



STRESS: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Abstract: Stress is quite prevalent and common in present life. Stress can be associated with interpersonal, social, academic, professional issues or even with daily hassles like missing of keys. Stress can be related to both positive and negative situations and can be acute and chronic. It is strongly correlated with health and mental health problems. Stress management techniques may be beneficial in dealing with stress.

INTRODUCTION:

Stress is a commonly used term in today's vernacular. Many people often use this term interchangeably with variety of other terms like anxiety, pressure and strain. In general sense, stress refers to a collection of physiological, emotional, behavioural and cognitive reactions that occur in response to environmental demands. It occurs when pressure is greater than resources. Stress can be positive (eustress) and negative (distress), eustress is the effect of positive events that makes demands on a person to adapt or change optimal amount of stress that people need to promote health and well being and distress is effect of unpleasant/undesirable stressors. In humans, the autonomic nervous system and hypothalamic pituitary axis (HPA) are the two major systems that respond to stress. When we are under stressful situations a fight-or-flight response gets activated through our sympathetic nervous system. Adverse situations in our lives may lead to experience of stress, people tends to pay more importance to the characteristics of the stressor/stressful situation. Each adverse situation or a critical episode in our lives has a unique demands be it social, physical, psychological or intellectual. These demands affects an individual's coping resources and triggers a particular stress response (Braun et.al., 2016; Feldman, 2010; Ciccarelli & Meyer, 2008).

STRESS AND HEALTH:

When we are stressed, the immune system's ability to fight off antigens is reduced. The stress hormone corticosteroid can suppress the effectiveness of the immune system as it lowers the number of cells (lymphocytes) that are associated with immunity. Stress has a very strong connection with our health. Many health conditions and diseases are related to stress like heart diseases, lifestyle diseases like hypertension, diabetes, obesity, bronchial asthma, headaches like migraine, gastrointestinal problems, Alzheimer's disease, sexual dysfunctions, sleep related problems like insomnia behavioural problems like addiction-excessive smoking and drinking alcohol

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(Aniasman,2021;Koolhaas et.al.,2011).Chronic stress is also associated depression, anxiety disorders, adjustment problems, reactive psychosis and suicide.

TYPES OF STRESSORS:

Stressors can be broadly categorized as external(objective) or internal(subjective).

External(objective) stressors:

- **Physical environment** may include noise, bright light, heat, confined space.
- **Social** may include rude attitude of someone, bullying, domestic abuse.
- **Organizational** may include rules,regulations, deadlines.
- **Major life events** may include birth,death, lost job,promotion marital status change.
- **Daily hassles** may include commuting, misplaced keys, mechanical breakdown.

Internal(subjective) stressors:

- **Lifestyle choices** may include caffeine,drug/alcohol use, lack of sleep, overloaded schedule.
- **Negative self-talk** may include pessimistic thinking, self criticism, over analyzing.
- **Mind traps** may include unrealistic expectations, taking things personally,all or nothing thinking, exaggeration, rigid thinking.
- **Personality traits** may include perfectionists, workaholics, Type 'A' personality.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS:

1. **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS** are sleep pattern changes, fatigue, digestion/gastrointestinal changes,loss of sexual drive,headaches,aches and pains, infections, indigestion, dizziness, fainting,sweating & trembling,tingling hands & feet,breathlessness,palpitations and tachycardia.
2. **PSYCHOLOGICAL/COGNITIVE SYMPTOMS** may include lack of concentration,memory lapses,difficulty in making decisions,confusion,disorientation.
3. **BEHAVIOURAL SYMPTOMS** may include appetite changes - too much or too little,eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia nervosa,increased intake of alcohol & other drugs,increased smoking,restlessness,fidgeting,nail biting,deterioration of personal hygiene and appearance.
4. **EMOTIONAL SYMPTOMS** may include bouts of depression,impatience,episodes of rage,tearfulness,anxiety.

MODELS OF STRESS:

Stress can be explained from different perspectives:

1. Response based model of stress by Hans Selye

This includes the general adaptation syndrome (GAS), which explains the physiological process that takes place when a person experiences stress of any kind, whether it be positive or negative. Alarm is the first step, followed by resistance and tiredness. If the stress that has caused GAS is not relieved, it may result in issues with one's physical and emotional health. There are three phases: **(Selye,1950;Baffy,2017;Baffy,2020)**

- **Alarm Reaction Stage**

The initial phase of general adaptation syndrome is this. During this stage, the body sends a distress signal to the brain. Gluco-corticoids and adrenaline, sometimes referred to as the "fight or flight" hormones, are released by the body as a result of the brain's message to it. An individual may experience increased levels of blood pressure and heart rate during the alarm reaction stage.

- **Resistance Stage**

The reaction stage is followed by the resistance stage. The parasympathetic nervous system is used by the body in this stage to try to counteract the alterations that happened during the response stage. Your body starts to slow down your heart rate and blood pressure during the resistance stage. Additionally, it lessens the production of cortisol and adrenaline.

- **Exhaustion Stage**

The exhaustion stage comes after a protracted period of stress, which puts the body through a lot of strain. This happens during a prolonged period of stress on the body. The body is too exhausted to continue fighting the stressor in this situation, even if it persists. This stage of general adaption syndrome is the most dangerous because it is when a person is most likely to become ill.

2. Stimulus /transactional based model of stress

The appraisal theory is a psychological theory that states that emotions are derived from our judgment of events that result in various persons having varied reactions. In essence, our evaluation of a circumstance results in an emotional, or affective, reaction that is dependent on that evaluation. The way we think about and evaluate a situation is referred to as appraisal, and it plays a significant role in how stressful that particular stressor or situation is. If the person views the situation as potentially harmful, they will likely find it stressful; however, if they believe they have the resources to handle it, they may be able to handle the stress well. According to Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory from 1984, there are two different types of cognitive responses to stress: primary and secondary.

In the 1960s, the concept of stress as a stimulus was first presented. It saw stress as a major life experience that necessitates a reaction, a change, or an adaptation **(Lazarus & Folkman,1984)**. According to the stress as stimulus approach:

1. Change is by its very nature stressful.
2. All people must adjust to life's circumstances to the same degrees.

STRESS MANAGEMENT:

Stress management refers to set of specific therapeutic procedures and techniques to reduce tension. The different techniques and methods of stress management can be divided into four A's:-

- Avoid stressors
- Alter stressor
- Adapt to the stressor
- Accept the stressor

1. **Avoiding of the stressor** involves directly avoiding the sources of stress, these may involve assertiveness training, conflict management and time management skills/strategies.

Assertiveness

It involves effective communication abilities that can aid in lowering demands and boosting an individual's own resources. It entails respectfully and honestly communicating one's needs, wants and views. Learning to say "no" to situations that are stressful or not very significant to a person is an essential component of it.

Conflict management

It involves differences between two or more persons about topics such as values, ideas, perceptions and opinions. Conflict resolution techniques facilitate better conflict resolution, which reduces stress.

Time management

In order to reduce stress, time management requires helping people plan their activities in advance and introducing enjoyable activities into daily routines in addition to mundane daily responsibilities. The motivation to execute tasks declines under intense stress. Poor time management and procrastination can be significant sources of stress.

2. **Alerting of the stressor** involves figuring out what can be done to change things so that the problem does not present itself in future. Some of such strategies are progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique, diaphragmic breathing, mindfulness meditation, visualization, guided imagery, exercise, sleep, leisure and expressing thoughts and feelings.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

It is a type of therapy where you tighten and release each individual muscle group in a predetermined pattern.

Diaphragmatic breathing

At the base of the lungs, there is a sizable muscle with a dome-like form called the diaphragm. It is intended to assist you in properly breathing while using your diaphragm. Your body will benefit from using this breathing method in many ways, including improved relaxation and blood pressure and heart rate maintenance.

Mindfulness meditation

It is the practice of actually being present in the moment, which in turn trains us to become more mindful throughout the day, particularly during difficult situations.

Visualization

A mindfulness-based practise is visualisation. When we visualise, we concentrate on a particular thing, such as an occasion, someone, or goal we want to accomplish, and hold it in our minds while imagining our desired result coming to pass(Woods Rockman,2021)

Guided imagery

It is a technique for reducing stress. It's a method of relaxation when you picture pleasant places like a lovely beach or a tranquil meadow.

Exercise

Our body burn off extra energy produced by the "Fight or Flight" response when we exercise. It boosts blood flow, keeps blood pressure in check, produces endorphins, clears the mind of anxiety, contributes to improving self-image and generally makes one feel better.

Adequate Sleep

Adequate sleep is a good stress reducer, sleep hygiene measure like limiting caffeine and screen use at night hours, fixing a time foe waking and sleeping, keeping bed tidy and clean, not using bed for other activities like eating, studying and consuming milk at night are some effective non-pharmacological methods that can help make our sleep quality better.

Working on our thoughts and emotion

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) is a widely used form of psychotherapy that helps individuals understand the connection between their thoughts and feelings, and how thoughts and feelings influence their behaviour (Beck,2020).

3. **Adapt to the stressor:**If an individual cannot change the stressor, he/she can adapt to stressful situations and thus regain their sense of control by changing their expectations and attitude related to the situation. The techniques involved are distraction techniques, thought defusion techniques, worry postponement, cognitive restructuring, positive thinking/affirmations and problem solving techniques.

Distraction

When you're feeling panicked, anxious, or distressed, distraction strategies can help you focus on something else. Despite the fact that it could appear challenging, doing it can end up being a beneficial and healthy method to deal with the circumstance. counting the objects nearby (e.g how many blue things are in your room), coloring, or drawing Starting with 10, moving on to 25, then to 50, concentrating on your breathing by inhaling for four counts, holding your breath for four counts, and then exhaling for four counts, Imagine yourself in a secure environment, and then picture the things you can hear there as distractions.

Cognitive defusion

These methods are derived from mindfulness approaches intended to separate from mental content. Defusion is about viewing the concepts themselves, not the reality via skewed or harmful thinking and not observing the world via one's thoughts, but rather watching one's thoughts.

Worry postponement

In a research by Borkovec, Wilkinson, Folsenbee, and Lerman (1983), it was first described as a daily, 30-minute "stimulus control" task. The patient's job was to become aware of their worrying and consciously decide to put off engaging in the anxiety until later.

Cognitive restructuring

It is a therapy approach based on CBT that aids individuals in recognising and altering their negative thought habits. It's a good idea to look into methods for interrupting and rerouting thought patterns when they start to become negative and self-defeating (Beck,2020).

Positive thinking

It entails having an optimistic mindset when dealing with life's challenges. Notably optimistic psychologist Martin Seligman, frame positive thinking in terms of explanatory style.

Problem solving

It alludes to the method of resolving issues that arise in daily life. These issues typically have situational or contextually unique solutions. The first step in the process is problem discovery and problem shaping, where the problem is identified and clarified.

4. **Accept the stressor:** Stress can occasionally result from unavoidable circumstances. Accepting things as they are in these circumstances is the greatest method to manage stress. At first, accepting the circumstance as it is could appear challenging, but once accepted, one may gradually learn to positively modify oneself in accordance with the demands of the scenario. For instance, it's crucial to understand that we have no control over other people's attitudes or actions. Rather than worrying about them, we may instead learn to control how we respond to them.

We can learn to adopt a positive outlook when challenges appear to be unavoidable, altering our perspective to perceive these circumstances as learning opportunities for our overall development.

Lifestyle modification

It entails changing long-standing routines, usually related to eating or exercising, and maintaining the new behaviour over several months or years. Obesity is one condition that can be treated with lifestyle changes.

Psychological acceptance

It is the conscious acceptance of subjective experience, especially painful experiences. The goal is to totally and unapologetically embrace unfavourable events rather than to grudgingly endure them (Hayes & Strosahl, 2004)

CONCLUSION:

Stress can have detrimental effects to physical, emotional, social and psychological well being. Identification of the warning signs is important. Application of stress management techniques can help to deal with stress better.

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