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**Stress management: An overview****Kavita Dua****Abstract**

Tired faces, embittered looks, unwillingness to communicate with the colleagues, constant dissatisfaction and in the end the decreasing of the overall working results and poor performance... Is this the picture you often see? The —painter of this negative picture could possibly be such a phenomenon as stress, which is no more something new or seldom meeting.

Stress is a fact of everyday life, we've all felt it. Sometimes it acts as a positive force and sometimes as a negative force. If you experience stress over a prolonged period of time, it could become chronic, till you take some action. About 500 million people worldwide are believed to be suffering from neurotic, stress related and psychological problems. Stress has been experienced since ancient times, but it has never been worse than it is here in the early 21st century. Nowadays stress is responsible for more than fifty percent of all illness. Despite this fact, the phenomenon of stress still hasn't been that deeply studied.

This article highlights the causes, effects and management of stress and therefore could be helpful for people who want to learn how to react to stress in a more constructive, proactive way.

**Keywords:** stress, stress management, causes of stress, prevention of stress, consequences of stress

**1. Introduction**

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help us perform under pressure & motivate us to do our best. But if we frequently find ourself feeling frazzled & overwhelmed, it's time to take action to bring our nervous system back into balance. We can protect ourself by learning how to recognize the signs & symptoms of stress & taking steps to reduce its harmful effects. Stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint, or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. Stress is a normal physical response to events that make us feel threatened or upset our balance in some way. When we sense danger, the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as "the stress response."

When working properly, the stress response helps us stay focused, energetic, & alert. In emergency situations, stress can save our life, for example, spurring us to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident. The stress response also helps us rise to meet challenges. But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful & starts causing major damage to our health, our mood, our productivity, our relationships, & our quality of life.

**2. What is Stress?**

H. Selye (1936) [2] defined stress as "non-specific responses that be resulted from a variety of different kinds of stimuli." However, Selye's stress theory has only focused on physiological stress, and psychological factors have not been considered. Research on life stress examined the relationship between diseases and life events. Many studies were conducted for clarifying the psychological factors related to stress, and the results revealed that psychological factors play a significant role in the occurrence of physiological and psychological stress responses.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) [1] proposed that stress occurs when people perceived that the demands from external situations were beyond their coping capacity.

Stress is the excitement, feeling of anxiety, and/or physical tension that occurs when the demands placed on an individual are thought to exceed his ability to cope. This most common view of stress is often called distress or negative stress. The physical or psychological demands from the environment that cause this condition are called stressors. (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004)

It is defined by Ganster and Murphy (2000) [7] as a form of 'strain' provoked in response to situational demands labeled 'stressors' which occur when jobs are simultaneously high in demands and low in control.

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Stress (psychology), an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. (Auerbach *et al*, 2007 / Encarta 2008) [3].

Stress is defined as a nonspecific response of the body to a stimulus or event (stressor). Under a general model of the stress response, when an individual experiences a stressor, the stressor will lead to a physiological response, one that can be measured by several indicators, such as elevated heart rate. In related literature, the term-stress is used to refer to this physiological response. Stressors vary in form and can include extreme temperature or lighting, time pressure, lack of sleep, and exposure to threat or danger, among others. All stressors, however, tend to produce similar physiological responses within the body. (Selye, 1956)

### 3. Signs or symptoms of Stress

Stress can affect all aspects of your life, including your emotions, behaviors, thinking ability, and physical health. No part of the body is immune. But, because people handle stress differently, symptoms of stress can vary.

#### Emotional symptoms of stress include

- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated, and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed, like you are losing control or need to take control
- Having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind
- Feeling bad about yourself (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless, and depressed
- Avoiding others

#### Physical symptoms of stress include

- Low energy
- Headaches
- Upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation, and nausea
- Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- Insomnia
- Frequent colds and infections
- Loss of sexual desire and/or ability
- Nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear, cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth

#### Cognitive symptoms of stress include

- Constant worrying
- Racing thoughts
- Forgetfulness and disorganization
- Inability to focus
- Poor judgment
- Being pessimistic or seeing only the negative side

#### Behavioral symptoms of stress include

- Changes in appetite -- either not eating or eating too much
- Procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes
- Exhibiting more nervous behaviors, such as nail biting, fidgeting, and pacing

### 4. Causes of Stress

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative,

such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on you can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be internal or self-generated, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

Finally, what causes stress depends, at least in part, on your perception of it. Something that's stressful to you may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. While some of us are terrified of getting up in front of people to perform or speak, for example, others live for the spotlight. Where one person thrives under pressure and performs best in the face of a tight deadline, another will shut down when work demands escalate. And while you may enjoy helping to care for your elderly parents, your siblings may find the demands of caretaking overwhelming and stressful.

#### Common external causes of stress include

- Major life changes
- Work or school
- Relationship difficulties
- Financial problems
- Being too busy
- Children and family

#### Common internal causes of stress include

- Pessimism
- Inability to accept uncertainty
- Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
- Negative self-talk
- Unrealistic expectations / perfectionism
- All-or-nothing attitude

### 5. Sources of Stress

#### 1. Financial Problems

- lack of money
- Debts
- Credit Card payments
- Pending mortgage instalments
- Rising costs of education
- Mounting expenditure on health concerns

#### 2. Workplace Stress

- Worried about promotion
- Negative or bullying behavior bosses
- Career goals
- Office politics.
- Change that is taking place in the organization
- Under stress because of the prospect of losing your job

#### 3. Personal Problems

- Studies of children
- Attitude of relatives
- Arguments with spouse or children
- Change of place due to requirements of your job
- Illness of a family member

#### 4. Health

- Heart diseases,
- hypertension,
- problems with eye sight
- And sugar afflict many people becoming a major cause of life stress for them.

- Maintaining good health,
- reducing weight,
- increasing weight,
- Being able to lead a healthy life-style.

### 5. Irritants

- Problems in commuting to workplace, balance of work and family life,
- visit to doctor,
- inadequate sleep
- no time to relax
- no time to discuss some nagging problems
- noise

### 6. Eustress vs. Distress

Stress is not always a bad thing. Stress is simply the body's response to changes that create taxing demands. The previously mentioned Dr. Lazarus (building on Dr. Selye's work) suggested that there is a difference between eustress, *which is a term for positive stress*, and distress, *which refers to negative stress*.

*In daily life, we often use the term "stress" to describe negative situations.* This leads many people to believe that all stress is bad for you, which is not true.

### Eustress, or positive stress, has the following characteristics

- Motivates, focuses energy.
- Is short-term.
- Is perceived as within our coping abilities.
- Feels exciting.
- Improves performance.

### Distress

In contrast, Distress, or negative stress, has the following characteristics:

- Causes anxiety or concern.
- Can be short- or long-term.
- Is perceived as outside of our coping abilities.
- Feels unpleasant.
- Decreases performance.
- Can lead to mental and physical problems.

### Examples of Eustress and Distress

It is somewhat hard to categorize stressors into objective lists of those that cause eustress and those that cause distress, because *different people will have different reactions to particular situations*.

However, by generalizing, we can compile a list of stressors that are typically experienced as negative or positive to most people, most of the time.

### Examples of negative personal stressors include:

- The death of a spouse.
- Filing for divorce.
- Losing contact with loved ones.
- The death of a family member.
- Hospitalization (oneself or a family member).
- Injury or illness (oneself or a family member).
- Being abused or neglected.
- Separation from a spouse or committed relationship partner.
- Conflict in interpersonal relationships.
- Bankruptcy/Money Problems.
- Unemployment.

- Sleep problems.
- Children's problems at school.
- Legal problems.

### Examples of positive personal stressors include

- Receiving a promotion or raise at work.
- Starting a new job.
- Marriage.
- Buying a home.
- Having a child.
- Moving.
- Taking a vacation.
- Holiday seasons.
- Retiring.
- Taking educational classes or learning a new hobby.

### 7. Work and Internal Sources of Distress

Work and employment concerns such as those listed below are also frequent causes of distress

- Excessive job demands.
- Job insecurity.
- Conflicts with teammates and supervisors.
- Inadequate authority necessary to carry out tasks.
- Lack of training necessary to do the job.
- Making presentations in front of colleagues or clients.
- Unproductive and time-consuming meetings.
- Commuting and travel schedules.

### Common internally caused sources of distress include

- Fears: (e.g., fears of flying, heights, public speaking, chatting with strangers at a party).
- Repetitive Thought Patterns.
- Worrying about future events (e.g., waiting for medical test results or job restructuring).
- Unrealistic, perfectionist expectations.

### Habitual behavior patterns that can lead to distress include

- Over scheduling.
- Failing to be assertive.
- Procrastination and/or failing to plan ahead.

### 8. Effects of Stress

There are numerous emotional and physical disorders that have been linked to stress including depression, anxiety, heart attacks, stroke, hypertension, immune system disturbances that increase susceptibility to infections, a host of viral linked disorders ranging from the common cold and herpes to AIDS and certain cancers, as well as autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis. In addition stress can have direct effects on the skin (rashes, hives, atopic dermatitis, the gastrointestinal system (GERD, peptic ulcer, irritable bowel syndrome, and ulcerative colitis) and can contribute to insomnia and degenerative neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease. In fact, it's hard to think of any disease in which stress cannot play an aggravating role or any part of the body that is not affected (see stress effects on the body stress diagram) or. This list will undoubtedly grow as the extensive ramifications of stress are increasingly being appreciated.

### Fifty Common Signs and Symptoms of Stress

1. Frequent headaches, jaw clenching or pain
2. Gritting, grinding teeth
3. Stuttering or stammering

4. Tremors, trembling of lips, hands
5. Neck ache, back pain, muscle spasms
6. Light headedness, faintness, dizziness
7. Ringing, buzzing or “popping sounds
8. Frequent blushing, sweating
9. Cold or sweaty hands, feet
10. Dry mouth, problems swallowing
11. Frequent colds, infections, herpes sores
12. Rashes, itching, hives, “goose bumps”
13. Unexplained or frequent “allergy” attacks
14. Heartburn, stomach pain, nausea
15. Excess belching, flatulence
16. Constipation, diarrhea, loss of control
17. Difficulty breathing, frequent sighing
18. Sudden attacks of life threatening panic
19. Chest pain, palpitations, rapid pulse
20. Frequent urination
21. Diminished sexual desire or performance
22. Excess anxiety, worry, guilt, nervousness
23. Increased anger, frustration, hostility
24. Depression, frequent or wild mood swings
25. Increased or decreased appetite
26. Insomnia, nightmares, disturbing dreams
27. Difficulty concentrating, racing thoughts
28. Trouble learning new information
29. Forgetfulness, disorganization, confusion
30. Difficulty in making decisions

31. Feeling overloaded or overwhelmed
32. Frequent crying spells or suicidal thoughts
33. Feelings of loneliness or worthlessness
34. Little interest in appearance, punctuality
35. Nervous habits, fidgeting, feet tapping
36. Increased frustration, irritability, edginess
37. Overreaction to petty annoyances
38. Increased number of minor accidents
39. Obsessive or compulsive behavior
40. Reduced work efficiency or productivity
41. Lies or excuses to cover up poor work
42. Rapid or mumbled speech
43. Excessive defensiveness or suspiciousness
44. Problems in communication, sharing
45. Social withdrawal and isolation
46. Constant tiredness, weakness, fatigue
47. Frequent use of over-the-counter drugs
48. Weight gain or loss without diet
49. Increased smoking, alcohol or drug use
50. Excessive gambling or impulse buying

As demonstrated in the above list, stress can have wide ranging effects on emotions, mood and behavior. Equally important but often less appreciated are effects on various systems, organs and tissues all over the body, as illustrated by the following diagram (The American Institute of Stress)

Here are ways in which some key body systems react.

**1 NERVOUS SYSTEM**

When stressed — physically or psychologically — the body suddenly shifts its energy resources to fighting off the perceived threat. In what is known as the “fight or flight” response, the sympathetic nervous system signals the adrenal glands to release adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones make the heart beat faster, raise blood pressure, change the digestive process and boost glucose levels in the bloodstream. Once the crisis passes, body systems usually return to normal.

**2 MUSCULOSKELETAL SYSTEM**

Under stress, muscles tense up. The contraction of muscles for extended periods can trigger tension headaches, migraines and various musculoskeletal conditions.

**3 RESPIRATORY SYSTEM**

Stress can make you breathe harder and cause rapid breathing — or hyperventilation — which can bring on panic attacks in some people.

**4 CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM**

Acute stress — stress that is momentary, such as being stuck in traffic — causes an increase in heart rate and stronger contractions of the heart muscle. Blood vessels that direct blood to the large muscles and to the heart dilate, increasing the amount of blood pumped to these parts of the body. Repeated episodes of acute stress can cause inflammation in the coronary arteries, thought to lead to heart attack.

**5 ENDOCRINE SYSTEM**

**Adrenal glands**  
When the body is stressed, the brain sends signals from the hypothalamus, causing the adrenal cortex to produce cortisol and the adrenal medulla to produce epinephrine — sometimes called the “stress hormones.”

**Liver**  
When cortisol and epinephrine are released, the liver produces more glucose, a blood sugar that would give you the energy for “fight or flight” in an emergency.

**6 GASTROINTESTINAL SYSTEM**

**Esophagus**  
Stress may prompt you to eat much more or much less than you usually do. If you eat more or different foods or increase your use of tobacco or alcohol, you may experience heartburn, or acid reflux.

**Stomach**  
Your stomach can react with “butterflies” or even nausea or pain. You may vomit if the stress is severe enough.

**Bowels**  
Stress can affect digestion and which nutrients your intestines absorb. It can also affect how quickly food moves through your body. You may find that you have either diarrhea or constipation.

**7 REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM**

In men, excess amounts of cortisol, produced under stress, can affect the normal functioning of the reproductive system. Chronic stress can impair testosterone and sperm production and cause impotence.

In women stress can cause absent or irregular menstrual cycles or more-painful periods. It can also reduce sexual desire.



## 8. What People Do?

**Step 1:** Identify if you are stressed

**Step 2:** Identify the stressor

**Step 3:** Identify the reason for the stressor

**Step 4:** Select an appropriate stress management

**Step 5:** Evaluate.

### 8.1: ABC Strategy

A = AWARENESS - what causes you stress? How do you react?

B = BALANCE - How much can you cope with before it becomes negative?

C = CONTROL-What can you do to help yourself combat the negative effects of stress?

### 8.2 Stress Management Techniques

Avoid unnecessary stress

Alter the situation

Adapt to the stressor

Accept the things you can't change

Make time for fun and relaxation

Adopt a healthy lifestyle

Positive thinking

Learn how to say "no"

Avoid people who stress you out

Take control of your environment

Express your feelings instead of bottling them up.

Be willing to compromise.

Be more assertive.

Manage your time better

Reframe problems

Look at the big picture

Adjust your standards

Focus on the positive

Share your feelings

Learn to forgive

Make time for fun and relaxation

Adopt a healthy lifestyle

Be Focused

Eat healthy and think healthy

Sleep well

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