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Stress: Causes and Solutions

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Life is full of expectations, commitments, deadlines, frustrations and demands. People are faced with stress everyday that it has become a way of life. In recent years, there has been increasing awareness about the causes of stress and people have been trying to cope with this problem. The objective of this paper is to outline both causes of stress and appropriate ways of dealing with it.

Stress is a fact of nature in which forces from the inside and outside world affect the individual. The individual responds to stress in ways that affect the individual as well as their environment due to the overabundance of stress in our modern lives, we usually think of stress as a negative experience, but from a biological point of view, stress can be a neutral negative or positive experience. We generally use the word “stress” when we feel that everything seems to have become too much – we are overloaded and wonder whether we really can cope with the pressures placed upon us.

Frost (1971) says, “Stress is a state in which the natural homeostasis (equilibrium) of the body is disrupted. Stress is caused by any threat to the organism. Disease, trauma, heat cold, thirst, fatigue can all be causes of stress. Emotional arousal can also bring about stress. Selye (1950) describes the way stress is manifested in the body within what he calls a ‘General Adaptation Syndrome’, which is reflected in both time and space. The spatial components of the general adaptation syndrome include adreno-cortical changes, modifications of muscles tone, heart rate, blood content and gastrointestinal functions. These bodily functions do not evidence breakdown under stress. But if the organism is overstressed, it may be reflected in such maladaptive changes as gastro intestinal ulceration, adreno-cortical enlargement and hyperactivity, pathological heart conditions and strains to muscles, tendons and joints. Williams and Huber (1986) defines stress as “a psychological and physical reaction to prolonged internal and environmental conditions in which and individual’s capabilities are overextended.” They argue that stress is a result of a “perceived” threat and is not necessarily related to actual environmental conditions. The amount of stress that is produced by a given situation depends upon one’s perception of the situation, not the situation itself. In other words, stress is a relativistic phenomenon. Arnold and Feldman (1986) define stress as “the reactions of individuals to new or threatening factors in their work environment.” Since our work environments often contain new situations, this definition suggests that stress is inevitable. This definition also highlights the fact that reactions to stressful situations

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are individualized, and can result in emotional, perceptual, behavioural and physiological changes.

Women are More Stressed Than Men

Some believe that the greatest contributor to the epidemic of stress among women now is that they are working outside the home in record numbers. At the turn of the 20th century only 12 percent of women were paid a salary for their work, today, we comprise 46% of the workforce. Seventy percent of the mothers with children under the age of eighteen now work. Either raising children or working requires much more than half our attention on top of which working women still has primary responsibility for child care and household chores. A worldwide survey of women between the ages of thirteen and sixty five found that who work full time and have children under the age of thirteen reports the greatest stress.

Working mothers become stressed because they feel guilty for leaving their children yet women who choose to stay home to raise their children often feel isolated and stressed because they are not contributing financially. Their husbands often have to work long hours as the sole income earner ; which can also become a source of friction and married women who have not worked outside the house or who are widowed or lose their financial security after a divorce have multiple financial stresses and usually a marked decline in their quality of life.

Stress Terminology

A Stressor is any event or situation that is perceived by an individual as a threat causing the individual to either adapt or initiate the stress response. Therefore a stressor is a stimulus and stress is a response. Stressor is the cause and stress is the effect. The effects of stress upon a person are cumulative and can cause serious harm if experienced over a long time.

Dr. Selye Hans (1979) was the first to study the effects of stress. He suggested that stress had four basic variations:

1. Good stress – Eustress
2. Bad stress – Distress
3. Overstress – Hyperstress
4. Understress – Hypostress

According to another classification given by Dr. Selye Hans, stress can be acute and chronic in its effects:

1. **Acute Stress:** It is the result of short term stressors. It is usually quite intense initially and then disappears quickly it can be exciting and stimulating in small doses, but too much leads to fatigue. People who experiences this stress; tend to be over aroused, irritable, anxious and tense. Its symptoms include tension, headaches, migraines, digestive disorders, hypertension, chest pain and heart disease.
2. **Chronic Stress:** It is a long term stress usually resulting from nagging problems. In case of chronic stress, a person's physical and mental resources are depleted. Chronic stress can lead to suicide, heart attack and violence. Long term chronic stress results in stress related disease and reduces the quality of life.

Causes or Sources of Stress

According to Coleman, frustrations, conflicts and pressures are the three important sources

of stress:

1. **Frustrations:** A wide range of environmental obstacles, both physical and social and the internal factors in the form of personal limitation, biological conditions and psychological barriers may lead to frustrations of our needs, motives and effort. Such deal of frustrations place a great deal of stress upon many of us.
2. **Conflicts:** conflict of motives and desires may also cause frustrating and stress situations. In choosing of either alternative from the contradictory needs, a person may be forced to postpone a decision to cause more severe stress. This is essentially true where a considerable feeling of guilt is involved. An adolescent who has a natural curiosity of seeing a movie meant for adults faces a stress situation on account of the feeling of guilt and embarrassment associated with his motives. Such conflicting situations may lead to tensions and inner turmoil that the individual cannot resist stress and eventually develops into a disorganised personality.
3. **Pressures:** Apart from frustrations and conflicts, internal as well as external pressures also prove a major source of causing stress.
 - **Internal Pressures:** Internal pressures are caused by our own self for maintaining the picture of ourselves -as we think we could and should be. We strive hard to reach the top, to achieve success and in doing so put an unreasonable pressure on ourselves.
 - **Environmental Pressures (External Pressures):** The environmental demands, social obligations, family responsibilities, aspirations and demands of the person who concern us and the problems of complexities of life exert a good deal of pressure. Such pressures force us to strive and struggle resulting in severe stress.

Symptoms of Stress

When we are stressed the following happens:

- blood pressure rises
- breathing become more rapid
- digestive system slows down
- heart rate(pulse) rises
- immune system goes down
- muscles become tense
- we do not sleep (heightened state of alertness)

Williams & Huber (1986) provide a comprehensive list of the symptoms of stress. These are “constant fatigue, low energy level, recurring headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, chronically bad breath, sweaty hands or feet, dizziness, high blood pressure, pounding heart, constant inner tension, inability to sleep, temper outbursts, hyperventilation, moodiness, irritability and restlessness, inability to concentrate, increased aggression,, compulsive eating, chronic worrying, anxiety or tranquilizers, excessive use of alcohol, and excessive smoking. Furthermore job stress can make people more susceptible to major illness. High stress managers are twice as prone to heart

attacks as low stress managers (Roseman and Friedman 1971).

The Physical Side of Stress

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), Stress is an expression of the body's natural instinct to protect itself. While this may warn a woman of immediate danger, like a fast approaching car, prolonged stress effects can negatively affect your physical and emotional health.

Stress Effects: The Physical Side

- **Sleep Problems:** Trouble falling or staying asleep is common in women affected by stress and this is particularly counterproductive since a good night's sleep can help ease stress.
- **Concentration Difficulty:** stress makes it hard to focus and be effective in your responsibilities at home or work and that can compound your problems if your stress comes from your job to begin with.
- **Eating Disorders:** Anorexia and bulimia are two times more common in women than in men says Rosch and this may have something to do with stress levels. Like depression, this illness has been linked to low levels of serotonin and is often treated with serotonin-boosting antidepressant drugs.
- **Stomach Ailments:** stress can make you reach for junk or comfort foods or upset your stomach to the point that you feel like you can't eat. Common stress related stomach troubles include cramps, bloating, heartburn, and even irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Depending on how you respond, those can lead to weight loss or weight gain.
- **Skin Reactions:** Stress can lead to breakouts and even itchy rashes and hives in some people.
- **Emotional Conditions:** From being in a blue or irritable mood to more serious mental issues like depression, your emotional health suffers when there is stress in your life. Women are better than men at hiding some emotions like anger and aggressiveness because the parts of their brain responsible for these emotions are larger than men's but depression strikes women twice as often as men, says Rosch, adding, "The emotional effects of stress on women can range from postpartum depression after pregnancy to depression after menopause.

Impact of Stress on Employee's Job Performance

Stress damages people it damages their organisations. It can be all pervasive it can affect people in all occupations and of all ages irrespective of sex, nationality, educational background or role. Work related stress is estimated to affect at least a third of the workforce in any one year. Stress has been linked to a wide variety of diseases and the European Foundation estimates that lifestyle and stress related illness accounts for at least half of all premature deaths. Although the official figures for the cost of stress vary widely, they have one common feature – they are all massive.

Over the past few decades stress is emerging as an increasing problem in organization. Stress is vigorous state in which a person is confronted with an opportunity, demand, or resource

related to what the individual wishes and for which the outcome is perceived to be both vague and vital. (Selye, 1936) first introduced the idea of stress in to the life science. He defined stress as the force, pressure, or tension subjected upon an individual who resists these forces and attempt to uphold its true state. Basically what is stress? **The HSE (Health Safety Executive UK)** defines stress is an undesirable response people have to tremendous pressures or other types of demands placed upon them. It arises when they worry they cannot deal with. Some stress can be good, and some can be bad. HSE distinguishes between stress and pressure. Pressure is seen as positive and something that actually helps improve our performance. We all need a certain amount of pressure to perform well. Ask any athlete, actor or actress. However, source of pressure is too great for us to cope with.

Stress can be understood more comprehensively as, it is a condition which happens when one realizes the pressures on them, or the requirements of a situation, are wider than their recognition that they can handle. If these requirements are huge and continue for a longer period of time without any interval, mental, physical or behavioural problems may occur, (Health & Safety Executive UK). Stress has a positive effect on employees of any organization but up to a certain extent up to which an employee can cope with it, mostly it exceeds the bearable limits and has a negative result on employees.

Diagnosis of Stress

A good primary care physician should be able to diagnose stress based on the patient's symptoms alone. Some doctors may wish to run some tests, such as a blood or urine or a health assessment.

The diagnosis of stress depends on many factors and is complex, say experts a wide range of approaches to stress diagnosis have been used by health care professionals, such as the use of questionnaires, biochemical measures and physiological techniques experts add that the majority of these methods are subject to experimental error and should be viewed with caution. The most practicable way to diagnose stress and its effects on a person is through a comprehensive, stress oriented, face to face interview.

Stress Management Coping Strategies

“Outer circumstances and events don't create stress. It is our response to them which creates stress” Nuernberger Phil (1990).

Stress is a fact of life and individual reacts to stress in different ways. Some individuals deal with stressors in a positive way with a proper understanding of the phenomenon and its effect. Taking appropriate action to optimise, reduce or prevent stress may be beneficial both for the individual and organization.

Stress management is a means to enhance coping with external stressors and their internal consequences. Stress management has three broad options- prevent or control, escape from it, or learn to adopt it. As prevention is better than cure, steps should be taken to prevent the occurrence of stress rather than treat its harmful effects or bear a heavy cost when the damage is already done. Effective stress management can be done at the individual level and at the organizational level in many different ways. Stress management can be divided into two phases:

the first is coping with stress and the second is counteracting the stress with the help of relaxation response.

Some specific techniques that individual can use for coping with stress include the following:

- **Physical Exercise:** physical exercise is necessary to keep the body healthy both physically and mentally and is the best antidote for stress. Emotional strength is a by-product of regular exercise and self-confidence is a natural consequence. Regular and regulated physical exercise includes walking, jogging, swimming, riding bicycle, playing outdoor games etc. Physical fitness helps the body to cope better with stress, whereas relaxation techniques are useful for the mind.
- **Relaxation Practices:**
 1. **Yoga:** yoga is a holistic science concerned with all aspects of human functioning. It involves various body postures and breathing exercises.
 2. **Relaxation:** relaxation removes fatigue and drives attention away from work or a stressful situation. It is useful in managing a prolonged stressful situation more effectively. Different people respond differently to relaxation activities.
 3. **Meditation:** “Meditation is of far greater importance than medication for whatever afflicts mankind today.” (Bhamgara,1997) it is a mental relaxation technique which has proved to be of immense value to relieve stress and re-energise the body, reduce psychological problems such as anxiety and depression and lead to better emotional and physical health practicing meditation results in tranquillity and peace of mind. It helps in lowering the pulse and heart rate, induces a more objective thinking process with an unbroken and maintained concentration the commonly practiced techniques of meditation are yoga and relaxation response.
 4. **Biofeedback:** Biofeedback is a specific relaxation technique which is now being used for treating psychometric disorders like hypertension, tension, headaches, migraine headaches, backache, depression, etc. sophisticated biofeedback instruments have been developed that constantly inform the user about the changes which are characteristics of stress within his/her body for example, the intensity of muscle tension, skin temperature, heart rate, blood pressure etc.
- **Recreation and Leisure Time Activities:** recreation provides an opportunity to let oneself go, become inhibited thus reducing tension and stress. There are various forms of recreation like music entertainment, music, painting, parties, gardening, dancing etc.” Recreational pursuits are important to the prevention of the damaging effects of stress (Husain 1998). Leisure time can be used for doing some activities which give pleasure and help in building connections with others.
- **Diet:** These days dietary practices are being used to improve a person’s over health making him/her less vulnerable to stress. One’s lifestyle, occupation, climate conditions and body constitution should determine both the quantity and quality of one’s diet. A proper diet can prevent stress caused by unhealthy dietary habits.
- **Sleep:** Human errors caused by drowsiness and sleepiness may lead to accidents and

tragedies. “Drowsiness is an urgent warning that should not be ignored” (Castleman, 1997). A good night sleep helps to restore physical resources and increases the stress tolerance level. A person with large sleep debt is more vulnerable to infections and other illness. An increased need for sleep is the body’s mechanism for producing the desired recovery. Adults require at least 7 to 8 hours of sleep daily even though individual differences in sleep patterns and sleep needs vary.

- **Time Management:** time management is important for people who maintain a busy schedule. They need to prioritise their activities to avoid stress from time pressure and overtime work. Time management helps to balance work and leisure time activities. Working late may also alleviate stress. Working professionals who are dedicated to work are often “overworked” which has an adverse impact on their mental and physical wellbeing. Premature ageing is also seen as a consequence of overwork.
- **Behavioural Self Control:** Individuals can manage their own behaviour to reduce stress and can avoid people and situations that they know will put them under stress. It is a type of self-cure technique. Even “Cognitive therapy” may be used to alter an individual’s self-defeating thoughts that unnecessarily cause a strain by making him conscious of the effects of his thoughts on his physiological and emotional response.
- **Networking or Social Support:** Social psychology research has indicated that people benefit from social support. Networking requires forming associations with trusted, empathetic people who may be family members, neighbours or co-workers and colleagues who are good listeners and confidence builders. These people provide support whenever needed and help an individual overcome stressful situations.

There are three broad methods that can be followed to treat stress; they include self-help, self management and medication.

Self Help For Treating Stress

1. **Exercise:** Exercise has been proven to have a beneficial effect on a person’s mental and physical state. For many people exercise is an extremely effective stress buster.
2. **Division of labour:** Try to delegate your responsibilities at work, or share them. If you make yourself indispensable the likelihood of your feeling highly stressed is significantly greater.
3. **Assertiveness:** Don’t say yes to everything. If you can’t do something well, or if something is not your responsibility, try to seek ways of not agreeing to do them.
4. **Alcohol and drugs:** alcohol and drugs will not help you manage your stress better. Either stop consuming them completely, or cut down.
5. **Caffeine:** if your consumption of coffee and other drinks which contain caffeine is high, cut down.
6. **Nutrition:** Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables. Make sure you have a healthy and balanced diet.
7. **Time:** Make sure you set aside some time each day just for yourself. Use that time to organize your life, relax and pursue your own interests.
8. **Breathing:** There are some effective breathing techniques which will slow down

your system and help you relax.

9. **Talk:** Talk to your family, friend, work, colleagues and your boss. Express your thoughts and worries.
10. **Seek Professional help:** if the stress is affecting the way you function, go and see your doctor. Highlighted stress for prolonged periods can be bad for your physical and mental health.
11. **Relaxation techniques:** Meditation, massage and yoga have been known to greatly help people with stress.

Self Management Techniques

Stress Management can help you to either remove or change the source of stress, after the way you view a stressful event, lower the impact that stress might have on your body, and teach you alternative ways of coping. Stress management therapy will have the objective of pursuing one or more of these approaches.

Stress management techniques can be gained if you read self-help books, or attend a stress management course. You can also seek the help of a counsellor or psychotherapy sessions. Many therapies which help you reflexology may have a beneficial effect.

Medicines

Doctors will not usually prescribe medications for coping with stress, unless the patient has an underlying illness, such as the depression or some type of anxiety. If that is the case, the doctor is actually treating a mental illness. In such cases, an antidepressant may be prescribed. Bear in mind that there is a risk that all the medication will do is mask the stress, rather than help you deal and cope with it.

Quick & Quick (1984) suggest several diagnostic procedures for determining stress levels in organizations. Interviews allow in depth probing, but they are time consuming and depend primarily on the listening skills of the interviews. Questionnaires have the advantage of being able to process higher volumes of data but they often lose the flavour or feel of the responses. Observational techniques (both medical & behavioural) can be either quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative techniques might involve gathering company records, such as the rates of absenteeism, tardiness, turnover and production. Qualitative techniques involve observing workers for signs of stress related behaviour.

Conclusion

“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another” William James. Stress is part of life and will always be around. The keys to deal with stress are appropriate control of stressors and management of our physical and mental responses. Stress releases powerful neuro chemicals and hormones that prepare us for action. If we don't take action, the stress response can create or worsen health problems. Prolonged, uninterrupted, unexpected and unmanageable stresses are the most damaging. Stress can be managed by seeking support from loved ones, regular exercise, and meditation or other relaxation techniques, structured timeouts, and learning new coping strategies to create predictability in our lives. The

management of stress is mostly depending on the ability and willingness of a person to make the changes necessary for a healthy life style.

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