

# Stress Management: Concept and Approaches

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## Abstract

This article provides an overview of stress and its management. Stress is a common phenomenon of modern life. Stress varies from person to person and situation to situation. Stress management involves techniques like relaxation exercise, time management, cognitive intervention and mindfulness based approaches. The present article examines and reviews aspects of stress, stages of stress and approaches related to stress management.

**Keywords:** *Stress Management, CBSR, MBSR, Autogenic training, Relaxation, Meditation.*

## Introduction

Stress is a common phenomenon of modern life. Stress is generally due to conflict emanating from high aspirations and goal attainment. Stress may also result from indecisiveness and/or failure to cope with the demanding situation. Stress is common for all, but the degree varies which depend on various intra psychic and interpersonal factors. Stress prone people experience more health related problems and experience difficulties in interpersonal area. Although stress cannot be totally eliminated from the individual's life it can be minimized which may help in leading a healthy and prosperous social life. It is thus quite important to discuss about some effective coping strategies to manage the human stress. In this context Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 19) considered stress and coping a dynamic phenomenon and viewed stress as "particular relationship between the person and his environment, that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well being". In this context it can be said that a person with the developing mind (with high expectation) is more stress prone when he or she is in a middle track such as do's or don'ts. If the confusing situation becomes longer it leads towards prolonged stress, which results in mental and physical illness. Coffey

and Appley, (1967) stated that in psychological stress the person perceives that, his wellbeing or (integrity) is endangered and that he must devote his energies to its protection. This is the genuine process of human life to face stress, because human beings have to go through these events and situations throughout their life span. So for its protection it can be minimized by developing appropriate coping procedures, otherwise it will produce psychopathology. Environment also plays an important role in the perception of stress and its coping ability.

## Stressors

Stress can start from the daily hassles of family to the work place or from the work place for family. Those who are even living single, they are also facing stress. There are various sources which produced stress, where some are acute and some others are still chronic. The study conducted by Holmes and Rahe (1967) stated that the greatest number of people faced stress due to the death of a spouse, divorce and marital separation as comparable to the change of residence, vacation and violation of law, etc. Cohen and his colleagues (1998) conducted their research on chronic and mild stress. They found that severe reprimand at work or a fight with the spouse produced less chronic stress as compared to unhappy marital life or unemployment. When a person is under stress, he/she may experience and passes through these specific stages. However, one may or may not pass through all stages of stress, depending on the events that triggered the occurrence.

## Sources of Stress

Some stress is of high frequency in nature where as some are of low frequency. Some high frequency stresses like the hassles of daily life are less severe than the low frequency stress like sudden work load

in the workplace, support in social life (DeLongis, Folkman & Lazarus 1988 Kenner et al, 1981 and Lazarus et al, 1985). In this context it can be stated that stress is always with the human being and it comes from every setup of human life, maybe from marital life, daily hassles of family life, dissatisfaction in marital life, low academic performance, job dissatisfaction, disturbed love affairs etc. One thing cannot be disregarded that the sources of stress vary from person to person.

## Personality and Stress

With regard to individual differences, the coping ability and the perception of stress is different from person to person. Scheier and Carver (1988) from their study proposed that pessimistic people are more stress resistant than the optimistic people. In another study Scheier and Carver (1992) stated that pessimistic people used various tactics to cope with their stress. But optimistic are less able in this context. Segerstorm and her colleagues (1998), found from their study on law students that optimistic students are in better mood and scored better in comparable with pessimistic students. In this context it can be concluded that various type of personality people used various type of coping strategies to cope with their stresses, as their perception of stress vary. But one thing cannot be denied that introvert people are more prone to stress, because they are more anxious and their expectations are infinitive. In comparison with male and female, females are less capable to cope with their stress and perceive stress easily than males. The study conducted by Potter and Stone (1995) provided the results on the conclusion that there is difference between male and female in their perception of stress and coping with stress. From the study of (Gross, 1992) in the medical set up it is found that although male and female doctors felt pressured by the amount of time demanded by their profession, females had the additional pressure of family obligations.

## Stages of Stress

Stress may be ranged from mild to severe forms. In this context, Seaward (1999, p.7) stated that stress passes through four major stages. In first stage, the

stimuli from the sense organs are sent into the brain. In second stage an interpretation took place inside the brain. And then the brain perceives it either threat or no threat. If the brain regarded it as no threat, then the stress is at normal level. Otherwise it leads to the third stage, where the body stays activated, aroused until the threat is over. In the fourth and last stage the body returns to the homeostatic state, which results in the physical and mental calmness. Hans Selye, (1976) proposed that the first stage of stress is the alarm stage, where the body prepares itself for immediate action, aroused by the sympathetic nervous system and released the hormone which alert the organism to meet the danger. If the stress is prolonged, the second stage is the resistance stage, where the arousal become slowdowns compare to the first stage. If the stresses continue for a long period then it entered into the third or the exhaustion stage, which produced both psychological and physical illness. If the effective coping strategies will be followed in the resistance stage and exhaustion stage respectively it will also lead to the normal stage.

## Alarm Stage

The Alarm stage marks the first contact with the stressor. The individual's nervous system immediately sends an emergency signal to brain. Stress leads to increased adrenaline to the blood stream. This in turn causes breathing to speed up. Blood flow to the brain and muscles increases; digestion slows; vision improves, blood pressure goes up, palm sweat and our mouth gets dry. Adrenaline activates the "fight or flight response," which is the body's initial response to stress. This phase is characteristic of the fight-or-flight reaction described by Cannon (1932) and Taylor et.al (2000). The "fight or flight" reaction prepares us to meet the stressors head on (fight) or run from it (flight).

## Resistance Stage

Resistance stage occurs when one is unable to successfully deal with a stressor during the alarm stage• body adapts to the presence of the stressor. Since the body is still fighting the stressor, the

individual may become irritable, tired, and less capable to handle the demanding situations. Resistance is a form of adjustment that lasts until the stressor stops. If the stressful situation continues, the body continues the changes that started in the first stage. Once the stressful situation is over, the body returns to a pre-alarm state.

### Exhaustion Stage

Exhaustion stage comes when the body can no longer keep up with the demands of the stressor. Exhaustion only occurs if a stressor continues for long periods of time- weeks, months, or even years. When stress continues beyond the second stage and you do not adhere to remedial measures, the final stress stage of exhaustion settles in. The individuals at this stage are totally tired and drained out of all energy.

### Stress Management

The intensity of stress and the perception of stress are different from person to person, time to time and situation to situation, like this, the coping abilities, and coping strategies also differ from person to person, time to time and situation to situation. Although there is difference of coping strategies, there are some common coping strategies to live a healthy and prosperous life. So here one question may be raised, what are the coping strategies? Lazarus and Folkman, (1984) defined that “coping is the process where the individual constantly changed his/her cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands, that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person”. As the causes of stress related with the cognitive and behavioral process of the individual, for its intervention the cognitive and behavioral functions are plays a vital role. In this context Halahan et al, (2004) stated that “coping strategies are mostly depends on the cognitive and behavioral of the person to manage his/her stressful condition or associated emotional distress”.

### Coping Strategies

Besides the Cognitive Behavioral stress Reduction (CBSR) approaches which are based on western model in which cognitive intervention is important aspect of stress management. Dysfunctional appraisals maintain and exacerbate stress. Identifying and altering these maladaptive appraisals or other cognitive processing deficits is the major element of cognitive intervention. Mindfulness based Stress reduction (MBSR) approaches rooted in eastern model are also applied for stress management in recent times. The MBSR consisted of weekly sessions aim to enhance mindfulness awareness and attention through the use of breathing, body scans, meditation, yoga and group discussion. The CBSR group was exposed to cognitive behavioral stress management skills. The intervention comprised of cognitive restructuring skills and behavioral relaxation techniques. When averaged across eight outcomes (i.e. Perceived stress, depression, psychological well-being, neuroticism, binge eating, energy, pain, and mindfulness) related to stress, the effect size for improvements was more than twice as large for the MBSR, as compared with the CBSR group. Social stress is linked to recurrence of depressive symptoms. Britton, Shahar, Szepeswol, & Jacobs (2012) conducted a study on 52 individuals with partially remitted depression. The results found that MBCT was associated with decreased emotional reactivity to social stress. Stress and quality of life are related. In this context Nyklíček, & Kuijpers (2008) conducted a study on 40 women and 20 men having distress. The results indicated a positive effect of mindfulness based intervention on perceived stress.

- Social support

Study by Oxman and Colleagues 1995 conducted on 232 older open heart patients participated in social and community group program reduced their chance of dying within six months of surgery. In this regard numbers of researches (e.g. Berkman and Syme, 1979; Cohen and Wills, 1985, 1988; Dunkel/Schetter and Skokan, 1990; Hobfoll et.al 1990; House, Landis and Umberson, 1988; Segerstrom, 2007; Strine,

Chapman, Balluz and Mokdad, 2008) found that individual with supportive relationship experienced enhanced mental and physical wellbeing.

- **Relaxation Exercise**

Relaxation is not only used to release the physical tension but also improve the mental well-being. It may be categorized into: Progressive muscle relaxation Meditation and Autogenic training. In Progressive Muscle Relaxation specific muscle groups are relaxed following alternating tension and relaxation of muscle groups. On other hand meditation involves several techniques which attempts for focused thoughts by undistracting other thoughts. Autogenic training is a behavioral technique used for self relaxation and management of anxiety. Autogenic training constitutes visual imagination and use of verbal cues for making the body warm and relaxed. This technique involves directions to control physiological responses such as breathing, blood pressure, heart beat and skin temperature (e.g. Ernst and Kanji 2000; Crowther, 1983).

- **Time management**

Time management training provides individuals with skills to adjust activities with respect to time .It involves increasing amount of functional time. Time management for behavioral modification in stress management has been used by Lakein, 1973 including the techniques such as preparing the list to

do and prioritizing. Richards, 1987 used time management technique and found effective outputs in managing stress and enhancing productivity. Further, Robinson & Godbey, 1997 affirmed a positive relationship between time management and stress management.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Stress is a complex phenomenon and is influenced by various factors. There is no single method for surviving the stressful events in life; rather, it is a process of figuring out what works best for person at the time of stress. The coping strategies will guide the individual to work through both everyday stress as well as crisis stressors. Cognitive behavioral approaches are effective in dealing with stressful conditions. Stress management is important since stress is related to various medical conditions which have enduring effects on individual.

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