

Facilitation Guide

Stress Management and the Bahá'í Community

An Assembly Development Module Workshop



“The evolution of local and national Bahá’í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá’í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage. Bahá’u’lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new civilization.

“. . . Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes. They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counselors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the function of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believer’s capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá’í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.”

*The Universal House of Justice, Ridván message
to the Bahá’ís of the World, 1996*



Stress Management and the Bahá'í Community

OVERVIEW FOR FACILITATORS

Purpose

- ★ To identify practical steps to decrease stress and increase energy, vitality, and joy, both individually and in the community

This module focuses on sources of stress, the emotional and spiritual dynamics of stress, and attitudes and practices that individuals can use to reduce stress. It includes time for the Assembly to identify practical steps it can take to decrease stress and increase energy, vitality, and joy in the community.

What you will find inside your Facilitation Guide:

- ★ **Frontispiece with key quotations.** A one-page sheet containing a quotation from a letter of the Universal House of Justice which provides the foundation of the module. (p. 2)
- ★ **Overview for Facilitators.** The page you are reading. (p. 3)
- ★ **The Assembly Development Process.** A one-page description of the process of Assembly development, the role of these modules within that process, and how to request an Assembly Development representative to facilitate the modules. (p. 4)
- ★ **Guidance for Facilitators.** A four-page collection of suggestions for preparation before the session, tips for facilitating during the session, ideas for closing the session, and guidance on what to do with the workshop report form and evaluation forms after the session. (pp. 5-8)
- ★ **Highlights of this module.** A two-page listing of the workshop objectives, an agenda outline with times of each segment of the workshop, and a listing of materials needed. (pp. 9-10)
- ★ **Facilitator's instructions for segments of this module.** A series of pages that provide the purpose and instructions for each section of the module. (pp. 11-36)
- ★ **Description of the Office of Assembly Development.** A two-page overview of the vision and mission of this office and the services it can provide. (unnumbered pages near the end of the Facilitation Guide)
- ★ **Evaluation Forms.** A two-page evaluation form for the facilitator to complete and return to the Office of Assembly Development and a two-page evaluation form for the Assembly to complete two months after the workshop. (unnumbered pages at the end of the Facilitation Guide)

Note: You will also want to obtain a copy of the Participant Handouts.

The Assembly Development Process

“...enabling Assemblies to rise to a ‘new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities’...””

The National Spiritual Assembly focuses its Assembly development initiatives towards facilitating the development of “a new state of mind” on the part of Assembly members and the community, thereby enabling Assemblies to rise to the “new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities” envisioned by the Universal House of Justice.

The development process is designed to be furthered by presentation of a variety of module workshops, each covering a distinct topic or function. Use of these modules will help Assemblies to understand more clearly the spiritual nature of their institution, improve their performance, and attain an ever advancing level of maturity as the primary institutions of the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. When used with the general community, the modules will heighten appreciation for the station and responsibilities of local Assemblies and deepen the desire to support and assist these institutions in their growth process.

The National Spiritual Assembly highly recommends that each module be studied with a Bahá’í facilitator who resides outside the particular Bahá’í community attending the training, although these materials may be used by Assemblies on their own. A list of Bahá’ís who serve as module facilitators, called Assembly Development representatives, is available from the Office of Assembly Development of the Bahá’í National Center at (847) 733-3490 or by e-mail to OAD@usbnc.org.

Assemblies may choose to study these modules as an institution, may invite other Assemblies in their area to study together, or may invite their community to join them in exploring the modules. Module workshops may also be used at Bahá’í schools or Institutes. If modules are used with both Assembly members and other community members, Assemblies are encouraged to set aside follow-up time at one of their future meetings to consider the impact and implications of what was learned on their collective functioning.

Each regular workshop in this program is designed to be around three hours in length. They are, however, adaptable to different timing needs. The module is divided into separate segments which can be selectively deleted if timing needs require this. Optional supplemental materials are also included for your use if more time is available.

Guidance for Facilitators

Before the Session

Personal preparation

- ★ Take time to prepare yourself spiritually and materially to facilitate this workshop. Meditate on your role in facilitating the friends' thoughtful study and consultation.
- ★ Read through the workshop and its handouts in advance of the session and ponder the themes in them.
- ★ Pray for assistance. Feel confident that the Blessed Beauty will guide and confirm you as you endeavor to serve the Faith.

Preparation of the course and its materials

- ★ Become familiar with the workshop and its options and extensions. Feel free to duplicate the handouts on colored paper and interleaf them in the Facilitation Guide if this would make facilitation easier for you.
- ★ The amount of time suggested for each segment of the workshop is a minimum only. If the number of participants in a workshop is large and many small groups will be reporting back, you will need to allow more time than the minimum to complete some segments.
- ★ If some of the participants are not proficient in English, consider ways to meet their needs. For instance, those who understand spoken English but do not read it easily could be paired with those who can read quotations aloud. These adjustments may affect the amount of time necessary to complete an activity or exercise.
- ★ Material which appears in italics is provided to supplement and extend the session if more time is available. Determine in advance how many expansions to the module, if any, are appropriate. Some factors to consider are available time, general level of experience and deepening of the participants, and local interest in a particular topic.
- ★ Have materials (such as a few extra handouts, art supplies, extra pens and pencils, small gift item) ready for each participant. It is wise to have slightly more of everything than you anticipate needing in case a larger than expected group of friends attend.
- ★ If the workshop segments you will be using require cards for games or exercises, prepare these beforehand. If workshop

Guidance for Facilitators, continued

segments have demonstrations, practice these once or twice beforehand.

- ★ Select devotional readings, prayers, and music you will want to use and make sure you have the equipment to play any music you might have.

Preparation of the meeting room

- ★ If possible, ask to see the meeting room in advance. Arrive early to set up. Adapt the room set-up to meet your needs, if possible.
- ★ Create an inviting atmosphere of beauty, dignity, and warmth to welcome participants. Possibilities include photographs of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, holy places or great teachers, heroines and heroes; framed quotations, decorating the walls with objects of beauty, tablecloths, arrangements of fresh or dried flowers, lighting, candles, music from diverse cultural backgrounds, bowls of potpourri or drops of rose oil, seating arrangements, and refreshments.

During the Session

Creating and maintaining a spiritual environment

- ★ Warmly greet the participants. Be sure that the spirit of the Faith permeates the room. While conveying the content of the workshop is important, it is equally important that the style of interaction does not feel harsh, nervous, or rushed. Be a bringer of light to the hearts of the group.

Facilitating discussion

- ★ These workshops ask facilitators to raise several questions to the group for possible consultation. If one question fails to elicit much response, move on to another one.
- ★ Express appreciation for each participant’s contribution.
- ★ Be mindful of who has spoken and try to give everyone an opportunity to offer a first comment before giving time for individuals to offer second or third comments. Depending on the size of your group, you may want to go around the room, inviting each person to comment briefly in turn.
- ★ As groups are consulting on quotations and focus questions, go from group to group and listen in, without interrupting the consultative process. You may want to note comments or

Guidance for Facilitators, continued

questions that arise and bring them up when the groups reassemble.

Using time

- ★ When small groups are asked to consult or work on an art project in a certain amount of time, give each group a “5-minute warning” when their time is nearly finished. This could be done either by going from group to group as a reminder or by ringing a small bell.
- ★ Be flexible and sensitive to the needs and understanding of the participants. If a particular question or point engages the group in lengthy but topic-related discussion, it may be preferable to allow participants to continue to pursue an area that intrigues them rather than to cut off discussion and move on to another point or exercise. Participants often experience exploring less material but in greater depth as more satisfying than a hurried look at many aspects of a topic.
- ★ You may choose to make the decision yourself about whether to let a group spend more time on one area and skip later exercises or activities. You may also choose to involve the group as a whole in the decision: “Since this topic is generating a lot of interest, do we want to 1) spend more time here and not explore a later topic, 2) extend the time of our session and not skip any segments, or 3) move on from this topic, go through all the following segments, and end at our original agreed-upon time?”

Dividing participants into small groups

- ★ Put stickers on participants name cards or leave cards with stickers at their place and have them group themselves according to sticker design.
- ★ Divide into groups by the month/season in which one’s birthday falls.
- ★ In theater/auditorium seating, form groups around where participants are sitting.
- ★ Create funny groupings and ask people to choose the group that best describes them (Example: people who love apples are group A; if your favorite color is blue, join group B; if Casablanca is your favorite movie, join group C.)

Guidance for Facilitators, continued

Closing the Session

- If you have Assembly members from several communities attending a session, you may wish to have them work together as an Assembly or work in groups composed of different Assemblies, depending on the exercise.
- If you have a combination of Assembly and community members attending, you may wish to mix the groups together for some exercises and separate Assembly members from community members for other exercises.
- ★ Provide verbal instructions on how to turn the evaluation forms in.
- ★ You may want to give a gift to each participant of a card with a beautifully lettered quotation that pertains to the workshop.
- ★ Encourage Assemblies that went through this workshop in a group larger than their own membership to have a follow-up period at an up-coming meeting to consult on what was learned and how it can be applied to their own functioning.
- ★ Suggest choosing a date and picking a topic for the next Assembly development workshop.

Please note: Have the participant evaluation forms turned in to you and return them with your evaluation form. Be sure to use the machine readable forms. Give participants their Bahá'í Locality Code and explain how to fill in the forms.

After the Session

- ★ Complete the workshop report form and mail it with the participant evaluations to:

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States,

Office of Assembly Development
1233 Central St., Evanston, IL 60201

OAD@USBNC.ORG

fax. (847) 733-3486, phone (847) 733-3490

- ★ Send a follow up letter to the Assembly(ies) to thank them for participation and include a copy of their evaluation form to fill out two months after the workshop.

Thank you for serving the Cause by facilitating this Assembly development workshop!

Highlights of Stress Management and the Bahá'í Community

Objectives:

Participants will

- ★ Explore aspects of “a new state of mind”
- ★ Gain knowledge of the emotional and spiritual dynamics of stress
- ★ Perceive actions they can take to better manage stress in their personal life and in the life of their community
- ★ Acquire greater skill and confidence in assisting individuals experiencing stress

Agenda outline: (Total time: 3 hours, 20 minutes)

- ★ **Introduction** (15 minutes), pp. 11-13
An opportunity to introduce the Assembly development program, familiarize participants with the objectives of this module, and present an agenda outline of topics and activities.
- ★ **The call to “a new state of mind”** (10 minutes), pp. 14-15
A guided discussion to help participants grasp some of the implications of moving toward “a new state of mind.”
- ★ **Health and well-being in Bahá'í community life** (15 minutes), pp. 16-18
An activity to reflect on the ideal of a healthy individual and community life, assess the current condition of the community, and appreciate the link between personal happiness and the ability to build flourishing communities which attract others.
- ★ **Causes of stress** (30 minutes), pp. 19-22
Individual and group identification of common sources of stress, leading to an understanding of why being a Bahá'í increases rather than decreases exposure to sources of stress.
- ★ **Dynamics of stress** (30 minutes), pp. 25-27
Guided group discussion of the spiritual and emotional dynamics of human functioning under the conditions of joy and stress, increasing participants' ability to anticipate behaviors that may occur in an individual under stress.
- ★ **Attitudes and practices that individuals can use to reduce stress** (50 minutes), pp. 28-30
Small group identification of choices individuals can make to reduce stress, followed by a brief period of individual reflection for participants to select specific changes they would like to make in their own lives.
- ★ **The Assembly, the community, and stress** (40 minutes), pp. 32-35
Examination of four areas of Assembly functioning that can inadvertently contribute to stress in the community or result in missed opportunities to increase energy, vitality, and joy in the community.
- ★ **Closing** (10 minutes), p. 36
Time for individuals to finalize plans for stress-reducing and energy-enhancing changes they would like to make in their own lives, beginning this coming week.

Highlights, continued

Extension sessions for use if more time is available

- ★ ***Stress and the Assembly*** (30 minutes), p. 21
An opportunity for Assembly members to consider ways in which their service on the Assembly may be a cause of stress and what they can do about this particular type of stress.
- ★ ***The inevitability and role of tests*** (30 minutes), p. 23-23
Small group discussion aimed at perceiving stress and tests as potential doors to spiritual growth.
- ★ ***Counseling believers experiencing stress*** (variable time), p. 31
A role-playing activity to gain experience in diagnosing what stress-reducing, vitality-enhancing practices may be temporarily missing from a stressed believer's life, and recommending such practices and explaining their benefits.

Times given above are minimums. Module material which appears in italics is provided to supplement and extend the session if more time is available. If less time is available, you can skip whatever section seems to be less relevant to the needs of the group. You may also choose to direct participants to focus only on quotes in their handouts that are bolded, as these are the most vital. Focusing on bolded quotes may also aid participants who are slower readers.

Materials needed

- ★ Prayer book
- ★ Pens and pencils for participants
- ★ Sheets of blank paper for each participant
- ★ Whiteboard, blackboard or flip chart and markers
- ★ A variety of highlighters
- ★ Fruit juice with particles or pulp (canned pineapple juice or natural, pressed apple cider)
- ★ A clear drinking glass
- ★ *Suggested: A musical rendition of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayer "Refresh and gladden my spirit."*
- ★ *Optional: A beautiful card or calligraphy rendition of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayer "Refresh and gladden my spirit" to give as a gift to each participant*

Note: You will need to inform the sponsoring Assembly that Participant Handouts for each person should be ordered from the Bahá'í Distribution Service prior to the event.

Introduction (15 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To introduce the Assembly Development resources
- ★ To familiarize participants with the objectives of this module
- ★ To present an agenda outline of topics and activities
- ★ To determine what questions and issues participants have on this topic

* **Equanimity:** composure, especially under tension; mental or emotional balance

Activities:

1. Brief devotions

- ★ Open with brief devotions that you have selected or ask for a volunteer.

2. Introduction to the module (2 minutes)

- ★ Open by playing a musical rendition of the prayer of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that begins “O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. . .” or by asking a participant to sing this prayer.
- ★ Comment that this prayer has a special place in the hearts of many and suggest that it is so well loved because it contains some very positive statements about what we would like to be: happy, joyful beings, without any anxieties, sorrow or grief.
- ★ Note that the reality is that there are times when we aren’t very joyful, when we feel anxious, when our troubles do seem to overwhelm us, when we grieve. It happens to us as individuals, and it happens to us collectively as Bahá’í communities. This Assembly Development module is designed to help us to better understand some of the dynamics that are taking place during those difficult times, whether it be on the individual or community level, to suggest some ways in which we can cope in a positive way with what is happening, and to develop what the Universal House of Justice describes as the ability “to cope with the challenges of life with equanimity*.” (The Universal House of Justice, letter on “Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh,” par. 52)

3. Introduction to development resources (3 minutes)

- ★ Give a brief introduction to the resources of the Office of Assembly Development (see the description of the Office of Assembly Development which is attached in unnumbered pages near the end of the modules), highlighting that the purpose of the modules in the Assembly Development process is to facilitate the development of “a new state of mind” on the part of Assembly members and the community, thereby enabling Assemblies to rise to the “new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities” envisioned by the Universal House of Justice.

Introduction, continued

4. Introduction to importance of the topic (1 minute)

- ★ Share with participants that in its Naw-Ruz 1974 message the Universal House of Justice stated that “. . .In a world becoming daily more divided by factionalism and group interests, the Bahá'í community must be distinguished by the concord and harmony of its relationships. The coming of age of the human race must be foreshadowed by the mature, responsible understanding of human problems and the wise administration of their affairs by these same Bahá'í communities. The practice and development of such Bahá'í characteristics are the responsibility alike of individual Bahá'ís and the administrative institutions, although the greatest opportunity to foster their growth rests with the Local Spiritual Assemblies.”
- ★ Comment that as the old world order gives way to the new, one of the prevalent human problems facing people during this transition is stress. We can't eliminate stress, but we can take positive action to manage it better in our personal life and in the life of our Bahá'í community. A primary focus of this particular module is using the concept of stress management to help Assemblies increase their ability to counsel and encourage individuals experiencing stress, thereby developing happier and healthier communities.
- ★ This module will not make Assemblies experts on stress management. Its purpose is to stimulate thinking about the development of our Bahá'í communities by looking at some of the ways stress affects the believers' attitudes and behaviors and to identify some actions that can help individuals better manage stress.

5. Overview of objectives (2 minutes)

- ★ Read aloud the objectives of this module and have them posted.
- ★ See page 9 for a list of the objectives. Make adjustments for any sections that are removed for timing considerations or optional extension sessions that are added.

Introduction, continued

6. Review agenda (2 minutes)

- ★ Go through the agenda for the session, writing an outline of topics to be covered on a whiteboard or previously prepared flip chart.
- ★ See pages 9-10 for an agenda. Make adjustments for any sections that are removed for timing considerations or optional extension sessions that are added.

7. Invite questions (3-5 minutes)

- ★ Invite participants to share questions they have about stress management and the Bahá'í community.
- ★ Make a list of these and post them. At the end of class, check to make sure that all have been answered or that the questioner has been referred to information elsewhere.

The Call to “a New State of Mind”(10 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To grasp some of the implications of moving toward “a new state of mind”
- ★ To gain a deeper understanding of the Assembly’s roles and responsibilities

Activities:

1. Discussion of quotations (5-10 minutes)

- ★ Have a participant read aloud the first quotation on the handout “The Call to a New State of Mind.”(Participant Handouts p. 3)
- ★ Invite participants to share thoughts and feelings about “a new state of mind” and the process of moving toward it.
- ★ Offer the thought that one implication is the need for all of us to listen to “old” quotes with “new” ears in order to find new insights in familiar quotations.
- ★ *You may also choose to share two other thoughts:*
 - *First, a new state of mind is not a one-time paradigm shift – a condition of once we “get it,” we will necessarily “have it” forever – as much as a continuing process of reorienting our minds from what is to the vision of what the possibilities are, as described in the Writings and Ridván messages.*
 - *Second, it is normal to slide back into “old” states of mind – esp. under stress – for quite a while. States of mind are habits, or default settings, which take conscious, deliberate effort and time to change.*

Optional extension: Further discussion of quotations

- ★ *Have participants take turns reading aloud the remaining quotations on the handout “The Call to a New State of Mind.” (Participant Handouts pp. 3-4) The following questions can be asked in any order, and you have the option to ask them after the paragraph in question or after all quotes are read.*

Ask the group as a whole:

- *How might “an expansion of thought” be stimulated? (par. 3)*
- *What might fall into the category of “the obscuring dust of acquired knowledge”? (par. 5)*
- *What are some of the assumptions and conceptions we have in general about institutions, their authority, and*

The Call to “a New State of Mind,” continued

“what is natural and appropriate in relationships”?
(par. 6)

- *Where do these assumptions and conceptions come from?*
(par. 6)
- *How do we remove “obscuring dust” and “clear the ground for new conceptions of social organization”?*
(par. 5)
- *How comfortable is the process of “ever more rapid change”?* (par. 8)
- *Is resisting or hiding from this “onrushing” and “quickenning wind” an option for us? for humanity as a whole?* (par. 4)
- ★ *Ask for thoughts on the process of “experiencing the rigorous effects” of an “onrushing” and “quickenning wind” ventilating “the modes of thought of us all, renewing, clarifying, and amplifying our perspectives.”* (par. 4)
- ★ *Ask for one word descriptions of the feelings that being part of such a process evokes. Acknowledge as a normal part of the change process all the feelings, whether they express excitement or reservations.*

2. Read passage, underline and share (3-5 minutes)

- ★ Ask participants to read the passage from the Ridván 1996 letter from the Universal House of Justice (Participant Handouts, p. 3) silently and underline or highlight what they feel are key words or phrases that have particular implications for the topic of the module.
- ★ Invite participants to share what they have underlined.

A word in the Participant Handouts:

* **Canalize:**
to channel into a particular direction; provide an outlet for

Health and Well-being in Bahá'í Community Life (15 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To perceive that we are created to be happy, individually and collectively
- ★ To reflect on indicators of the current condition of the local community
- ★ To appreciate the relationship between personal happiness and the ability to contribute to building flourishing communities which attract others to them

Activities:

1. Individual study of quotations (3-5 minutes)

- ★ Have participants silently read through the quotations on the handout “We are Created to be Happy,” (Participant Handouts, pp. 5-6) underlining or highlighting key words and phrases about the ideal of a healthy individual and community life.

2. Individual assessment of current community condition (10 minutes)

- ★ Ask participants to consider the current condition of their community, looking at three barometers or indicators: energy level, happiness, and perseverance (write these three indicators on the board or flip chart). Ask them to ponder questions about these three indicators as you raise them or have them read by participants.

Energy level:

- ⇒ What is the general energy level of your community?
- ⇒ Are the friends, for the most part, positive, active, and motivated, or are they listless and apathetic?
- ⇒ If you were to give the energy level at your community's events, such as a typical Feast, a number from one to ten, with ten being the highest, what would you give it?
- ⇒ Do the friends in your community generally arise to do what needs doing or does the Assembly need to remind them to do things over and over again?
- ⇒ Do the friends come away from community events energized or drained?

Happiness:

- ⇒ How happy are the friends in your community? (Do you know the friends in your community well enough to respond comfortably to this question?)
- ⇒ When the friends talk about your community, do they tell positive stories?
- ★ Comment that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often asked the friends, “Are you happy?” Suggest that perhaps the reason for this was that He knew that people tend to be at their best when they are happy. They get more done and are more creative. Happiness also affects energy levels. When we're happy, we tend to have more energy.

Health and Well-being in Bahá'í Community Life, continued

Perseverance:

- ★ Comment that nobody is ever always happy. In those times when we're either neutral or unhappy, it's important that we know how to persevere.
- ★ Define perseverance as the capacity to pursue an objective or undertaking in the face of discouragement or opposition.
 - ⇒ How well is your community persevering in general?
 - ⇒ If things aren't going well, do the friends tend to become inactive?
 - ⇒ Has Feast attendance been dropping or rising in your community?
 - ⇒ How many of the people who have become Bahá'ís in your community over the past five years are still active in Bahá'í community life?
- ★ Note that the Universal House of Justice's letters and plans have increasingly related numerical and qualitative goals. The goal of developing “a greatly expanded, visibly united, vibrant and cohesive” community (Letter to Bahá'ís of the world, dated December 31, 1995) is linked to the goal of “enhancing the vitality of the faith of individual believers” (Ridván 1993).
- ★ Inform participants that the Universal House of Justice explains that ‘vitality of faith’ “is expressed through personal initiative and constancy in teaching the Cause to others, and through conscientious, individual effort to provide energy and resources to upbuild the community, to uphold the authority of its institutions, and to support local and regional plans and teaching projects.” (Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World, dated December 31, 1995).
- ★ Comment that the activities that are vital to the development of the individual believer – teaching, deepening, praying, giving to the Fund, living the Bahá'í life – also contribute to the overall health and growth of the Bahá'í community.
- ★ Comment that believers – or communities – whose level of energy is consistently low, who are unhappy, and who are unable to persevere in the face of life's tests and difficulties, will find it harder to perform these activities. The process of building “flourishing” communities (Ridván 1996), with happier, healthier patterns of life, will be slowed down.

Health and Well-being in Bahá'í Community Life, continued

- ★ Note that learning how to remain joyful and energized in the face of life's difficulties will enhance the quality of life of individuals and their communities and will also increase their effectiveness in building new models of life which will attract and give hope to others.

Causes of Stress (30 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To identify common decreases exposure to possible sources of stress

Setting up the activity:

- ★ Share a quotation about the relationship between individuals and their environment:
“We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us. . . . Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other. . . .” (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, February 17, 1933, Compilation of Compilations, Vol. 1, p. 84)
- ★ Mention that stress results from the interaction between a person and his environment. It appears when there is a discrepancy between the physical and emotional demands made upon a person and his perceived ability to respond to these demands. Stress can result from both positive and negative events.
- ★ Comment that complete elimination of stress is not a desirable goal. Too few demands – too little stimulation – can lead to feeling bored and restless, just as too many demands can lead to feeling overwhelmed and drained. Stress management is learning to make choices that keep our lives in balance and our energy levels healthy.

Activities:

1. Individual reflection on sources of stress (2-3 minutes).

- ★ Ask participants to take out the handout “Sources of Stress” (Participant Handouts, p. 7) and quickly write down five general life events or situations that are stressful (not detailed or specific to them – see samples below).

2. Group discussion of stressors (7-8 minutes)

- ★ Compile responses on a board or flip chart, asking each person to add stressors not already mentioned.
- ★ A sample of stressors might include those listed on the following page:

Causes of Stress, continued

- Health problems
- Death of a relative or friend
- Getting divorced
- Injury of a relative or friend
- Starting a new job
- Getting married
- A major purchase
- Children
- Quitting smoking
- Income taxes
- Visiting or hosting relatives
- Getting laid-off or fired
- Any type of conflict
- Being the victim of a crime
- Final exams
- Giving a talk or recital
- Travel
- Holidays
- Driving a vehicle
- High school reunions
- Going on a diet
- World events

★ If the group does not mention positive events as potential stressors, give a few examples such as: getting married or traveling.

★ Ask: How many of these stressors go away when we become Bahá'ís?

Comment that we may have additional information about them, understand them in a new context, and rearrange them as priorities in our life, but they still cause stress. Share the following:

“The Bahá'ís are part of the world. They too feel the great pressures which are brought to bear upon all people today, whoever and wherever they may be.” (Letter from Shoghi Effendi, dated July 19, 1956, to a National Spiritual Assembly, in Unlocking the Power of Action, #11)

★ Note that in addition to these common sources of stress, we also experience stress related to being Bahá'ís.

3. Contemplation of experiences unique to being a Bahá'í (10 minutes)

★ Ask participants to continue using the handout “Sources of Stress” and write down five experiences unique to being Bahá'ís that are stressful.

★ Compile responses on a board or flip chart, asking each person to add stressors not already mentioned.

★ A sample of stressors unique to being a Bahá'í might include:

Causes of Stress, continued

- Becoming a Bahá'í
- Going to your first Feast
- Serving on a local Assembly
- Pioneering
- Coordinating a conference
- Serving as an Assembly officer
- Standing out as different
- Being asked to meet with the Assembly
- Observing the Fast
- Giving a talk about the Faith
- Consultation
- Struggles with Bahá'í law
- Asking for parental consent
- Going through a year of waiting
- Diversity
- Answering questions about the Faith

- ★ Mention that some stresses that come from being a Bahá'í are related to doing something that is unfamiliar. Share a comment on behalf of the Guardian:

“It is often difficult for us to do things because they are so very different from what we are used to, not because the thing itself is particularly difficult.” (Letter from Shoghi Effendi, dated March 16, 1949, in The Bahá'í Life, p. 16.)

- ★ Other stresses stem from making major life changes which may not be viewed favorably by people whose opinions we value, such as relatives, friends, and co-workers.
- ★ Still others come from Bahá'í community life and the challenging experience of learning to create unity in diversity:

“Perhaps the greatest test Bahá'ís are ever subjected to is from each other. . .” (Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, dated February 18, 1945, in Lights of Guidance, 1996 ed., p. 602, #2037)

- ★ ***Optional extension: Stress and the Assembly (30 minutes)***

- Have Assembly members consider ways in which their service on the Assembly may be a cause of stress and what they can do about this particular type of stress by reading the quotations and consulting about the focus questions on the handout “Stress and the Assembly.” (Participant Handouts, p. 8)

Causes of Stress, continued

- If this module is being used in a group larger than the membership of one Assembly, encourage Assemblies to use this exercise at a future Assembly meeting.

4. Closing the activity

- ★ Point out that as Bahá'ís we are subject to more sources of stress than many of our fellow citizens: stress from the secular world and stress from the experiences inherent in being Bahá'ís.
- ★ Comment that this reality is important for Assemblies to understand and keep in mind because believers sometimes feel that by becoming Bahá'ís their lives are suddenly going to be free from stress – that somehow everything is now going to go right for them. When it doesn't work out that way, they may get disillusioned and start finding fault with the Faith, their communities, and their fellow believers.
- ★ Note that while Assemblies should strive to be empathetic to the pain believers feel when experiencing a gap between expectations and reality, they must also be aware that sometimes this pain occurs because the expectations were not realistic to begin with.

Optional Extension Session One

The Inevitability and Role of Tests (30 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To perceive stress and tests as potential doors to spiritual growth

Activities:

1. Small group activities (15 minutes)

- ★ Divide participants into groups of 4-5.
- ★ Ask groups to read aloud the section of their handout on “The Inevitability and Role of Tests” (Participant Handouts, p. 9) and discuss the following focus questions:
 - How do the sources of stress on our lists relate to Bahá’í concepts of tests and difficulties?
 - What benefits do tests and suffering confer on us?
 - What tests will Western believers face? What will be the results of these tests?

2. Small groups report back to larger group (10 minutes)

- ★ Allow time for each group to share the results of its consultation.

3. Closing the activity

- ★ Offer the following comments as a summation to this topic:
 - Comment that from a Bahá’í perspective, we can think of life’s stressors as tests and difficulties and regard them as essential to our spiritual growth and development.
 - Note that the Writings tell us that there are two kinds of tests and difficulties: those over which we have no control and those which are a consequence of our own choices. In either case, we always have a choice about how we’re going to respond. Our ability to choose how we will respond is an element of free will.
 - Comment that in all cases we also have Bahá’u’lláh’s promise that God “will never deal unjustly with any one, neither will He task a soul beyond its power.” (Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 106)
 - Note that as challenging and unpleasant as tests may be while we are going through them, the Writings assure us that they serve important and positive purposes.
 - Explain that in nature, the seeds of some plants, such as conifers, only open after a fire; they need intense heat to

The Inevitability and Role of Tests, continued

stimulate them to germinate. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá implies this same principle applies to some aspects of human development when He says, “Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 178)

- Comment that Bahá’u’lláh reassures us that experiences which seem harsh and uncomfortable can be doorways to growth: “My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy.” (Bahá’u’lláh, Hidden Words, p. 15, Arabic #51)

Dynamics of Stress (30 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To gain awareness of spiritual and emotional dynamics of human functioning under the conditions of joy and stress
- ★ To anticipate behaviors that may occur in an individual under stress

Activities:

1. Identifying feelings under conditions of stress (2 minutes)

- ★ Ask participants to remember a time when they felt under a lot of stress. Ask them to describe, in 1-2 word answers, how they felt.
- ★ Write their descriptions on one side of a blackboard or flip chart under the heading “stress/sadness.” On the opposite side of the board put up a heading of “high energy/vitality.”

2. Identifying feelings under conditions of joy (3 minutes)

- ★ Have a participant read the quote “Joy gives us wings! . . .” from the handout “Spiritual and Emotional Dynamics.” (Participant Handouts, p. 10)
- ★ Ask participants to list some of the dynamics this passages mentions about human functioning under conditions of joy (high energy and vitality) and sadness (low energy and vitality). Write these on the board/flipchart under the two columns.
- ★ Comment that human beings behave in loosely predictable ways when they operate under different emotional and spiritual conditions.

3. Discussion of the impact of feelings on behavior (15 minutes)

- ★ Ask participants to think about how a person with the feelings and dynamics listed on the stressed/sad side of the board is likely to act. Ask the following four questions and, if they do not arise from the group, share the suggested comments which follow each question.
- ★ Ask: How much energy is he/she able to bring to the task of making necessary changes to reduce stress?

Comment that many people don’t consider dealing with the sources of stress in their life until their energy level – and, often, self-esteem – are low; and this is the hardest time to make changes. Change, in itself, can cause stress. Thinking about making changes while already feeling overwhelmed can de-energize a person to the point of complete inertia.

Dynamics of Stress, continued

- ★ Ask: How receptive will he/she be to suggestions and advice?

Comment that individuals under stress may be resistant to help and guidance at the very time they may need it most. The Assembly should not be surprised, impatient, or hurt if suggestions are met with a series of “yes, but . . .”s.

- ★ Ask: How aware of other people’s needs, sensitivities, and feelings will he/she be?

Comment that individuals under stress may have lowered sensitivity to needs of others. This can manifest itself in all sorts of ways, such as lateness, rude remarks, forgetfulness, lack of courtesy, impatience, and anger. They are more prone to making those “cooling remarks” and “petty unnecessary observations” (Bahá’í Administration, p. 19) that Shoghi Effendi cautioned against.

- ★ Ask: How likely it is that he/she will revert to old behaviors that had seemed to have been successfully overcome?

Comment that individuals under stress may regress to old, familiar behaviors, even those that they had grown beyond. For instance, if the individual was previously expressing anger inappropriately or using drugs or alcohol, Assemblies should not be surprised if these old problems reappear.

- ★ Note that it is important for Assemblies to understand that people under stress are often not in full control of themselves. They may say things they don’t really mean and behave in ways of which they are later ashamed. Understanding this, an Assembly is in a better position to offer support to the person rather than responding forcefully or defensively to the situation.

4. Discussion of the variability of feelings (10 minutes)

- ★ Referring to the two sides of the board, ask: Are these “fixed” elements of our personality or do they vary?
- ★ If not raised by participants, make the following points:
 - Energy levels, self-esteem, and feelings of adequacy and competence vary from person to person. They also vary within each of us from day to day as we confront different situations and experiences.

Dynamics of Stress, continued

- Our internal state and our experiences with the outer world are interactive: the outer world can trigger feelings of joy or sadness, competence or inadequacy, and our internal state influences how we perceive and react to the outer world.

To illustrate this second point, offer the example of how two different believers experience a Feast. Someone whose level of energy, vitality, and self-esteem are low and whose stress level is high may view a particular Feast negatively. Someone whose level of energy, vitality, and self-esteem are high and whose stress level is low will tend to view the same Feast as a positive experience. It's the same Feast; the only difference is in how the people attending it feel that day.

Point out that this dynamic is important for Assemblies to understand because sometimes when people are overly critical about what is going on in their Bahá'í communities, they are really sending the Assembly a message about their own internal states. If the Assembly is not sensitive to this, it may try to address the problem by changing the activities in the community – activities that may be just fine – rather than by helping an individual believer during a time of stress.

- ★ **Optional:** *A short break could be taken at this point. If participants do not actually take a break, it may be helpful to have them stand and stretch.*

Attitudes and Practices that Individuals Can Use to Reduce Stress (50 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To identify choices individuals can make to reduce stress
- ★ To select specific changes participants would like to make in their own lives

Setting up the activity (2 minutes)

- ★ Take a container of fruit juice which has pulp or particles which will settle out, such as pineapple juice or natural, pressed apple cider. Shake the container up, then pour juice into a clear glass. If you cannot locate these materials, you could also use a glass of water with an Alka Seltzer tablet dropped into it.
 - Ask participants to describe the contents of the glass (murky, agitated, cloudy, etc.)
 - Set the glass aside for reference at the end of this segment.

Activities:

1. Individual reading and underlining of quotations (3 minutes)

- ★ Ask the whole group to silently read through the remaining quotations on the handout “Spiritual and Emotional Dynamics” (Participant Handouts, p. 10) and underline answers to this focus question:
 - What are the choices these passages highlight that are ours to make as individuals?
- ★ As participants work, write the question on the board or at the top of a flip chart.

2. Individuals share responses (2 minutes)

- ★ Record participants’ responses on a flip chart sheet or board as a master list.

3. Small group consultation on quotations (20 minutes)

- ★ Divide participants into groups of 4-5. Ask groups to read silently the handout (Participant Handouts, pp. 11-14) “Attitudes and Practices that Affect Stress Levels,” focusing on the bolded paragraphs, and to consult on the following focus questions, using the handout and their own experience:
 - What are examples of acts of physical care of the body? How do these affect stress levels? What happens if these are neglected?

Attitudes and Practices that Individuals Can Use to Reduce Stress, continued

- What spiritual practices reduce stress or increase one's energy level and ability to deal with stress? How or why do they have this effect? What happens when these are neglected?
- What could be added, removed, or changed about the home environment to create a soothing atmosphere that relaxes and rejuvenates?

4. Small group brainstorming (5 minutes)

- ★ Have each group make up a list of “stress busters” for individuals, using the Stress Busters sheet in their handouts (Participant Handouts, p. 15). Their list should include a variety of stress-reducing or energy raising choices the individual can make in his or her:
 - attitudes, perceptions, and ways of viewing situations
 - behaviors and habits
 - or environment

5. Small groups report back to larger groups (10 minutes)

- ★ As groups report back their lists, encourage participants to add other particularly appealing stress busters to their own lists.
- ★ If not mentioned by any groups, suggest the practice of memorizing very short passages from the Creative Word to bring to mind during times of stress, such as:

“What but remembrance of Thee can give delight to my soul or gladness to my heart?” (Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 195)

“The healer of all thine ills is remembrance of Me, forget it not.” (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words, Persian, p. 32)

6. Individual contemplation (2-3 minutes)

- ★ Give time for participants to select 2-3 stress busters they personally want to incorporate into their life and write these on the bottom of their stress busters sheet.

7. Closing the activity (5 minutes)

- ★ Ask participants to look again at the glass of juice (which should have settled out by now) and describe its contents (e.g., clear, settled, calm).

Attitudes and Practices that Individuals Can Use to Reduce Stress, continued

- ★ Ask what factors changed the condition of the juice (e.g., sitting quietly, undisturbed, over a period of time).
- ★ Invite comments about any implications this demonstration may have for de-stressing our lives.
- ★ Invite comments about the relationship between this demonstration and the spiritual practices of daily prayer and meditation.
- ★ End by sharing the following two quotations:
 - “I beseech Thee, by Thy name through which Thou turnest restlessness into tranquillity, fear into confidence, weakness into strength, and abasement into glory, that Thou of Thy grace wilt aid me . . .” (Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 213)
 - “Be still, and know that I am God.” (Psalms 46:10)

Optional Extension Session Two

Counseling Believers Experiencing Stress

Purpose

- ★ To practice diagnosing what stress-reducing, vitality-enhancing practices may be temporarily missing from a stressed believer's life
- ★ To practice recommending stress-reducing, vitality-enhancing practices and explaining their benefits

Activities:

1. Role playing or discussion in small groups (20 minutes)

- ★ Divide into Assembly size working groups of 7-10.
- ★ Announce that a stressed-out believer has come to the Assembly for guidance. Tell groups to assume, for this exercise, that the believer's difficulties are not such as require therapeutic counseling outside the expertise of the Assembly or that he/she is already working with a therapist on those elements.
- ★ A participant could be asked to role play the stressed believer and meet with the "Assembly" before it begins its consultation. Alternately, the "Assembly" could simply consult on the types of diagnostic questions it might want to pose to a stressed-out believer in general, without role playing a meeting with the believer.
- ★ Each "Assembly," as a "channel of divine guidance" and "loving shepherd" and using all that has been covered in this module, should then consult on the advice the Assembly may wish to give.

2. Small groups report back to larger group

- ★ Depending on available time, groups could reassemble and share their questions and advice with each other.
- ★ If time allows, have two "Assembly" members role play being a pair of liaisons from the Assembly delivering its guidance in person to a person (in front of the full group) and explaining the spiritual dynamics and wisdom which underlie the guidance.
- ★ This role play could be repeated several times for more participants to have turns practicing being liaisons.
- ★ Ask:
 - What behaviors on the part of the Assembly and its liaison would display loving sensitivity to this stressed believer?
 - What behaviors might be perceived as patronizing or insensitive?

The Assembly, the Community, and Stress

(40 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To identify areas of Assembly functioning that can raise or lower stress levels in the community
- ★ To identify practical steps Assemblies can take to decrease

Setting up the activity:

- ★ In its May 19, 1994 letter, the Universal House of Justice describes the relationship between the Assembly and the body of believers and refers to “a sense of partnership based on appreciation” and “a commonly recognized commitment to service.”
- ★ Ask: What are some of the qualities that characterize a close, productive partnership?
- ★ List these on a board or flip chart. (e.g., communication, affection, trust, mutual respect, etc.)
- ★ Comment that sometimes Assemblies inadvertently contribute to stress in the community or miss opportunities to reduce stress and increase energy and vitality. By being aware of the following factors and acting accordingly, an Assembly can enhance a sense of partnership.

Activities:

1. Small group discussion of stress factors (15 minutes)

- ★ Divide participants into four groups. Assign each group one of four factors that impact stress in the community (listed below). Ask each group to answer the focus questions relating to their stress factor, using their experience and material on the handout page for their stress factor (Participant Handouts, p 16-19). Stress factors are:
 1. Implementing change
 2. Meeting a diversity of needs and interests
 3. Expressing appreciation and encouragement
 4. Learning to let go of grievances
- ★ Ask each group to express the results of their consultation through writing 3-5 guidelines or recommendations for Assemblies.
- ★ In addition, ask each group to also consider the same, general question as well:
 - What practical steps can Assemblies take to decrease stress and increase energy, vitality, and joy in the community?

The Assembly, the Community, and Stress,

continued

2. Small groups report back to larger group (15 minutes)

- ★ Have the groups report back on the questions and suggested guidelines related to their specific stress factor (the question about practical steps will be covered later). See that the following points are made, if they are not part of the groups' guidance and recommendations to Assemblies:

Points on Stress Factor 1

Implementing change

- ★ If one tries to change too much and too quickly, the change itself will become a source of stress. If Assemblies change the plans of their communities too often, they are going to increase the level of stress in their communities.
- ★ Assemblies and communities are constantly called to undertake new initiatives and seize new opportunities, and every Assembly faces pressing concerns that need to be dealt with as they arise. Change is unavoidable; but to be effective, changes should be consistent and gradual, for the most part. Constantly changing the community's direction and plans should not be the Assembly's accepted mode of operation, or there will be a lot of stressed-out and frustrated believers in the community.

Points on Stress Factor 2

Meeting a diversity of needs and interests

- ★ Bahá'í communities by nature and destiny are diverse. Racial and cultural diversity are just the tip of the diversity iceberg. Other examples include age, single/married/married with children, education, interest and skills, personality, capacity and ability, day people/night people, vegetarians, diabetics, etc.
- ★ Often Assemblies will make plans without taking the diversity of their community into account. Trying to take part in events that don't "fit" can be stressful. It can also make individuals or elements of the community feel ignored or less valued.
- ★ One way to prevent this is to plan a variety of activities in the community and to inform the believers that the Assembly does not expect everyone to attend everything that has been planned.
- ★ As Bahá'í communities grow in size, the number and diversity of activities must increase as well to meet diverse needs and

The Assembly, the Community, and Stress

(continued)

Points on Stress Factor 3

make full use of a wider range of human resources and interests. A few simple activities may be sufficient for a community of 9-15 members but will not meet the needs of a community whose membership numbers in the hundreds and thousands.

Expressing appreciation and encouragement

- ★ Life is stressful enough when we are working our hardest and trying our best. A lack of recognition of efforts – never hearing a word of appreciation and encouragement – is an additional burden that can lead to feelings of discouragement, that our efforts are never enough.
- ★ A lack of recognition of effort is particularly discouraging when results are slow in appearing or goals are still not being won despite hard, often sacrificial, work.
- ★ In addition to needing to hear appreciation and recognition from individuals, we need institutional encouragement as well.
- ★ Shoghi Effendi intuitively knew the power of appreciation and encouragement. Nearly all of the letters written on his behalf to individuals include a personal, hand-written post script expressing the Guardian's appreciation of the believer's services and efforts and offering encouragement and prayers.
- ★ Assembly expressions of appreciation and recognition of effort in the community will go a long way toward raising the level of energy and happiness of the friends.

Learning to let go of grievances

- ★ We tend to separate our grievances into two categories, justified and unjustified. We all understand that unjustified grievances – hurts that resulted from misunderstandings or were inflicted unintentionally – should be set aside, but we tend to feel that justified grievances need to be apologized for and made right. The Guardian's guidance saves us time and the emotional energy of sorting through – and dwelling on – our grievances because it prescribes the same course of action for all of them: let them go.

Points on Stress Factor 4

The Assembly, the Community, and Stress,

continued

- ★ The more Assemblies can help the friends learn how to let go of their grievances, the more energy and happiness will fill their personal lives and the whole Bahá'í community.
- ★ The Assembly can call in believers who seem to be harboring grievances against each other, even if neither brings the problem to the institution, if the Assembly feels it is affecting the spiritual health and vitality of the community.

3. Sharing of practical steps by groups (5 minutes)

- ★ Ask each group to share its ideas on the question “What practical steps can Assemblies take to decrease stress and increase energy, vitality, and joy in the community?”
- ★ Write these on a flip chart or board.

4. Individual contemplation. (3 minutes)

- ★ Allow a few minutes for participants to write down a few items for his or her Assembly to consult about later for possible implementation. Have sheets of paper handy for those who need it.
- ★ Encourage Assembly members to consult together at a future Assembly meeting to identify the kinds of stress the community is currently experiencing and to come up with a proposal addressing these, using some of the ideas just suggested.

Closing (10 minutes)

Purpose

- ★ To consolidate what has been learned
- ★ To make individual plans to translate knowledge into behaviors

Activities:

1. Individual contemplation of stress buster activities (2 minutes)

- ★ Ask participants to take a moment to review the stress busters they selected (Participant Handouts, p. 15) and plan how they will incorporate these into their lives, beginning this coming week.

2. Check to see if questions are all addressed (5 minutes)

- ★ Check to see that all questions raised at the beginning have been addressed or that the questioner has been referred elsewhere.

3. Musical close (3 minutes)

- ★ Play a musical rendition of the prayer “Refresh and gladden my spirit” or ask a participant to sing this prayer.

Optional: Give each participant a beautiful card or calligraphy version of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prayer “Refresh and gladden my spirit” (an example suitable for photocopying onto attractive paper is on the following page).

O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart. Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved; I will be a happy and joyful being. O God! I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life.

O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.

'Abdu'l-Bahá