

Stress

MANAGEMENT GUIDE

stress



TIPS &
TECHNIQUES

STRESS

Management Guide

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INTRODUCTION: EFFECTIVE STRESS MANAGEMENT

Effective stress management skills are ideal techniques and methods that allow a person to cope up with the demands of his or her environment, external or internal. Stress is a product of the interaction between one's coping ability and the demands that require testing of such abilities.

Though stress is known to be positive, it is also associated with a lot of negative symptoms that affect a person on the physical, psychological and emotional level. These skills invoke the fight or flight response in a person thus making it possible to cope with or alter stressful situations. In fact, effective stress management can be thought of in the terms of the following models.

Transactional Model

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman put forth the suggestion that stress results from an imbalance between demands and the resources possessed by a person. Stress could be thought of as a reaction when pressure far exceeds one's expected ability to cope with demanding situations.

Stress management was thus developed on the lines that stress is not a direct reaction to the actions of any stressor, but rather a phenomenon that creates or manifests itself as a result of severe shortcomings in one's resources and ability to cope.

Thus, an effective stress management program would include identifying the factors typical to a person and controlling his/her stress features. And then to identify the methods that could serve to be effective ' solutions' to these factors comes next.

Lazarus and Folkman devised a model of stress based on the interactions of people with the external environment and thus the stress management techniques would focus on factors related to these. This model breaks the traditional approach towards stress by challenging the idea that a stressor and a stress are directly proportional to one another.

Effective management techniques under this model suggest that if a person were confident of his ability to handle pressure situations, he would not feel under stress. However, the pressure itself would be a potential stressor.

1. Health Realization Model

The health realization model, also referred to as an innate health model, was founded on the basic idea that stress may not be necessarily associated with a potential stressor. Instead of concentrating on the individual's perception of stressors in relation to his or her own stress coping abilities, the health realization model suggests that the nature of thought has a profound impact on shaping a person's stress levels.

The model states that it is a person's thinking process, which decides the response to external stimuli. In this model, stress is regarded as a by-product of an individual's appraisal of oneself through a mental state coupled with insecurity and negativity.

The model states that a quiet mind is a product of inner mind and common sense. This model puts forth the proposition that helping stressed individuals understand the importance of orienting thinking process on positive lines will go a long way in equipping them with better stress handling capacities.



SCIENTIFIC & CONSERVATIVE DEFINITIONS OF STRESS

Stress is an inevitable part of our lives. We cannot do away with it. In fact, we often have to figure out ways to deal with it. However, a little proportion of stress 'keeps us going', an excessive experience of a stressful situation may result in the failure of the psychological, physical, mental or emotional defense mechanisms.

Coming up with a definition of stress is however, not an easy task. Over the decades, there have been many debates to come upon one conclusion on what stress really is. However, that conclusion still is not unanimous amongst the researcher's fraternity; different researchers have a different perception of stress.

As a result, stress has been defined in conservative terms as a cause and effect relationship between the body and the environmental factors influencing it. We react with our environment, which may be a work place or a home front. We come across many situations, which test our dexterity.

It is this unique experience of each person that will decide how the body reacts to such demanding situations, and whether the body can deal with them on ordinary terms, or may need more effort to come to terms with them. This back and forth relationship shows up in the form of many factors that may be out in the open or out of sight.

One could have changed moods or may develop some health problems. However, the conservative theory fails to take into account that a bit of stress can have a positive effect on an individual and may prompt him or her to direct his efforts towards goals.

The scientific definition of stress encompasses both the positive as well as the negative effects of stress to define this phenomenon. This definition states that stress is a condition when a person perceives that "demands exceed the personal resources that the individual can make available."

If the demands are not too in excess, this perception acts as a 'motivator' and acts as a trigger allowing a person to face an external stimulus with renewed vigor. If however, this excess cannot to be dealt with in an ordinary manner, the person begins to feel 'under pressure'.

The entire experience of being under pressure will show up in different forms like mental or emotional stress, physical, psychological or behavioral problems. What makes the study of stress so interesting is the fact that till date, there is no scientific evidence to link certain symptoms directly to stress. What we do is 'assume' things, and although stress does lead to a general degradation of health, there is no test to prove that.

MEASURING THE INTENSITY OF STRESS

Stress is regarded as a medical condition and it can have a serious repercussions. It is thus, very crucial to cope up with it and to accurately pin point the cause of stress. The intensity of stress greatly depends upon the cause of stress.

For example, stress could be a combination of stressors related to the work place and an individual's inability to cope. A different stress situation could arise due to added pressures at home. In each of these cases, the level of stress felt will be different and an effective measurement of its intensity allows us to classify stress.

1. Distress

Distress is negative stress, which is commonly felt when the mind and body have to constantly change their responses to the external environment. You see the human mind tends to orient in 'comfort zones,' and a prolonged absence from such a zone can make a person feel uncomfortable, resulting in stress.

Acute stress is a type of distress that accompanies a change of routine. It is an intense type of stress, but it is usually short-lived. Acute stress is the way by which the body ensures that a person takes notice of the changes around him or her, and tries to adjust himself or herself so as to be comfortable in face of such changes. Chronic stress is a long-term effect and is generally observed when there is a constant change of routine on a periodic basis.

Chronic stress affects the body for a long time and it is also a level of stress, which is difficult to deal with. It needs more attention and efforts to do away with the symptoms of such a stress.

2. Eustress

Eustress is a type of positive stress and in most cases is known as a 'necessary factor' to motivate a person to work towards goal realization. It is, thus, a helpful type of stress that is experienced right before one needs to exert physical force.

Eustress is the body's way of preparing the muscles, the mind and heart to face what may occur. Thus, it is essential in any creative endeavor to ensure that appropriate levels of energy are channelized to perform better at particular task at hand.

A common example of this type of stress are the 'adrenaline rush' that football players may feel before a game is to begin. This feeling will help them play better and possibly win the game.

Hyperstress and Hypostress

Hyperstress is a negative stress that is observed when a person is forced to undertake more than what he or she can endure. A stressful job may overwork the individual and may affect him on serious lines. Hyperstress is a serious form of stress and can affect a person on an emotional level if not dealt with.

Hypostress is opposite to hyperstress and is a situation where a person can do much more than what he is expected to. The results of hypostress are boredom and frustration leading to a sense of mental lethargy.

PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

Stress is a feature of our everyday lives. Though observed very commonly, it has numerous psychological and physiological aspects. Though it sounds scary, what we need to understand is that the brain is the true origin of stress.

In order to have a reaction on the emotional or physical level, the brain must process the happening in the surroundings and must initiate a perception and appraisal system. The senses of our body provide the necessary inputs for this perception system.

The stressors could be biological, psychological, sociological or philosophical in context and thus require a cognitive process to be recorded by the brain. The scary part of the scenario is that the brain need not be provided with 'real' stressors; either of the sensory organs can even perceive stress and communicate as such to the brain.

Thus, stress cannot have a definite form since the brain of each person works uniquely and differently. It may not even be possible to uniquely attach stress to a particular event, since what may be perceived as a stressor by any one individual may not be a potential stressor for someone else.

To demonstrate this, researchers chose a class of students as a test group and asked all the students to close their eyes and sit in peace. After a calm settled on the surroundings, one of the researchers slammed a big, book and screamed.

Although the initial reaction of most students was to be jerked back to reality, what amazed the conductors was the difference in the reactions showed by each student. The act of slamming a book and screaming was provided as an input by the ears to the brain and the brain processed it at lightening speed.

An immediate outcome of this processing was that the heartbeats fastened and the muscles tightened; a body's typical way of reacting to fear. Some of the students reacted by screaming while others were simply startled. Thus, the brain reacted to a source of stress, which was conspicuous by being absent.

After the initial ho-hum humdrum was over, the researchers asked the students to maintain peace in the room and again close the eyes. Although the students obliged, most of them showed some signs of apprehension and fear at being disturbed again!

Thus, they could actually create conditions of stress by the sheer power of thinking and imagination. What struck the scientists was that the manner in which each student reacted was different; some screamed loud, some were simply rudely shocked out of a sense of peace.

Thus, stress cannot be uniformly defined; it is a unique to each person. Further, the time of recovery of each student was different. Some students showed an increased anticipation of something unexpected, while the others recovered back to their original state. The researchers concluded that stress is affected by a person's psychological as well as physiological make up.

UNCERTAINTY CAN LEAD TO STRESS

Richard Lazarus along with Susan Folkman suggested the transactional model of stress management. They tried to establish a unique relationship between the demands on the resources that an individual possesses.

Such excessive demands can also create stress since the individual may not be able to match up to the demands. However, if the individual can mobilize the necessary resources, he will be able to deal with the situation and thus may not feel stress at all. Most of the times, we fear what we do not know.

For example, a student may be scared of an examination on the next day. He may not have put in the expected efforts or hard work. Thus, he fears what he cannot control, i.e. uncertainty.

The very uncertainty of a situation will allow us to hunt for ways by which we could cope with these demands responsible for creating pressure. This is a very natural phenomenon since we cannot control the unknown.

New experiences that may not have been encountered previously can be stressful. We would be in no position to know what is around the corner and that is precisely why we worry about this. On the other hand, if you know exactly what is expected in the future, you will find ways to deal with it.

As a consequence, you would not associate any sense of anxiety with the happening of that event. Let us take an example of the person who is faced with a huge pile of work that he or she needs to complete in good time.

Perhaps, the person's previous performance on a similar work was less than satisfactory and this may produce worry in his or her mind. Thus, past will serve as an aggravating factor resulting in a sense of fear for what is to come. Fear naturally leads to stress.

STRESS AS AN ILLNESS OR DISEASE

Stress is a state of mental, physical, or emotional tension that is caused by pressures, better known as stressors. These stressors differ in their origin and nature. Some of them could be internal.

A good example of internal stressor could be a lack of confidence to do a particular bit of work. At times, it could be external in nature. A student feeling 'tensed' due to his exams is an example of external pressure.

These stressors can affect a person in varying proportions and for varied duration of time. Stress is inevitable and what is scary is that it can affect each person in different ways. There is no uniform definition of symptoms for stress.

Stress may be a major factor in causing illnesses that could be fatal at times. Researchers are of the opinion that stress disrupts the body's homeostasis or the state of equilibrium, thus resulting in the weakening of the immune system.

Constant degradation of the body's defense mechanism can lead to serious illnesses. Thus, stress itself is recognized a medical condition. A common example of stress as a result of trauma is seen in soldiers post war conditions.

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was known as shell shock during the First World War I and battle fatigue after World War II. Patients of PTSD complained depression, nightmares, feelings of guilt for having survived, and flashbacks of the horrific events. Some of them became sensitive to noise and some even became violent.

Stress is thus, known to affect the normal functioning of the body. As a result, it can cause severe illnesses. Some of the known physical signs are a dry mouth and throat, tightening of the neck and back muscles, chronic neck and back pain, indigestion, headaches, muscle tics, tremors, insomnia and fatigue.

A wear down of the emotional functioning is also a result of stress. During stress, patients experience a quickening of heartbeats, increase in blood pressure and the body releases adrenaline, which fastens the body's rate of metabolism. If this situation continues for prolonged periods, it results in a weakening of the immune system.

Thus, stress has been recognized as a form of illness to be regarded with due seriousness. Though stress itself does not signify a particular disease with perfectly known symptoms, it can trigger the onset of a variety of diseases. Different people will be affected differently by stress.

STRESS AND INTERVENTION

Stress is regarded as a serious medical condition that requires immediate attention. Many a times, stress is referred to as a 'silent killer'. Stress has symptoms that affect a person physically, mentally, emotionally and even behaviorally. Thus, it becomes priority to search for strategies to counterattack stress.

While the symptoms of stress need some definite form of treatment, the first signs of stress could be recognized and done away with. An effective method to do away with stress is the intervention techniques. Given below are some of the most popular methods of intervening, which are designed to arrest the growth of stress so that it does not have harmful repercussions.

◆ Behavioral Rehearsal

Behavior rehearsal is popularly referred to as “role playing”. A rehearsal of expected behavior in a peculiar situation is the aim of such a technique. The technique suggests that a participating individual is not playing the role of someone else but is learning how to behave right in light of a situation.

Rehearsing behavior is useful before as well as after an event. Before the event, it gives an idea of what is expected and thus relieves the anticipatory stress one may feel. After the event, it throws light on the mistakes made and thus, does away with any remnants of stress. Role-playing is adopted by many organizations as an effective way of beating work related stress.

◆ Cognitive Restructuring

This is a cognitive therapy where a process of learning to refute faulty thinking patterns is set. The aim is to displace one’s irrational goals with those goals that can be achieved realistically. The cognitive therapy recognizes the main reason for stress as a conflict between expectations and behavior.

One may hold on to goals that are unrealistic and cannot be achieved in the normal course of the way. Thus, one may ‘invite’ stress for oneself. This therapy believes in teaching an individual to understand the true extent of goal setting with due regards to the nature of goals. Thus, an attempt is made to set rational goals that can be attained by a normal individual as an effective way of ‘trapping’ stress before it is felt.

◆ Stress Inoculation

Stress inoculation is a term that is used to describe anxiety-reducing techniques as a medicine for stress and allied causes of imbalance in bodily functions. These techniques are developed so that they can be accessed as and when needed.

This is extremely useful considering that the corporate world has to undergo a constant state of ups and downs. The aim of stress inoculation techniques is to develop a procedure that will calm a person’s nerves and put him in a controlled state. This will allow a person to think rationally and have a better access to one’s feelings and patterns of behavior.

◆ Anger Management

Everyone experiences anger in varying proportions. In fact, it is very natural to get angry at times. However, one must realize that just as getting angry is natural, controlling anger is also equally important. Excessive anger could result in physical or emotional harm to some person.

In addition to that, it is a known cause of stress. Thus, anger management programs are the routes that one may adopt in order to learn how to overcome excessive anger. More and more people are venturing into such therapy classes as a means of learning how to deal with anger and the consequences arising thereof.

◆ Thought Stopping Procedure

This is a relatively , individualistic' technique to deal with stress. It attempts to alter the thinking process of an individual and thus, make definite changes to the way he thinks. What is important, is an effective realization of the way one thinks and for this purpose, experts can be consulted.

Often, stress is a state of mind is characterized by a number of negative thoughts. An attempt is made to understand the negativity of a person's thinking while understanding the cause and effect of such thinking. An effort is made to , stop' negative thoughts, so that its place can be efficiently taken by positive ones.

◆ Control and perception of control

Often times, we cannot keep a check on the way we think. We hold many fears that could be irrational in their very roots. Thus, what we cannot do is to control these aspects of our mind, which affect us at an emotional level. What we feel as stress is many a times a perception of what we feel is stress. It may not qualify to be stress at all. Thus, it is imperative to learn to control our perception power and the way we think.

We can control the way our mind processes what we absorb as knowledge and modify it to a state that best suits our state of mind. Control is thus, a very good way of combating stress.

◆ Self Esteem Enhancement

Many people who suffer from stress also suffer from a low self-esteem. Many a times, experiences fuel a person's esteem status. For example, failure in the past to do a particular thing successfully may make the person feel that he or she is incapable and thus may put a sense of fear in his or her mind.

Self-enhancement techniques attempt to do away with low self-esteem and elevate the esteem of a person. This will make a person see himself in better light and thus allow him to get rid of stress that may live deep in his or her mind. This sort of stress is perceived stress and could be imaginary in many cases.

◆ Goal Setting

One of the important reasons as to why stress is caused is the fact that one may fail to do what one is meant to do. One may fail to achieve goals that may be set out for him. This is a stress inducing situation and many a times, such goals are expected out of an individual in a typical work place situation.

For example, a worker may be asked to produce hundred items as against the normally accepted standard of eighty items. If he fails to do so, he would suffer from a state of stress. Thus, goal setting involves framing of goals, which integrate the needs of an organization as well as an individual. They are , achievable‘ goals, and thus, do not cause any feeling of stress in the person working to attain them.

◆ Active Listening

One important reason as to why stress is felt is in the fact that a person is not understood in the way he would want to be understood. It thus leads a person to a state of frustration and imparts in him, a sense of stress.

This is type of a stress owes its roots to negligence on part of the people other than the sufferer. Thus, active listening is introduced as a means of relieving the person of stress. He is asked to listen as well as understand the true meaning of what is being said.

The same is expected from the other people around him as well. This is a very popular technique that is adopted by progressive managers who believe in the welfare of their employees.

◆ Deprivation Stress

This is a form of stress that is caused when a lack of something is felt. The ,something‘ could be as common as a hair pin! This stress is caused amongst people who are prone to anxiety and who perceive the world around them with a sense of bitter negativity.

Thus, an attempt to relieve a person of this form of stress is actually an attempt to study why a person behaves the way he or she does. A simple lack of something that could be described as mundane should not be a cause for stress like feeling. Thus, it is really a combination of self introspection and counseling that will allow a person to get over such a form of stress.

◆ Systematic Desensitization

Systematic desensitization is also known as graded real-life exposure or exposure therapy. It is a systematic method of exposing a person to certain behavioral patterns thus attempting to find the cause of the root problem.

This problem is seen in the form of various phobias. Many people who have been exposed to harsh life changes may develop a sudden aversion or phobia for something. An exposure to that very aspect may cause them severe mental or emotional stress. This therapy has proven to be successful in treating many people from their various phobias.

◆ Change in Lifestyles

Many times, the feeling of stress can be attributed to the way one leads one's life. For example, it could be due to excessive work pressures or may be due to frequent late nights. It may also be a result of faulty food habits.

Dealing with such acquired stress can be a change in the way one leads one's life. For example, doing away with addictive habits can ease out the felt stress to a certain extent. Another way of coping up with this kind of stress is to introduce healthy means of living life.

INTRAPERSONAL CAUSES OF STRESS

Stress is the physiological response to a potentially pressure inducing situation which is also known as a stressor. These stressors could be an event or situation, which a person may feel, is difficult to cope up with. He 'falls' to the pressure and thus, feels that he is under tension.

One more cause of stress is what one perceives as a goal for oneself. Everyone has a set of expectations out of oneself. An inability to live up to any of these expectations may promote a feeling of frustration internally.

This state of frustration triggers what could be called as a state of internal conflict. This is also known as being in a state of 'two minds' by a layperson. We may not be sure about what we would want to do in a particular situation.

Every person is structured psychologically, based on an accumulation of experiences and value systems. One has a one's unique 'psychological mark' that defines how a person may shape his or her attitude. For example, a person who has 'observed' that his parents are religious may turn out to be the same; he may even be a God fearing individual. Sometimes, there are situations, which force us to examine these very foundations of our psychological make up.

We begin to question our own beliefs and our own ideas. We feel that they are not well aligned with what the external world demands from us. This creates a situation of internal conflict. Our mind remains in a state of confusion and conflict and can not decide what is to be done. This creates a lot of anxiety and is a source of tension in many people.

Intrapersonal causes of conflict are more or less within a person. They are not apparent and thus, they become difficult to tap. It becomes even more difficult to find an effective solution for such conflict triggered stress. One of the most effective ways of dealing with this type of a stress is to understand why this stress is caused.

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