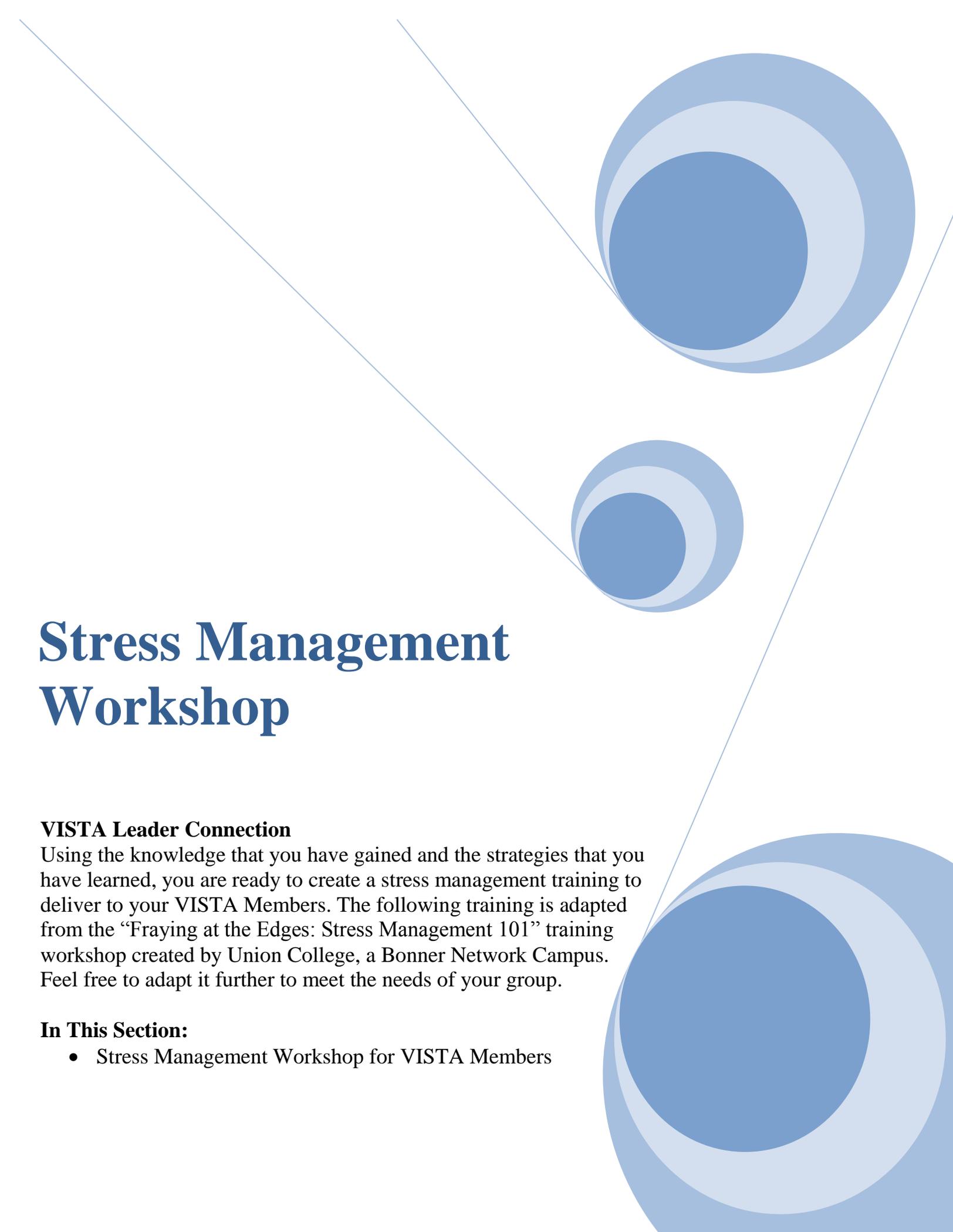
You have completed the VISTA Leader Stress Guide! We hope you were able to understand your stress level, identify what specific stressors are visible in your life, and realize the coping methods that both work and do not work for you. Our intention is that you will be able to use the knowledge gained from each section to cope with the many stressors that may arise during your VISTA Leader year. Just like anything in life, your stressors will not instantly go away, but you are now equipped to deal positively with them and face them head on. Additionally, VISTA Leaders are not the only ones who get stressed. Your VISTA team members will have stressors of their own, especially as their year begins. Utilizing the resources in the above sections, the Appendix, and the succeeding Stress Management Workshop, you can empower your VISTA team with additional knowledge that will help them lower their stress levels and have a successful VISTA year.

Keep Cool,

*Bob Boylan
Nicole Densmore
Kimberly Jaeger*

Bob, Nicole, & Kimberly



A decorative graphic on the right side of the page features three overlapping circles of varying sizes, each composed of concentric blue rings. Two thin blue lines extend from the top left towards the circles, and a larger blue circle is partially visible at the bottom right corner.

Stress Management Workshop

VISTA Leader Connection

Using the knowledge that you have gained and the strategies that you have learned, you are ready to create a stress management training to deliver to your VISTA Members. The following training is adapted from the “Fraying at the Edges: Stress Management 101” training workshop created by Union College, a Bonner Network Campus. Feel free to adapt it further to meet the needs of your group.

In This Section:

- Stress Management Workshop for VISTA Members

Stress Management Workshop

“Fraying at the Edges”: Stress Management 101

(Adapted for AmeriCorps*VISTA Leaders and Members)

Overview:

Through this workshop, VISTA Members will explore the topic of stress. They will reflect upon the triggers of their own stress, learn ways to avoid stress, and pick-up tools to cope with unavoidable stress as public service professionals and volunteers.

Learning Goals:

- To understand the triggers of personal stress
- To learn ways to avoid stress in daily life
- To gain tools for coping with stressful periods of VISTA life

Materials:

- Ball of yarn
- Construction paper
- Markers
- Newsprint or dry erase board
- Balloons

How to Prepare:

- Room should be large enough for VISTAs to have room to sit on floor and/or lay down
- Table should be present so that VISTAs can do written/drawing exercises
- Prepare by reflecting on the stress that you, the VISTA Leader, experienced as a VISTA Member and what coping strategies you have now that you wish you had then

How to Do/ Brief Outline:

The outline has the following parts:

- | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Yarn Toss | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 2. Stress Identity Circle | suggested time 10 minutes |
| 3. Group Discussion | suggested time 15 minutes |
| 4. Meditation Activity | suggested time 25 minutes |
| 5. Balloons | suggested time 5 minutes |



Part 1) Yarn Toss

Suggested time: 10 minutes

1. Gather VISTAs into a circle, with everyone standing.
2. Give one VISTA a ball of yarn.
3. Instruct the VISTAs that they are to wrap a small amount of yarn around their wrist, state something that causes them stress, then pass the ball of yarn to someone across the circle from them (encourage as many different responses as possible)
4. This yarn toss should continue until everyone in the circle has stated aloud at least two things that cause them stress.
5. Transition into next activity by stating something to the following effect, “while some might look at what our circle has created as a beautiful web that connects us, for the purposes of this exercise, we can see that stress can create a tangled web of emotion that each of us helped to create. Can you imagine our group now going out with all of this individual stress tying us all together and trying to do a community service project? You can see that when we are stressed, we can also stress others and put a strain on the important work we have to do.”
6. You may ask the following question as VISTAs take the yarn off of their wrists, “Did you want to state a stress factor that someone else already said? If so, what was it? Are there common areas of stress that we all encounter while in service?”

Part 2) Stress Identity Circle

Suggested time: 10 minutes

1. Have VISTAs sit at tables and work individually.
2. Give each VISTA a piece of construction paper and markers.
3. Instruct the VISTAs to draw a circle on their paper (with room around it).
4. Inside the circle, VISTAs should write things that stress them that they are responsible for (stress they create).
5. Outside of the circle, VISTAs should write things that stress them that others are responsible for (stress that is placed on them).
6. After all of the VISTAs are done drawing, break into pairs and have them share their stress factors.
 - a. What stress factors are similar?
 - b. What stress factors are individual?
 - c. Looking overall at what is in the circle and what is outside of it, how much internal stress does each individual VISTA experience and how much is placed on them from outside sources?

Part 3) Group Discussion

Suggested time: 15 minutes

1. Gather the group together in a circle.
2. On a dry erase board or newsprint, have VISTAs brainstorm.
 - a. “How do you know when you are stressed?”
 - i. “How does your body tell you that you are stressed?”
 - ii. “What is your attitude like when you are stressed?”
 - b. “What are ways that you cope with stress?”
 - i. “Who do you talk to when you are stressed?”
 - ii. “What types of activities do you do to relieve stress?”



Part 4) Meditation Activity

Suggested time: 25 minutes

1. Transition from discussion to activity with something like the following: “We have a good amount of ways that we as individuals deal with stress. We’ve talked about what stress does to our bodies. Next, we will all participate in a simple exercise that you can do at home on your own to help you relax – both your mind that is running a million thoughts a minute, and your body whose muscles unfortunately pay the price for our stress.”
2. Have VISTAs sit on the floor at least an arm-length apart from each other, sitting cross-legged. If VISTAs prefer to lie on the floor, that is acceptable as well, but no one should be sitting in a chair unless necessary to meet an Americans with Disabilities Act requirement.
3. Tell VISTAs to sit as comfortable as possible, allowing them to remove their shoes if desired.
4. Verbal instructions for meditation (NOTE: Read slowly for the VISTAs to relax):
 - a. Please close your eyes. (1 min)
 - b. Be sure that your back is straight, and that your whole body is in a straight line. (1 min)
 - c. Place your hands comfortably in your lap, on your thighs, or on your knees. (1 min)
 - d. Begin to give permission to yourself to let go of all of the thoughts of your daily activities and concerns. There is nothing for you to worry about, all of your worries are gone for the time being. (3 min)
 - e. Feel your body and the space that your body occupies. (3 min)
 - f. Pay attention to your breathing. Breathe quietly through your nose. Breathe deeply, slowly, and evenly, but do not strain yourself. Breathe in deeply, breathe out slowly. (3 min)
 - g. Relax your body. Send warmth to each body part. Let all the muscles soften. Begin at the top of your head and move down to your face – relax your eyes, eyelids, mouth, teeth, tongue, lips, jaws, throat, and neck. Let the muscles of your shoulders soften by stretching them and letting them go, then send warmth down your arms to your fingers. Move down and relax your chest muscles, heart, and lungs. Then relax the abdominal muscles and the organs in that area. Stretch and relax your entire back and spine. Then send warmth to down your legs to your toes. (5 min)
 - h. Concentrate on the warmth and relaxation that you are bringing to your body. Feel your body relax. Imagine your favorite quiet place. Imagine the silence, far away from your worries and concerns. It is only you and your breath. Breathing in deeply and out slowly. Feel that breath coming in your nose, through each part of your body, and out through your mouth. (2 min)
 - i. I will now give you a few minutes of silence to concentrate on your breathing and relaxation. (5 min)
5. After about 5 minutes of silence, instruct the VISTAs to slowly stretch each muscle in their body, beginning at the head and ending at the toes. VISTAs may open their eyes and slowly begin to retake their seats.

Part 5) Balloons

Suggested time: 5 minutes

There can be several tasks or events during the service year that are stressful for VISTAs.

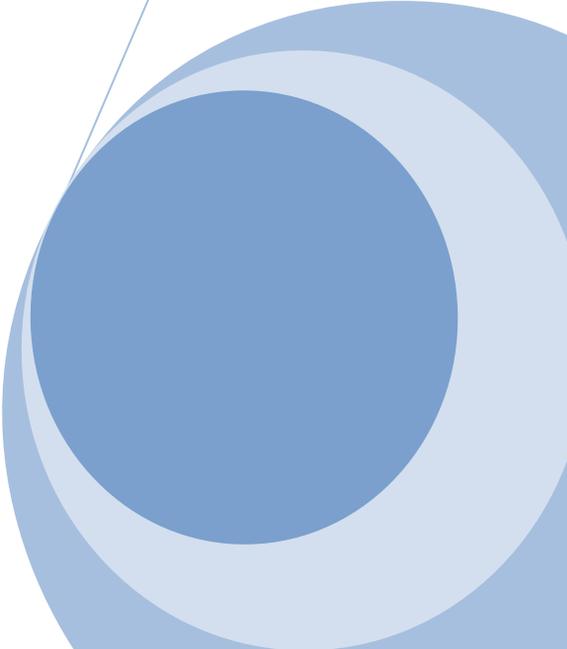
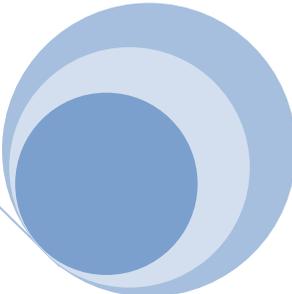
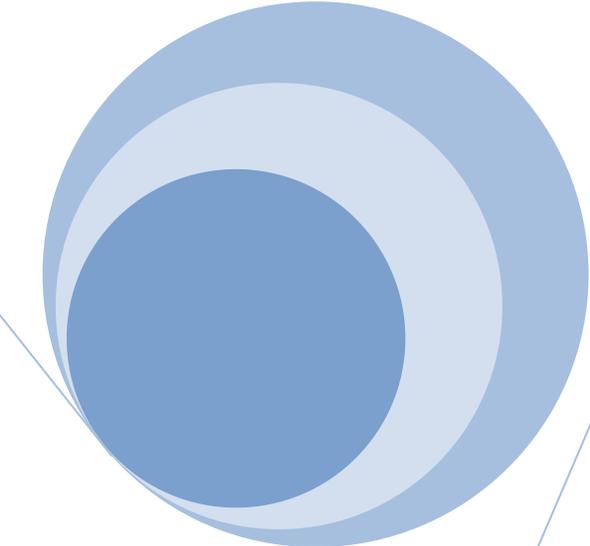
1. Give each VISTA approximately 6 small balloons.
2. Standing in front of the group, demonstrate this effective activity for breaking up the stress of those activities.
 - a. Blow up a small balloon.
 - b. Using a sharpie marker, write the name of a task or event on the balloon (i.e., Volunteer Recruitment or Quarterly Report).
 - c. Tape the balloon to the wall.
 - d. Pop the balloon using a push pin.
3. Explain to the VISTAs that when they are working with several approaching deadlines, they can blow up a balloon for each task and/or event and then pop that balloon when they are done with that task. The joy of stabbing the balloon as well as the noise actually helps to deflate the stress associated with that week. Be sure to note that this activity is most constructive outside of the office in an environment where they will not be stressing anyone else.

* Adapted from:

1. "Fraying at the Edges: Stress Management 101". Union College, a Bonner Network Campus. http://www.bonner.org/resources/modules/modules_pdf/UnionCollNewTrainings/FrayingAtEdgesStress/1stressmanagementoutline.pdf
2. "What is Stress?" Counseling Center at Northern Michigan University. <http://www.nmu.edu/counselingcenter/>



Appendix



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Appendix 1.1 Job Burnout Quiz: How close are you to burning out?

DIRECTIONS

Respond to the following statements as truthfully as possible with one of four answers: Always True, Often True, Sometimes True, and Not True.

1. I feel increasing anger at my co-workers and detached from the people around me.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
2. I feel overwhelmed and out of control when I am at work.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
3. I come home from work and find myself completely exhausted/fatigued.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
4. I seem to be more susceptible to colds and other illnesses recently.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
5. I feel besieged at work, like nothing I do is right.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
6. I find myself exploding in anger at the most inconsequential things.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
7. My weight and eating patterns have changed dramatically recently (resulting in weight gain or loss).
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
8. I have noticed a definite change in my sleep pattern (either much harder to fall asleep/insomnia or needing more sleep/harder to get up in the mornings).
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
9. I have been finding more and more excuses to call in sick.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
10. When I am at work, I find it hard to concentrate on doing my job.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
11. I feel like I just don't really do a good job anymore.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
12. I have a sense of being isolated/alone.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
13. I have noticed that I have become much more negative and cynical about my job and employer.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
14. I can't even remember the last time I was enthusiastic about my job.
 - Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True

15. I'm having relationship problems with my family, more stress, conflicts, and fights.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
16. I increasingly feel that things are simply spinning out of my control.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
17. I've noticed that I am finding refuge in increased use of food, alcohol, or drugs.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
18. I'm experiencing more physical ailments headaches, stomachaches, ulcers.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
19. It just seems like I have lost interest and care for the things I used to value, like I am emotionally empty.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
20. I am often sad for no particular reason.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
21. I wake up in the morning and often wonder why I even bother showing up at my job.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
22. Television has become my haven, and I watch much more of it than in the past.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
23. I've noticed that I am taking more risks without thoughts of the consequences.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
24. I have experienced chest pains, shortness of breath, or panic-like attacks at work or when I think of work.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True
25. I live for Friday afternoons and dread Sunday evenings the most.
- Always True
 - Often True
 - Sometimes True
 - Not True

SCORING

For each statement, give yourself the following point values:

Always True	4 points
Often True	3 points
Sometimes True	2 points
Not True	1 point

Add up your score and find your degree of job burnout:

65-100: Danger Zone. Find a way to relieve stress now! You have serious job burnout, and it appears that you are already suffering from the physical and mental consequences it produces. Find new coping methods and work toward a solution as quickly as you possibly can.

35-64: Warning Zone. You are having some of the classic signs of job burnout, and if you do not take steps to evaluate and change your situation, you could face serious mental and physical challenges ahead. You need to make some changes soon.

Under 35: Healthy Zone. You appear to not have any problems with your job or employer, but there may be a few issues you need to watch. You may want to examine your current situation and make some minor adjustments, but otherwise you appear to be doing well.



Appendix 1.2 The Ardell Wellness Stress Test

DIRECTIONS: Rate your satisfaction with each of the following items by using the following scale.

+3	Ecstatic	-1	Mildly Disappointed
+2	Very Happy	-2	Very Disappointed
+1	Mildly Happy	-1	Completely distraught
0	Indifferent		

- ___ 1. Choice of career
- ___ 2. Current VISTA Leader assignment
- ___ 3. Marital Status
- ___ 4. Primary Relationships
- ___ 5. Capacity to have fun
- ___ 6. Amount of fun experiences in last month
- ___ 7. Financial Prospects
- ___ 8. Current VISTA Leader income level
- ___ 9. Spirituality
- ___ 10. Level of self-esteem
- ___ 11. Prospects for having impact on those who know you and possibly others
- ___ 12. Sex life
- ___ 13. Body, how it looks and performs
- ___ 14. Home life
- ___ 15. Life skills and knowledge of issues and facts unrelated to your job or profession
- ___ 16. Learned stress management capacities
- ___ 17. Nutritional knowledge, attitudes, and choices
- ___ 18. Ability to recover from disappointment, hurts, setbacks, and tragedies
- ___ 19. Confidence that you currently are, or will in the future be reasonably close to your highest potential
- ___ 20. Achievement of a rounded or balanced quality in your life
- ___ 21. Sense that life for you is on an upward curve, getting better and fuller all the time
- ___ 22. Level of participation in issues and concerns beyond your immediate interests
- ___ 23. Choice whether to parent or not and with the consequence or results of that choice
- ___ 24. Role in some kind of network of friends, relatives, and/or others about whom you care deeply and who reciprocate that commitment to you
- ___ 25. Emotional acceptance of the inescapable reality of aging
- ___ TOTAL

SCORING

Add and/or subtract your ratings to figure your score.

+51 to +75: You are a self-actualized person, nearly immune from the ravages of stress. There are few, if any, challenges likely to prevent you from a sense of near total well-being.

+25 to +50: You have mastered the wellness approach to life and have the capacity to deal creatively and efficiently with events and circumstances.

+1 to +24: You are a wellness-oriented person, with an ability to prosper as a whole person, but you should give a bit more attention to optimal health concepts and skill building.

0 to -24: You are a candidate for additional training in how to deal with stress. A sudden increase in potentially negative events and circumstances could cause a severe emotional setback.

-25 to -50: You are a candidate for counseling. You are either too pessimistic or have severe problems in dealing with stress.

-51 to -75: You are a candidate for major psychological care with virtually no capacity for coping with life's problems.

Appendix 1.3 Perceived Stress Scale

The questions in this scale ask about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, you will be asked to indicate how often you felt or thought a certain way. Although some of the questions are similar, there are differences between them and you should treat each one as a separate question. The best approach is to answer fairly quickly. That is, don't try to count up the number of times you felt a particular way; rather indicate the alternative that seems like a reasonable estimate.

DIRECTIONS

For each question choose from the following responses:

- 0 - Never
- 1 - Almost Never
- 2 - Sometimes
- 3 - Fairly Often
- 4 - Very Often

- ___1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?
- ___2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?
- ___3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and stressed?
- ___4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?
- ___5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?
- ___6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?
- ___7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?
- ___8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?
- ___9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that happened that were outside of your control?
- ___10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

SCORING

First, reverse your scores for questions 4, 5, 7, & 8. On these 4 questions, change the scores like this: 0 = 4, 1 = 3, 2 = 2, 3 = 1, 4 = 0. Now add up your scores for each item to get a total. **My total score is _____.**

Individual scores on the PSS can range from 0 to 40 with higher scores indicating higher perceived stress.

0-13 would be considered low stress.

14-26 would be considered moderate stress.

27-40 would be considered high perceived stress.

Appendix 1.4 Assess Stress Table

DIRECTIONS

Using the Assess Stress Table, fill in your response for each item based on the instructions following the table.

Assess Stress Table

Resting Heart Rate	_____ Beats per minute
Breathing Pattern	_____ Abdomen _____ Chest _____ Both
Respiration Rate	_____ Breaths per minute
Stress-o-meter	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Resting Heart Rate

Check your resting heart rate (pulse) after you have been sitting or relaxing for a period of time. You will need a watch or clock with a second hand (or digital seconds). First, find your pulse. You can find your **radial pulse** on the thumb side of your wrist or your **carotid pulse** on your neck just under the jaw. For sixty seconds count the number of beats that you feel. Place this number in the first line of the “Assess Stress Table”.

Breathing Pattern

Next, find a chair that has a back to it. Sit in the chair so your back is primarily straight up and down against the back of the chair. Place one hand on your abdomen with your palm covering your navel. Place your other hand on the upper part of your chest with the palm of that hand just above the heart. For a minute or two, become very aware of your breathing. While sitting straight up, notice your breath as it goes in and comes back out. Become aware of your hands as you breathe in and out. Which one seems to move more? Is it your abdominal hand or your chest hand? Or do they both move equally?

Try this second technique to see if you get the same results. First, breathe out and empty your lungs. Count to three as you inhale deeply. Now, hold it. Did your shoulders go up? Did you feel like the air filled the upper part of your lungs? If so, you probably lean toward chest breathing. If you are a diaphragmatic breather, you would feel your abdominal area expand, your belt tighten, and fullness in the lower part of your lungs and chest. Record your results on the “Assess Stress Table.”

Respiration Rate

Now, for about a minute, become aware of your breathing again. This time, just count how many natural, effortless breaths you take in a minute. Be sure to breathe as normally and naturally as possible. Each inhalation and exhalation cycle is considered one breath. The number of breaths in one minute is your **respiration rate**. Record the number of breaths you take per minute in the “Assess Stress Table.”

Stress-o-meter

Another self-assessment is the Stress-o-meter. Think back over the last month of your life. Include all of your waking moments, as you think back. Give yourself a rating according to the following scale. A score of “1” would indicate that you feel your life has been relatively stress-free during that period. You have felt blissful, calm, peaceful and serene at all times. You have been able to adapt and “flow” with situations as they arise. A “10” score would mean that you felt very high anxiety most of the time. You may have had periods bordering on neurosis, suicidal, or very depressed feelings. A score of 10 would mean that this was a month packed with high levels of stress.

Considering the last month as one single period of time, it is most likely that you would rank yourself somewhere between these two extremes. If you were to average the month (we all have highs and lows), what number would you give yourself on this scale from 1 to 10? Make a note of this number on the “Assess Stress Table.”

SCORING

Many factors are involved in determining a general level of stress. A couple physiological measures that relate to increased stress are increased heart rate and increased respiration rate. The average pulse rate for an adult is approximately 70-80 beats per minute. The average respiration rate is around 12-16 breaths per minute. A faster heart beat or breathing rate might be an indicator of higher than desired stress levels.

Were you primarily a chest breather or an abdominal breather? Many of us are primarily chest breathers. Chest breathers tend to take shallower breaths. Diaphragmatic, or abdominal, breathing involves the abdominal muscles to facilitate deeper breathing. This allows you to take in more oxygen with each breath.

Your perception of stress primarily determines how your body responds. The “Stress-o-meter” increases your awareness of the level of stress you perceive in your life. When we exercise we can follow a perceived exertion scale that will give us some idea of how hard we are exercising. We can determine our intensity level. Similarly, we can use the “Stress-o-meter” to assess our general levels of perceived stress over the past month. Your body responds the same, whether the stress is real or imagined, so your perception becomes your reality. Now, look back over your results recorded in the “Assess Stress Table.” What does this information tell you about your stress level?



Appendix 2.1 Work Stressor Check List

VISTA LEADER WORK STRESSOR CHECK LIST

Place a check mark next to each situation you feel you have to deal with.

Design of Tasks

- Heavy VISTA Leader workload
- Infrequent breaks
- Long work hours
- Hectic and routine tasks that have little inherent meaning to VISTA Leader role or project
- Skills feel underutilized
- Little sense of control over work

Management Style

- Lack of participation in decision making regarding VISTA Leader assignments
- Poor communication in organization
- Lack of family-friendly policies

Interpersonal Relationships

- Poor social environment
- Lack of support/help from coworkers/VISTA team members
- Lack of support/help from supervisor

Work Roles

- Conflicting or uncertain VISTA Leader role expectations
- Too much VISTA Leader responsibility
- Too little VISTA Leader responsibility

Career Concerns

- VISTA Leader Salary
- Job insecurity (Where is my VISTA Leader role leading me?)
- Lack of professional development
- Changes not prepared for (Change of VISTA supervisor)
- Lack of transitional planning for after VISTA Leader assignment

Environmental Conditions

- Unpleasant work environment
- Unsafe work place
- Loud work place

Each one of your above selections is an additional stressor that you have to deal with. Being able to identify what stresses you, will put you one step closer to being able to eliminate or reduce some of these stressors from your life. Utilize the Stress Guide sections on “Identifying Positive and Negative Coping Mechanisms”, “External Stress Relievers”, and “Internal Stress Relievers” to help you deal with your negative stressors.

* Adapted from research in “Stress...At Work” from NIOSH Publication No. 99-101. from <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/99-101/>

Appendix 2.2 Stress Journal Activity

STRESS JOURNAL ACTIVITY

Another way to analyze your stressors is to keep a Daily Stress Log. The information entered into this journal will help to increase your awareness of what may be causing you stress. For several days, you will make a note of any and all activities that put a strain on your energy and time, trigger anger or anxiety, or precipitate a negative physical response. You can also note your reactions to these stressful events. When you have completed a daily log for a few days, review the log and identify 2 or 3 stressful events or activities that you can modify or eliminate. It has been said that awareness is half the battle. As you keep track of all the events that happen during the day, and you notice patterns in which you find yourself getting more stressed, you can begin to take steps to make adjustments in those damaging patterns. The following page includes an example of a Daily Stress Log.

DAILY STRESS LOG

Date	Time	Place	Source of Stress	*Tension Level	Coping Response
June 17th	11:00am	United Way	Public Speaking	3	Short with coworkers/Obsessive Thoughts
June 17th	5:30pm	Apartment	Roommate	2	Avoidance
<p>Major Source of Stress Today: I had to give a speech about the VISTA program to our United Way's board of directors</p> <p>Assessment of how you managed Stress: I was so nervous about my speech I was just going over it again and again in my head. I also feel I was very short with my coworkers when they would ask me questions.</p>					
June 18th	5:30pm	Apartment	Roommate	3	Avoidance
<p>Major Source of Stress Today: My roommate's girlfriend came over, and just left the living area a mess again.</p> <p>Assessment of how you managed Stress: I have not handle the situation very well. I avoided them and stayed in my room, I have also noticed I am thinking about the situation constantly at work as well.</p>					

*Tension Level: 1-Slight 2-Moderate 3-Strong 4-Intense

This is just a sample of how to put together a stress journal. Feel free to set your journal up the way it will really help you analyze your stressors.

Appendix 3.1 Coping Mechanism Survey

Carefully choose one response for each question. Complete the Negative Coping Mechanisms survey and then total the score. Complete the Positive Coping Mechanism survey and also total the score.

NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS

1. When stressful things happen at work, I blank out and tend not to care.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

2. I become busier in my tasks, so that I don't have to deal with a stressful situation.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

3. I am so helpful to others, I tend to forget about myself.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

4. I tend to lash out verbally at co-workers, family or friends during times of high stress.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

5. I tend to blame others for the cause of my stressful situation(s).

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

SCORING

Rarely=1, Sometimes=2, Often=3

Total = _____

POSITIVE COPING MECHANISMS

1. When plans change, I am able to easily adjust and adapt.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

2. I like to journal as a way to get my feelings and thoughts out.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

3. I like to run or do physical activity to help calm down during a time of high stress.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

4. When a stressful issue comes my way, I face it head on.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

5. During times of stress, I use stress release techniques such as breathing or yoga.

- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

SCORING

Rarely=1, Sometimes=2, Often=3

Total = _____

Look at both surveys and determine which has the highest number. The one with the highest score is how you cope.

*Adapted from www.Discoveryhealth.com

Appendix 5.1 Internal Stress Relievers

- *Go for a short, brisk walk outside:* Leave the building and change your environment. Breathe in some fresh air and stimulate your senses with new things.
- *Laugh:* Humor is one of the greatest and quickest devices for reducing stress. Humor works because laughter produces helpful chemicals in the brain.
- *Rehydrate:* With water. All of our organs, especially the brain, depend on water to function properly.
- *Cry:* Crying gives us a sense of “letting it all out” without really letting it out. It’s a physiological response and a bodily function that is natural. Crying, in a sense, is like the small hole in a pressure cooker that lets out pressure a little bit at a time.
- *Music:* Listening to a smooth jazz or soul collection can actually lower your blood pressure, relax your body and calm your mind.
- *Breathing exercises:* Practice breathing slowly and deeply, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- *Yoga:* Combines the practices of several other stress management techniques such as breathing, meditation, imagery and movement all into one.
- *Meditation:* Builds on deep breathing, and takes it a step further. When you meditate, your brain enters an area of functioning that’s similar to sleep. It carries some added benefits that you can’t achieve in any other state, including the release of certain hormones that promote health. Also, the mental focus on nothingness keeps your mind from working overtime and increasing your stress level.
- *Progressive Muscle Relaxation:* By tensing and relaxing all the muscle groups in your body, you can relieve tension and feel much more relaxed in minutes with no special training or equipment. Start by tensing all the muscles in your face, holding a tight grimace ten seconds, then completely relaxing for ten seconds. Repeat this with your neck, followed by your shoulders, etc. You can do this anywhere, and as you practice, you will find you can relax more quickly and easily, reducing tension as quickly as it start.
- *Exercise:* It is a great way to reduce stress. Because when you are active, your brain releases endorphins into your body. Endorphins are feel-good hormones.
- *Guided Imagery / Visualizations:* Combines deep breathing and visualization together. This is a great way to leave your stress behind for a while and relax your body. Some find it easier to practice than meditation, as many of us find it more doable to focus on ‘something’ than on ‘nothing’. Start by closing your eyes and taking shallow breaths in through your nose and out through the mouth. Imagine yourself relaxing somewhere, maybe lying on the beach under a palm tree, listening to the waves, feeling the breeze around you and smelling the salty ocean air. Let yourself stay there for a few minutes.

* Adapted from <http://stress.about.com/od/generaltechniques/tp/toptensionacts.htm>