

Stress and Stress Management

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Introduction

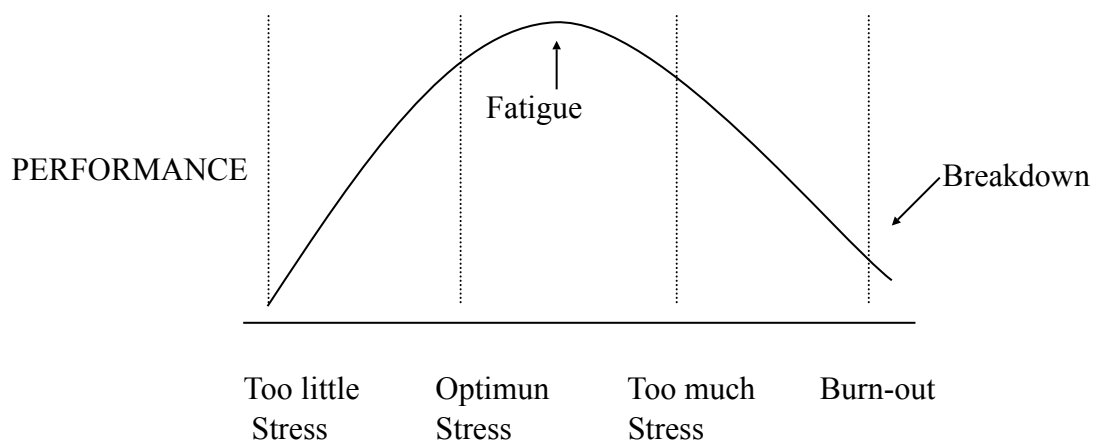
In everyday life we face pressures from many sources. These pressures will not have any adverse effect upon us if we think we can cope. At other times if we perceive that the situation is beyond our coping abilities then we say that we are under “stress”. Stress, derived from the Latin word *stringere* means to draw tight was used in the seventeenth century to describe hardships or affliction. Subsequently it was used to denote a force, pressure or strain. In physics, stress refers to an external load exerting pressure causing strain. This gave rise to the concept of an individual’s response to an external pressure.

A simple definition of stress is that it is an external pressure which exceeds our resources to cope. Another way of defining stress is that it is a physical and psychological response to events perceived as a threat to one’s sense of well being.

Not all stress is harmful. In fact some stress is not only desirable but essential to life. Research has demonstrated that within certain limits, an individual’s performance actually improves with increased level of stress. For example, an athlete is able to run faster under the stress of competition. A student studying for examinations is able to think quicker and stay alert because of the stress of impending examinations. Stress brings out the best potential in all of us. It helps us to be creative and gives us enthusiasm in what we do. As a violin string needs to be tuned to a certain tension in order that a beautiful sound may be produced from it, we need to be stretched to a certain degree of tension to enable us to perform at our optimum. Obviously if the string is stretched too tightly, it will snap. If it is too loose there may be no sound or the sound will be of poor quality.

Similarly, if we are not under any stress, we will not be able to achieve our fullest potential, or our performance will be lackluster. If we are under too much stress our performance drops. Hence we need an optimum level of stress to bring out the best in us. This principle is best illustrated by the Yerkes-Dodson curve in figure 1. Hence stress should really neither be seen as purely good nor bad.

Figure 1 – The Yerkes-Dodson curve



Sources of stress

Predictable stressors

1. Work

Work can be a source of immense satisfaction, but it can also be a source of stress. Examples of stress at work include lack of control over work environment, too much work, too little time, inability to master new technology, threat of retrenchment, unclear goals, lack of feedback regarding job performance and unsupportive bosses.

2. Financial

Economic recession, inflation, high prices for housing, inability to pay mortgage or medical bills and being unemployed.

3. Family problems

Marital conflicts, disobedient children, spouse posted overseas, in-law problems, difficult neighbours, child who gets into trouble with the law, spouse who is addicted to alcohol, and marital infidelity.

Unpredictable stressors

Some stressors may not be predictable, for example: illness of spouses, death of spouses, meeting with an accident, and being retrenched.

Personality and Stress

How a person reacts to stress is also to a great extent determined by his or her personality. Personality traits reflect the sum total of the ways we habitually think, feel and behave in a given situation. Thus there are obviously certain personality traits which render a person more susceptible to stress.

Obsessional Personality

These individuals are perfectionistic and set high standards for themselves and others. They are rigid and react poorly to changes in their living environment.

Anxious personality

This is a person who is much the worrier. He gets anxious over minor problems. He often overestimates the magnitude of his problems and underestimates his coping abilities. Many would consider him to be an anxious type of person for much of his life.

Type A personality

The type A personality was first described by 2 cardiologists Friedman and Rosenman, who noted that individuals with such personalities were more susceptible to suffer from heart attacks. Typical type A persons are ambitious, impatient, hard driving, competitive, have great sense of time urgency, often performing 2 more tasks simultaneously, restless, hostile, evaluating people or events in a suspicious manner, and are irritable.

Stress and your health – Fight or flight response

When a person is under threat of danger his or her body undergoes biochemical changes which prepare him or her to face up to the threat/danger (“fight”) or if the threat/danger is perceived to be impossible to overcome, to escape (“flight”)

Regardless of the source of stress the body reacts in the following manner. The hormone adrenaline is secreted into the blood stream. It causes the heart to beat faster and blood pressure to rise. Your rate of breathing quickens, the pupils of your eyes dilate, the muscles tense up in

preparation for physical activity, digestion stops, perspiration is increased to cool down the body, and your extremities turn cold.

Medical conditions

Persons subject to chronic stress may suffer from hypertension, migraine headaches, ulcers or diarrhea. In females, stress may result in the absence of menstrual periods and failure to ovulate, and in males impotency, whereas in both sexes there could be loss of libido (sexual desire). In the respiratory system, stress could worsen the symptoms of bronchial asthma and bronchitis. A decrease in the secretion of the hormone insulin during stress may result in the onset of diabetes. Stress inhibits tissue repair and reduces calcium content of bones leading to the condition of osteoporosis. This results in increase in susceptibility to fractures. Inhibition of the immune response results in increase susceptibility to catching colds. Persons with impaired immune responses are also more prone to developing cancers. Prolonged stress responses can worsen condition such as arthritis, chronic pain and diabetes.

Psychiatric conditions

Moreover stress has been shown to trigger off psychiatric disorders e.g. depression, anxiety, panic disorders, phobias, sleep problems, and alcohol and drug dependency.

| Physical Symptoms | Emotional Symptoms | Behavioural Symptoms |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| tense aching muscles | irritability | increased smoking |
| headaches | anxiety | increased drinking of alcohol |
| sweaty palms, tremors | panic attacks | taking of transquillisers, |
| cold figures | feeling of hopelessness | sleeping pills |
| dizziness | aggression | decreased sleep |
| palpitations | feeling of guilt | nail biting |
| abdominal pains, dry mouth | hostility | neglecting of hygiene |
| nausea | | absenteeism |
| frequency of urination | | |

The tell tale signs of stress

Most people are able to tell when they are under stress because they are able to recognize at least some of the tell tale signs of stress. These can be broadly categorized into physical, emotional and behavioural signs.

Life events

There has been considerable research demonstrating the impact of life events on physical and mental disorders. Two researchers, Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe observed that life events tended to cluster or increased in intensity prior to the onset of disease. They have found that death of spouse ranks as the most stressful event followed by divorce and separation. However there are life events which are of neutral impact. For example, marriage, moving house, and having a baby. Some positive events such as getting promoted at work may have an adverse effect as promotion means increase in responsibilities.

Case study

Cheng was given a difficult task by his immediate superior. Thoughts such as “I’m sure to fail”, “he’s all out to make life miserable for me” “people can’t be trusted” caused him to perceive that he had inadequate coping resources and could expect little help from others. Understandably he felt stressed.

On the other hand Leong interpreted the same situation differently, telling himself “I will try my best”, “I have performed the task before, I should be able to do it again”, “even though I made mistakes, I am now wiser and have learnt not to make the same mistakes”. While Leong tackled the assignment confidently and accomplished his goals. Cheng became easily discouraged, postponed carrying out his duties, made careless mistakes, and earned the displeasure of his superior.

Case study

Peter Wong, a young Chinese man, had just started work in an electronics factory. He had a fiancée, and they planned to marry soon. He lived with his parents, while awaiting the completion of his new HDB 4-room apartment. Peter was a very busy but happy man, and he looked forward to the wedding as well as moving to his new home.

Unexpectedly, Peter’s younger brother, Andrew, sustained multiple injuries after a road traffic accident. This was very troubling to Peter, as he was worried about his brother’s health, and moreover, he was hoping that his brother would be the best man at the wedding. He also realized that he had somewhat under budgeted for his wedding expenses and needed to work extra shifts to supplement his income. His friends and family were surprised to learn that he weathered all the difficulties that he faced and congratulated him heartily on his wedding day. He told them that he had an optimistic nature, and that he had effectively used stress

management strategies, which included some quiet time in meditation everyday, a relaxing activity and also a short burst of exercise each day. He also readily discussed his problems with his fiancée and accepted help from colleagues and friends.

Stress management techniques

1. Know where your stress comes from

Keeping a stress diary to identify the source of your stress is the first step in overcoming it. One way of helping yourself identify sources of stress would be to record down situations which cause you to be stressed and the persons involved in your stressful experience. This should be done at the end of each day. After four weeks review your diary to note any recurrent stressful situations and the individuals involved. Next make a plan to deal with the situations.

2. Time management

“There is so much to do and I have no time” is the common complaint we often hear. All of us are given 24 hours in a day. The person who best manages his time will be able to achieve the most in the given time. Hence time management techniques are of vital importance in coping with our hectic lifestyle.

Plan what you want to do each day. This may involve spending some time each evening or before starting work each morning to work out a timetable of the day’s activities. List things you want done, then assign them in order of priority eg. high, medium and low priority. The higher priority and unpleasant tasks should be tackled first when you are most fresh.

Don’t procrastinate on decision. Work which is postponed tends to pile up causing you to be tensed and worried. Delegate work if possible. Don’t entertain the belief that they cannot accomplish the job as competently or as efficiently as you.

Clear all irrelevant materials from your work table. Only have what is required for the immediate tasks at hand. Having a desk piled high with partially finished work adds to the stress of having so much to do, and gives others an impression that you are terribly disorganized.

3. Develop communication skills

Good communication skills are of vital importance at work, in the home and in every sphere of human interaction. Some people have natural abilities in communication while others will have to put in effort to develop this skill.

4. Assertiveness

Many problems at work are derived from a lack of assertiveness. We don't know how to stand up for ourselves. Some develop an aggressive stance, while others don't know how to say "no", thus allowing others to take advantage of them. Assertiveness can be learnt. In developing more assertiveness, pay attention to the following: make appropriate eye contact, use a firm voice, avoid "hums" and "hahs" which make you sound unsure. You may have to rehearse what you wish to say beforehand for each scenario that you would like to more assertive in.

5. Social support

We need friends, family members, colleagues to help encourages us and to lend us a listening ear. Studies have shown that people living in close-knit communities have a lower rate of developing heart attacks. Support from work supervisors and colleagues can improve morale and productivity. Spend time to build up relationships with family and friends, join support groups, religious groups, professional associations, community clubs or voluntary welfare organizations. In this way you will not feel so isolated.

6. Share your feelings

It is often beneficial to find a trusted confidant to share your frustrations with. Putting your feelings into words is a great way to gain emotional relief.

7. Physical exercise

There are great advantages to taking regular exercise. Some of them are: it prevents heart disease, improves stamina, reduces high blood pressure, helps your relax, reduces obesity, tones your muscles and improves your figure.

8. Listening to music

Many studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of music to produce a reduction of anxiety and produces a relaxed state of mind. Several studies have in fact demonstrated the beneficial effect of music on the immune response.

9. Relaxation techniques

Relaxation and tension cannot coexist simultaneously in your body. Relaxation of your muscles reduces pulse rate, blood pressure and rate of respiration. When a person is anxious his muscles are in a state of tension. Relaxing the tensed muscles reduces anxiety.

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position, slowly breathe in and then breathe out, close your eyes, check you body for any area of tension and consciously relax the tensed areas. The tension relaxation method involves tensing each muscle group for 7 seconds and then releasing the tension for 15 seconds. Visualize in your mind's eye, a peaceful scene e.g garden of a lake. Imagine that you are visiting this scene, and tell yourself to relax and let go of the tension in your body. For more details on using these techniques, it is recommended to purchase relaxation tapes/videos/ CDs to help you relax.

10. Neutralise negative irrational thoughts

Select a situation that consistently generates negative emotions e.g. anxiety or sadness. Write down your negative thoughts about the event. Dispute your irrational thoughts using the following techniques. Ask yourself

- What is the evidence for the falseness of this idea?
eg. what is the evidence that I am good for nothing ?
- Is there evidence for the truth of this idea?
eg . is there evidence that I am an asset to others?
- What is the worst thing that could happen?
Often a person is frightened by what he thinks might happen, but it he carefully considers the worst possible consequences, things might not be as bad as they appear.

11. Spiritual pursuits

One of the most important ways to deal with stress is to have a religious belief. Religious faith gives a person courage and inner strength to cope with the challenges and adversities in life.

Conclusion

We have presented an overview of stress, its nature, sources, effects and some stress relieving measures needed to combat stress. You are encouraged to try out some of these techniques and to regularly use whichever suits you best. By implementing effective anti-stress strategies, stress need not be feared. Stress management is important for better mental as well a physical health.

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