Being a Well Woman

10 SESSION ACTIVITY GUIDE FOR WOMEN’S CIRCLES

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Week Seven Theme: EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

Women will explore the aspects of emotional wellness, identify the stressors in their lives, discuss coping skills that help to manage their emotions and stress, and participate in some stress-relieving activities.

ACTIVITY

- Discussion and “What's on Your Plate?” Activity
- Emotional Wellness Plan
- Exercises for Relieving Stress
- Journaling

MATERIALS

- Flip chart or butcher paper
- Markers
- What's on Your Plate? Handout
- Exercises for Relieving the Physical Symptoms of Stress Handout
- Emotional Wellness Plan Handout
- Journals
- Journal Reflections

PURPOSE

- To define emotional wellness for women and to reflect on how women manage their emotions
- To identify stressors in women’s lives and their current coping skills
- To provide resources and support in managing stress
- To offer a process help the women put together a plan to help manage emotions in healthy ways

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

1. Post a piece of flip chart or butcher paper on the wall.
2. Make copies of the “What’s on Your Plate?” Handout – one for each woman.
3. Make copies of the “Emotional Wellness Plan” Handout – one for each woman.
4. Make copies of the “Exercises for Relieving the Physical Symptoms of Stress” – one for each woman. Choose 1-2 relaxation activities to lead during the circle.
5. Make a copy of the Journal Reflections at the end of this unit and cut into strips. Copy and cut enough for each woman.
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OPENING RITUAL

Do the same opening ritual each time.

THEME INTRODUCTION

Introduce the theme of the week, “Emotional Wellness.”

CHECK-IN

Go around the circle and have each woman “check-in” as to what is going on in her life.

ACTIVITY 1

Discussion and What’s on Your Plate?

1. Begin the discussion asking the women:
   - What does it mean for a woman to be emotionally well?

2. Summarize their responses and then invite the women to think about specific things that affect their emotional wellness. Ask:
   - How is stress related to emotional wellness?
   - How important is it to a woman’s emotional wellness for her to have ways to manage stress?
   - What stressors do you or other women you know have in your lives that mess with your emotions?

3. As the women respond, record their responses on flip chart paper.

4. Pass out the “What’s on Your Plate?” handout. Invite the women to reflect on their own individual list of things that are “on their plate” that cause them stress on a daily basis and to record them on the handout. Some ideas about how they can record their stress on the plate are to:
   - Use the plate as a pie chart to indicate what causes stress in their lives. Bigger pie pieces = bigger stressors.
   - And/or they can simply write the words of tasks, responsibilities, stressors, etc. on the plate or depict their stressors by using pictures, images, or symbols.

SHARING OF ACTIVITY

Go around the circle and ask the women to share what’s on their plates. Ask:
   - How did that feel? What was that like?
   - Do any of the things on your plate feel manageable? Do any feel insurmountable?
   - Which stressors seem long-term? Which seem temporary?
   - Describe a person you know and admire who handles life’s stress in a healthy way. What do they do? How do they do it?
What areas do you want to adjust and change if possible?

How does “what’s on your plate” affect your relationships?

What insights have you gained about yourself through this exercise?

**Emotional Wellness Plan**

1. Explain to the women that the next activity is going to have them think about how they manage emotions and how they might improve their emotional wellness.

2. Share with the group that Dr. Lynn Taylor, a researcher at UCLA, discovered that “befriending” (seeking positive social connection) is the most significant difference between how females cope under stress and how males cope. The positive effects of befriending include improvements in mood, immune functioning, and more.

3. Begin by having a brief discussion about how they handle stress and strong emotions using the following questions:
   - How does gender (or culture, ethnicity, spirituality, life experience) affect how we deal with emotions and stress?
   - What is a healthy way that you manage stress now or in the past?
   - Do you express yourself when you feel stressed? How?
   - How do you become aware of your emotions? What are the best ways you know how to handle strong emotions?
   - What happens if we do not acknowledge our emotions or stress and find ways to manage them in healthy ways?

4. Next, pass out the Emotional Wellness Plan handout. Ask the women to look over the worksheet and think about the following as they fill it out:
   - What are your top emotional stressors?
   - What are you doing well in regard to managing these stressors?
   - What things are you doing that don’t support your wellness?
   - Out of these, is there anything you can do to reprioritize or adjust to make one or more of them not so stressful?
   - If yes, what steps do you want to take to do this?
   - For those stressors that you cannot change, what techniques do you want to use to help manage your emotions or stress?

5. Guide the women to discuss together the things they can do to make themselves feel better even when things are beyond their control. Some examples might be to cry, talk it out with a friend, pamper themselves a little bit, etc. If we are aware of how we can manage our emotions in healthier ways, we will establish a better sense of emotional wellness.
Week Seven

ACTIVITY 3

Exercises for Relieving Physical Symptoms of Stress

1 Begin the activity by asking:
   - How does stress manifest physically in the body?
     *Examples might include: muscle cramps, fatigue, headache, etc.*

2 Inform the women that the next activity involves trying out a few relaxation exercises that can be used to reduce stress as needed in their daily lives.

3 Instruct them to get into a relaxed position, tell them they can either close their eyes or let their eyes focus on one place in their view, and take 3-4 deep breaths into their diaphragm.

4 Tell them you are going to lead them through a few of the exercises and that they should participate as they feel comfortable.

5 Lead the women through a few of the exercises for relieving stress.

6 When finished, ask the women to open their eyes and bring their focus back to the whole group.

SHARING OF ACTIVITY

1 Go around the circle and ask the women to share how they felt about doing the relaxation exercises. Questions can include:
   - What was that like?
   - What did you notice?
   - How did your body feel?

2 Invite the women to share other techniques or exercises they use to relieve stress in their lives. If time permits, ask if anyone wants to demonstrate or lead the other participants through a stress-reducing activity.

3 Use the following questions to facilitate a discussion:
   - How does stress physically manifest itself in your body?
   - For women, our bodies provide a great deal of information to us about how we feel, what we need and desire, and what is happening inside. What happens for women when they don’t pay attention to the physical or emotional signs of stress?
   - If we consider the physical and emotional manifestations of stress to be a way that our bodies communicate with us, what are some healthy ways to respond to the messages?
   - What insights have you gained about yourself from these exercises?

4 Provide the women with a copy of the exercises for their future use!
Week Seven

JOURNALING

1. Handout the take home journaling reflections for Week 7.

2. The women will read the following quotes and journal about what they mean to them over the next week. The first addresses emotional wellness, generally, while the second describes an important way to cope under stress – especially for females. Provide clarification of any terms as needed.

   “Acceptance of one’s feelings is paramount to emotional wellness. One needs to have a realistic assessment of their limitations, development of autonomy, and ability to cope effectively with stress.”
   ~National Wellness Institute, 2004

   “…under conditions of stress, tending to offspring and affiliating with others (‘befriending’) are at least as common responses to stress in humans as fight-or-flight….Oxytocin, in conjunction with positive social contacts, attenuates biological stress responses that can arise in response to social threats.”
   ~Shelley Taylor, UCLA, 2006, Tend and Befriend: Biobehavioral Basis of Affiliation Under Stress

3. Remind the women to bring their journals to circle with them next week.

CLOSING RITUAL

Bring the women together for your closing ritual.

REFERENCES:

From Activity 1: Group Discussion, re: Taylor UCLA Study:

What’s on your plate?
Identify Emotional Stressors:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Healthy Coping Strategies I am currently using (i.e., talking to someone, “befriending,” yoga, eating nutritious meals)

________________________________________________________________________

Not-so-Healthy Coping Strategies I am currently using (i.e., drinking more than moderately, overspending, doing too much for others)

________________________________________________________________________

Stressors to Adjust/Change/Reprioritize:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Actions Steps I Need to Take to Make This Happen:

________________________________________________________________________

Who will I ask to support me in my efforts to take the action steps?

________________________________________________________________________

Of stressful situations I cannot change, techniques I want to use to release emotion/stress or cope more effectively with the stress:

Strategy #1 _______________________________________________

Strategy #2 __________________________________________________________________________________

Strategy #3 __________________________________________________________________________________
Exercises for Relieving the Physical Symptoms of Stress

**Abdominal Breathing:**

1. Lie down and place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.
2. Expand both chest and abdomen as you inhale through the nose. You may have to make a conscious effort to expand the belly if you are used to breathing only with the chest. Eventually, your abdomen will move by itself.
3. As you exhale through your nose, feel your chest and abdomen deflating. You should also feel your navel or belly button gently being pulled toward your spine.
4. Work toward inhaling for three counts and exhaling for five to six counts. Practice for a few minutes.
5. Use visualization to make your experience even more satisfying. Visualize your body rising gently with your inhalation and sinking or floating down with your exhalation. Imagine that your breath is like a wave that gently laps the seashore as you inhale, and goes back out to sea when you exhale. When thoughts intrude, visualize them as clouds lazily crossing the sky.

**Arm Stretch:** Raise your arms above your head, fingers interlaced, palms facing up. Push up as far as you can. Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat 5 times.

**Leg Stretch:** Squat, with feet flat on the floor bring left knee to chest, extend right leg straight back. Gently lower your torso as close to the floor as you can. Hold for 10 seconds. Relax. Repeat 5 times, switch leg positions, and repeat again.

**Head and Neck Roll:** Relax your shoulders and let your head roll forward, chin to chest. Slowly rotate your head in a circle without straining your neck. Repeat 5 times. Relax, then rotate, in the opposite direction. Repeat 5 times.

**Back Stretch:** Lie on your back, keeping knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Gently push your lower back onto the floor. Hold for 10 seconds. Relax. Repeat 5 times.

**Eye Strain:** Cup your palm over your eyes, resting fingers on your forehead, the heel of your hand on your cheeks. Hold for 60 seconds. Rest for 30 seconds. Repeat 2 or 3 times.

**Tight Jaw:** Allow your jaw to hang slack with your teeth slightly parted. Gently move your jaw around until it feels comfortable and then message your jaw. Hold in this comfortable position for 10-20 seconds.
Week Seven Journal Reflections

Theme: Emotional Wellness

Read the following quotes and journal about what they mean to you over the next week. The first addresses emotional wellness, generally, while the second describes an important way to cope under stress – especially for females.

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~Shelley Taylor, UCLA, 2006, Tend and Befriend: Biobehavioral Basis of Affiliation Under Stress
i. Stress Relief Exercises Adapted from http://www.stress-relief-exercises.com/index.html