

Meeting Life Challenges

All the challenges, problems and difficult circumstances put us to stress. Thus if handled properly, stress increases the probability of one's survival.

Stress is like electricity. It gives energy, increases human arousal and affects performance. However, if the electric current is too high, it can fuse bulbs, damage appliances. Similarly, high stress too can produce unpleasant effects and cause our performance to deteriorate.

Conversely, too little stress may cause someone to feel listless and low on motivation leading to slow and less effective performance.

Hence not all the stress is inherently bad or destructive. **Eustress** is the term used to describe the level of stress which is good for us and is one of the person's best assets for achieving peak performance and managing crisis.

However, it also has the potential of turning into distress, causing our body's wear and tear.

Stress definition: The pattern of responses our organisms make against the stimulus/event that disturbs the equilibrium and exceeds a person's ability to cope.

Nature of Stress: The word stress originated from Latin word- 'strictus' meaning tight, narrow – internal feeling of tightness, constriction of muscles and breathing reported by many people under stress.

Stressor: is an event that causes our body to give the stress response. E.g.

External- environment (noise, pollution, crowd etc.)

Social- Break-up with a friend, loneliness

Psychological- Mental conflict, frustration

Strain: is the reaction of our body to external stressors.

Hans Selye : as per him an individual will respond with the same physiological pattern of reactions regardless to the causes of threat/nature of stressors.

Many researchers however do not agree with Hans theory. They believe the responses cannot be as general and non-specific for any stimulus.

Stress is not a factor that resides in an individual's mind or environment, it is a dynamic mental/cognitive state that arises due to disruption in homeostasis or an imbalance that gives rise to the requirement of resolution to restore homeostasis/balance.

The perception of stress is dependent upon the individual's cognitive appraisal of events and resources available to cope up with them.

Lazarus described two types of appraisals– primary and secondary:

Primary Appraisal: refers to the perception of a new or changing environment as **Positive, Neutral or Negative** in its consequences.

Secondary Appraisal: is when we perceive an event very stressful that it involves challenge appraisal that involve more confident expectations of ability to cope up. **This is more focused on coping abilities and assessment of resources**-mental, physical, social or personal to meet the challenge of harm, threat or challenge of the event.

Negative events are appraised for their possible **harm, threat or challenge**.

Harm- is the assessment of damage that has been done by the event.

Threat– Possible future damage by the event

Challenge– more confident expectations of the ability to cope up with the stressful event.

Types of Stress:

Physical stress: Impact state of our body or strain our body e.g. we overexert, lack of nutrition/diet, suffer an injury or fail to get enough sleep.

Environmental stress: is caused by our surroundings. E.g. pollution, crowding, noise, heat of the summer, winter cold or catastrophic events like floods, fire and earthquakes etc.

Psychological Stress: These are generated in our minds and are personal and unique to the person. Caused by **frustration, conflicts, internal and social pressures** they lead to worry, anxiety or depression.

Frustration: Results from blocking of needs and motives and someone or something hindering us from achieving goals. E.g. social discrimination, interpersonal hurt, low grades in school. Etc.

Conflicts: Occur between two or more incompatible needs. E.g. to study Dance or Psychology, to continue with old or take up a new job, to do something against the personal values.

Internal Pressures: are the stresses caused by high expectations we set from ourselves or setting unrealistic goals. E.g. trying to do everything perfectly, setting high goals.

Social Pressures: Excessive demands from people around us in family, community. Working with people with interpersonal conflicts and personality clash.

Social Stress: These are caused by people in society and surroundings. Social events like death in the family, conflict with the neighbourhood, strained relationship between spouses.

Sources of Stress:

A wide range of events and conditions can generate stress.

Life Events: any event causing major and sudden disruption in our routine and life can cause stress as we find it difficult to cope with that sudden change. e.g. break up in a long-term relationship, business exigency.

Hassles: Personal stresses we ensure as individuals due to happenings in our daily lives. E.g traffic while commuting, quarrelsome neighbours, electricity, water shortage etc.

Traumatic Events: Extreme events like fire, train accident, plain hijack, robbery etc. Such things haunt people in their dreams and keep coming back as flashbacks and cause stress.

Effects of Stress on Psychological Functioning and Health

Emotional Effects: Mood swings, erratic behaviour, low confidence, alienation from family and friends, anxiety, physical tension.

Psychological Effects: Under psychological stress human body produces certain hormones in excess- Adrenaline and cortisol. They produce marked changes in heart rate, metabolism, blood pressure and physical activity. Some increase although helps in effective functioning

of body to combat stress, but excessive release of hormones can impact the slowing down of digestive system, expansion of air passages in the lungs, increased heart rate and constriction of blood vessels.

Cognitive Effects: If pressures due to stress continue, one may suffer from mental overload. This can impact individuals' ability to make sound decisions and lead to poor concentration, reduced short term memory capacity.

Behavioural Effects: Stress also affects our behaviour. A stressed individual tends to eat less nutritional food, increasing intake of stimulants like- cigarettes, caffeine, alcohol and other addictive substances. Dizziness and disrupted sleep patterns.

Stress and Health

Chronic daily Stress can affect physical and mental health of an individual.

Physical exhaustion can cause chronic fatigue, weakness and low energy.

The mental exhaustion appears in the form of irritability, anxiety, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

Burnout: A state of physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion is known as **burnout**.

Stress can also impact our immune system and increase the chances of becoming ill, development of cardiovascular disorders, high blood pressure and sometimes psychosomatic disorders like ulcers, asthma, allergies and headaches.

Researchers estimate that **stress plays** an important role in **50% to 70% of our physical illnesses**. 60% of medical visits are on account of Stress related symptoms.

Selye' s theory of General Adaptation Syndrome(GAS)

Selye noticed a similar pattern in bodily responses by all in their response to stress.

According to him **GAS involves three stages:**

Alarm Reaction,

Resistance,

Exhaustion

Alarm Reaction:

Presence of noxious stimulus or stressor leads to activation of adrenaline-pituitary- cortex system. This triggers the release of hormones to respond to stress making individual to Fight or Flight.

Noxious stimulus or stressor > activation of adrenaline-pituitary- cortex system > Fight or Flight mode

Resistance Stage:

If stress is prolonged this stage begins. The parasympathetic system calls for more cautious use of body's resources. The organism makes efforts to cope with the threat, through confrontation.

Prolonged Stress > Parasympathetic system uses body resources cautiously > Organism confronts the threat and attempts to cope up.

Exhaustion Stage:

Continuous exposure to the same stressor > drains body resources > Alarm reaction & Resistance do not work > lead to stress related diseases like blood pressure etc.

Selye's model has been criticised for assigning a very limited role. They believe studying perceptions, personalities and biological factors also constitute to the response against stress.

Stress and Immune system:

The Immune system guards the body against attackers both from within and outside. **Psychoneuroimmunology** focuses on the links between the mind, the brain and the immune system. It focuses on the study of how our immune system works. The white blood cells (leucocytes) within the immune system identify and destroy foreign bodies (antigens) such as viruses by producing antibodies.

T- cells destroy invaders and enhance immunological activity. (It is these T cells when attacked by the HIV virus , it causes AIDS.

B-cells produce antibodies.

Natural Killer cells are involved in the fight against viruses and tumours.

Stress can affect Natural killer cells- cytotoxicity which are defence against infections and cancer. Stressed persons have been found to have reduced levels of these cells. (students appearing for important examination, bereaved and severely depressed people.)

Lifestyle:

Lifestyle is the overall pattern of decisions and behaviours that determine a person's health and quality of life. Stressed individuals are more likely to be exposed to pathogens – the agents causing physical illness.

Stressed people have poor nutritional habits, unhealthy sleep pattern and health risking behaviours like smoking and excessive drinking. These habits adversely impact physical and mental health.

Alternately, studies reveal health promoting behaviours are like balance diet, regular exercise, family support. Adhering to this lifestyle enhances health and longevity.

Coping With Stress:

Over the years, research shows that **it is not the Stress that we experience that** influences our health and wellbeing, **it is how we Cope with the Stress** that impacts us.

Endler and Parker suggests 3 step coping strategies:

Coping: is a dynamic situation specific reaction to stress. It is a set of concrete responses to stressful situations or events that are intended to resolve the problem and reduce stress.

Task- oriented Strategy: this involves obtaining sufficient info about the stressful situation and alternative courses of action and their probable outcome. It involves taking action based on the above information and deal with the stressful situation. For eg-

1. Your stress for being late to work..You analyse reasons of getting late, course of action-Time management, timely service of vehicle to ensure you eliminate the reasons of delay.

Emotional oriented strategy- This involves addressing emotion and by maintain hope. E.g. giving vent to your anger by hitting punching bag, watching entertainment program to reduce your stress. To give hope to someone ailing by telling positive outcomes.

Avoidance- oriented strategy- This involves denying or minimizing the seriousness of the situation. It also involves conscious suppression of stressful thoughts and their replacement by protective thoughts.

e.g. watching TV, phone up a friend.

Lazarus and Folkman coping strategy:

As per them **coping is a dynamic process** rather than an individual trait. It refers to **constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to Master, tolerate or reduce** the internal/external **demands created by stressful transactions**.

According to them coping responses can be divided into **two types**: problem focused & emotion focused.

Problem focused: this strategy attacks the problem itself, by gaining more information about the problem, causes, and possibilities of altering the event. Explore the behavioural and cognitive coping options and confronting the stress giving problem.

Emotional focused: this focuses on dealing with the emotions and not the problem (by controlling or giving vent) by psychological changes to limit the degree of emotional disruption caused by the event.

e.g. Sharing your emotions caused by stress by talking to someone, distracting your mind with something that gives positive emotions.

Stress Management Techniques:

Stress is a silent killer. Hypertension, heart disease, ulcers, diabetes, cancer all are linked to stress. Due to our lifestyle changes they are on the rise. In order to reduce stress we need to make some lifestyle changes:

Relaxation Technique: Deep breathing is used along with muscle relaxation to calm the mind and relax the body.

Meditation procedures: A yogic method of meditation consists of a sequence of techniques to bring about an altered state of consciousness. It involves thorough concentration that meditator becomes unaware of any outside stimulation and reaches in a different state of consciousness.

Biofeedback: training involves 3 stages:

1. **Developing awareness** of a particular physiological response (e.g. situations when my heart rate goes up)
2. **Learning ways of controlling** that in quiet conditions.
3. **Transferring this control into actual** situations by practice.

Creative Visualization: It is an effective technique for dealing with stress. This involves creative visualization of any new situation that is susceptible to cause stress. This makes it easier to plan and address the stressors and convert imagination into reality.

Cognitive Behavioural technique: involves inoculate people against stress. 3 steps:

Assessment: discussing the nature of problem and seeing it from a viewpoint of external/third person.

Stress reduction: involves learning the technique by approaching the solution and using relaxing technique

Application and follow through: by applying the solution by setting self-instructions.

Exercise: Regular exercise improves the efficiency of heart, enhances the function of lungs and maintains good circulation and metabolism. Swimming, walking, running, cycling, skipping etc help make systems stronger to combat physical impact of stress.

Promoting Positive Health and Wellbeing:

To stay healthy, we need to have Stress resistant Personality – It consists of 3 Cs: I.e. Commitment, Control and Challenge.

But not everyone has this personality. Regular people need to acquire **Life Skills** in order to manage stress in day to day life:

Life Skills: are the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

These life skills are–

Assertiveness: this skill helps to communicate clearly confidently our feelings, needs, wants and thoughts. Ability to say 'No' to a request. To express emotions of love, anger openly. Assertive people have high Self esteem and solid sense of identity.

Time Management: Learning how to plan time and delegate can help relieve the pressure. Learning to prioritize and doing the things you value than doing non value adds under pressure. Helps focus achieving your goals.

Rational Thinking: Many stress related problems are caused by distorted thinking. The way you think and the way you feel are connected. Rational

thinking is challenging your distorted /negative thinking from the past and making positive statements.

e.g. I failed last time I will fail again ..be replaced by This time I am fully prepared and will pass with flying colours.

Improving Relationships: The people who enjoy lasting sound relationships are better equipped to manage stress. The key is to: Listen carefully, Express your feelings and accept the other person's opinion.

Self –care: If we keep ourselves healthy, fit and relaxed we are better prepared to tackle physically and mentally stressful situations. Relaxed slow breathing is the representation of people who can manage the stress of noise, pollution, space, light, colour the daily challenges.

Overcoming Unhelpful Habits: Unhelpful habits like- Perfectionism, avoidance, procrastination etc make you more vulnerable to stress.

Diet: A balanced diet can lift one's mood give more energy, feed muscles, improve circulation, prevent illness and strengthen the immune system and make feel better to cope with stress.

Exercise: There's a consistent positive relationship between physical fitness and health. Regular exercises help manage weight, health and wellbeing better to address stressful situations.

Positive Attitude: Being tolerant of others' views, taking credit for success and responsibility for failures, sense of purpose, being open to ideas, and ability to laugh at yourself.

Positive Thinking: Optimism, inclined to expecting favourable outcomes.

Social Support: Existence people you can rely upon, care, love and value. People who act as social support.