

STRESS AND COPING WITH STRESS

PARVEEN ASIF KHAN
Department of Psychology
Maharashtra College, Mumbai

We generally use the term stress when everything seems to have become too much- we are overloaded and wonder if we can really cope with the pressures placed on us. Anything that poses a challenge or a threat to our well-being is Stress. Some stress gets you going and is good for you- without any stress at all many say our lives would be boring and would probably feel pointless. However when stress affects our physical and mental health, it poses a problem.

Stress is a phenomenon that affects all of us at some point in our lives. We experience it in the form of various threats, challenges, and changes. The study of stress assumes great importance because stress experienced by one individual can affect the lives and safety of other individuals. Stress can have devastating effects on individuals, family, organizations and society.

No wonder stress has become a major field of study in Psychology.

No one's life is free of stress, regardless of how sensible, intelligent or privileged we are, we will be challenged at times by frustrations, losses, changes and conflicts. Stress comes from negative events such as failure in exams, but stress is also a part of many positive events, such as new job, or having a baby. Stress is inescapable as death and taxes.

Stress is our natural way of responding to the demands of our ever changing world. Although we all experience changes and demands regularly, the way we interpret these internal and external changes directly affects the degree to which we feel stress. As a result, not all individuals interpret the same events as stressful, what may seem stressful to one may not be the same for another and vice versa.

But what actually is stress? We may define, as an internal state which can be caused by physical demands on the body or by emotional and social situations, which are evaluated as potentially harmful, uncontrollable or exceeding our resources for coping.

Stress maybe defined as a state of imbalance arising due to excessive psychological pressure or physiological demands on a person. Dr Hans Selye, one of the leading authorities on the concept of stress, described stress as, **“the state of all wear and tear caused by life”**. Fred Luthans defined stress as an adaptive response to an external situation that results in physical, psychological and, or behavioural deviations for organisational participants. Ciccarelli and Meyer described stress as physical, cognitive and behavioural responses to events appraised as threatening and challenging. In simple words, stress maybe described as an event by an individual as threatening or challenging in nature and which affects the individual's body (physical), mind (cognitive) actions, (behavioural) and emotions.

The physical symptoms of stress may be in the form of cold, fever, high blood pressure, tiredness, nausea, chest pain, etc.

The behavioral symptoms may be in the form of excessive smoking and drinking, reckless driving, over eating, crying and aggressive actions. The emotional symptoms of stress may be in the form of increased irritability, anxiety, depression, fear and frequent outbursts of anger. The mental symptoms of stress may be in the form of inability to concentrate, forgetting and difficulty in making decisions.

Any event that has a potential to cause stress is called stressor. It includes events within the individual as well as external events. The stressors may be mild or severe in nature. Stressors have been classified into 3 broad types – Catastrophes, major life changes and hassles. Catastrophes are often the cause of two types of anxiety disorders – Acute stress disorder and Post traumatic stress disorder.

Stress is slippery concept. We sometimes use the word informally to describe threats or challenges, and at other times, our responses. Thus stress is the process of appraising and responding to a threatening or challenging event. Stress arises less from events themselves than from how we appraise them.

However it is important to note that a certain amount of stress is probably healthy- it energizes us and challenges us to grow. And hence we distinguish between Eustress and Distress. The positive effect of stress is called

Eustress. It is the optimal level of stress that people need and which promotes health and psychological well-being of people. Eustress encourages optimal performance.

The negative effect of stress is called distress. It is stress that results in unpleasant experiences. It results in negative consequences and leads to a decline in performance. Unfortunately, much of the stress in modern society is distressful. Distress, the more familiar, is the chronic feeling of being overwhelmed, oppressed and behind in your tasks. It is the pervasive sense of being taxed by life with little opening for relief. Eustress is the alternate form of stress that is actually beneficial. Eustress allows us to engage with the challenges in life that are meaningful and offset boredom. It can entail utilizing that adrenalin surge to lend the necessary energy for maximum productivity. Have you ever been “charged” as you prepared a long term paper a day in advance of the due date? If you enjoy waiting to the last minute to prepare projects and find that they have a higher quality, the sensation you experience may be eustress. Keep in mind that perception is the key to determining which category a situation falls under. What is perceived as negatively stressful for one person may be perceived as positively stressful for another. The rest of this paper will focus on coping with the adverse impact of stress.

No one event, regardless of how traumatic, can be detrimental to health. Stress becomes problematic when stressors accumulate and or become recurrent, resulting in distress or feelings of anxiety and hopelessness. Stress then is the reaction people have to excessive demands placed upon them. It arises when they worry that they can't cope. This brings us to an important part of this paper- Coping with stress. If stress is inevitable and if too much stress is a threat to our psychological and physiological well being, then coping well with stress is of paramount importance.

A healthy and happy person is someone who can enjoy the good times and cope with the bad. Sometimes we can cope with the stress by removing it. But we cannot remove all the stress from our lives and will have to cope with some of it. Generally, we are better able to cope with the kinds of stress that we have had previous experience with and that we can control somewhat. Good social support also improves our ability to cope with stress. Simply disclosing our feelings to friends has been shown to improve immune system functioning and reduce need for medical care. But there will be times when we cope ineffectively with stress. The trick, of course, is to cope as effectively as possible and not worry too much about the rest.

Thus coping is all about managing stressful demands. Coping strategies are actions that people can take to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize the effects of stressors. Coping with stress may take two forms- Problem focused coping and Emotion focused coping. In problem focused coping, the individual takes direct actions to remove or eliminate the cause of stress or at least reduce the impact of the stressor. People who use problem focused coping feel less depressed during and after the stressful situation. Lower levels of depression make it easier to use this strategy to cope with stress effectively.

In emotion focused coping, the individual changes his feelings and emotional reactions to the stressor and thereby reduces the impact of the stressor. People use emotion focused coping when they find a problem uncontrollable and when negative emotions overpower them. Ignoring the problem is not the best solution but it can be useful sometimes. This is especially true when the individual has little control over the problem and merely worrying about it only makes things worse.

Humor is one form of emotion-focused coping which has been found to be effective in reducing stress. Research has found that laughter improves the functioning of the immune system by increasing the working of the natural killer cells.

Then again, people are continually engaged in a conflict between their internal needs and desires and the societal rules for their fulfillment. This often creates stress which cannot be resolved by problem focused coping and hence people resort to the use of defense mechanisms which are closely related to emotion focused coping.

Psychological defense mechanisms are face saving desires which act as “shock absorbers” and protect us from the harsh realities of life. The term defense mechanism is used because an individual uses these mechanisms as a defense against tension, stress, anxiety, resulting from internal conflicts.

Another way of coping with stress is to relax. Relaxation might simply mean taking a day off and sitting at home doing nothing. But it could also mean something serious and systematic such as meditation which is a mental series of exercise meant to refocus attention and achieve a trancelike state of consciousness.

The cultural background of an individual also plays an important role with regard to the level of stress an individual experiences as well as the strategies an individual uses to cope with stress. People from individualistic cultures are less likely to reach out to others in times of distress as compared to people from collectivistic cultures.

Faith in God and religious beliefs not only play an important role in the experiences of stress but also in the ability to cope with stress. Individuals with strong religious beliefs who are members of religious organizations and visit religious places are able to cope with stress better. They feel they're not alone and this lifts them up spiritually. The rights and rituals associated with religion help people to deal with and face their inadequacies and weaknesses in a positive manner. Then again, a majority of religions promote healthy lifestyle habits by prohibiting smoking, drinking alcohol, promiscuity, gambling etc. They thus enhance an individual's ability to cope more effectively with stress.

The link between psychology and health encompasses more than just stress and coping. Our patterns of behavior affect our health as well. Some behavior such as smoking and over eating create health risks, whereas others such as exercising and relaxing promote good health. Stress is highly anticipated if one feels a need to produce "perfectly" on a consistent basis. Incorporating healthy practices in our daily schedule – a healthy level of exercise, appropriate eating practices, relaxation techniques, socializing, adequate sleep, sound time management, hobbies and other interests- lowers blood pressure, strengthens muscles and reduces tension, and in turn aids coping.

In addition to these areas of stress prevention, consider adopting a "recharge regime" (re-nourishing one's emotional battery) accepting change as a part of life, developing a support system, and most importantly believing in oneself - as it is said: "You are your best advocate."

BIBLIOGRAPHY :

- 1) Simple ways to manage stress by Pramod Batra
- 2) Wikipedia
- 3) Journal of Personality and Social Psychology
- 4) Psychology-Ciccarelli and Meyer

