

Understanding Stress in New Light

Akbar Husain* Eisha Rahman**

Abstract

Stress has become an important topic in academic and professional circles. Stress is our enemy as well as friend. Many scholars in the field of behavioural sciences have carried out extensive research to explore sources and effects of stress and have devised various coping strategies accordingly. In some cases, an individual's level of stress (i.e. eustress) can contribute as an effective motivator for the overall improvement of his behaviour. Stress affects our social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual development. In the present article, we discuss the concept of stress as acronym i.e. STRESS. It is possible to experience and observe the external differences in terms of perceiving stress as stimulus, transaction, and response because our basic natures are the same. Environmental and social factors as well as spiritual distress can cause people to perceive stress.

We do not need people to become stressful; the only need is to adopt positive strategies to cope with stress. Then make best use of it to solve a problem or reach a goal. We need to focus on how stress can be helpful to us and utilize stress purposefully and meaningfully.

When you attach stress with a purpose it makes handling of the difficult situation easy and motivates one to cope with it in best possible way.

About Authors:

*Prof. & **Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh – 202002 (U.P)

Introduction

A word 'stress' is used more often in social, family, and organizational sectors than any other. Indeed, many of us use words such as strain, distress, hassles, and tension as synonymous expressions of stress. These narrow expressions of stress lead to the understanding that all human sectors are struggling for managing stress. If we attach stress with negativity it becomes distress and if we attach it with positivity it becomes 'eustress'.

In a highly competitive and stress-ridden world, hurry, and worry are major killers. Today, young adults are being afflicted by the stress-related disorders. Stress is spreading among individuals, family, organizations, and environment and is affecting their health. Stress develops a number of physical and psychological disorders among people. To some, stressful experiences are a source of motivation. It is estimated that three

out of four visits to the doctor are stress related. Above all, stress impacts the way we think, feel and behave, leading to negative psychological states.

Presently, people's life styles have been totally changed because physical and socio-cultural environment of the society has been drastically changed at work place with the advent of information technology. It is believed that automated technology has reduced their workload but, in fact, it has increased their mental workload as well as it has reduced person to person interaction resulting in higher stress. Machines are replacing humans in office and even at home for their basic needs, for example, shopping on internet, using ATM for banking, driving a car with cruise control and using vending machines for foods, tea and beverages. Thus technology is becoming one of the potential sources of stress in the form of mental load, lack of knowledge of situation awareness,

degradation of manual skill, insecurity about job, apprehension of not performing up to mark, strong competition at work place, etc.

Stress refers to any environmental, organizational, and individual or internal demands, which require the individual to readjust the usual behaviour pattern. Degree of stress results from events or situations that have potential to cause change. Stimuli or situations that can result in the experience of stress are called stressors.

Positive side of Stress

McGonigal (2013) describes in her book, *The Upside of Stress*, is the shift in mindset that allows you to have a healthier, even beneficial relationship with stress. She discovered that perceiving stress through a negative lens can actually be harmful to health. But when you view stress as a helpful tool and motivator, and learn how to harness it to your advantage, your health is less likely to be negatively affected. In fact, stress may actually be good for you, if you learn to embrace it and use it properly.

Stress can serve as a great motivator for reaching goals or accomplishing simple tasks. Whether it is a new job promotion, meeting a deadline, or completing a task, a little stress can push you to take action. If you perceive any stress in positive terms i.e. 'eustress' which is essential for personal growth you can reframe stressors to add meaning to your life and give your stress a positive purpose. When stress is perceived positively its purpose is motivating behaviour, building resilience, or boosting cognitive performance. Pairing stress with a purpose will allow you to broaden your perspective as to why it exists and the kind benefits it provides.

A 2013 study from the University of California, Berkeley, found that acute stress can generate new nerve cells in the brain, improving cognitive and mental performance. A certain

amount of stress can promote optimal levels of focus; improved memory and enhanced learning of new tasks. How one view stress determines how it affects us.

This article focuses on a new approach to understand the concepts of STRESS through different theoretical perspectives and sources of stress.

Stress as a stimulus

The notion of stress as a stimulus refers to any environmental stimulation, internal or external as an independent variable taxing the well-being of an individual. Stress as a stimulus also put forward the idea that there are so many life circumstances which act as stimuli and lead us to experience stress, such as loss of loved one, death of spouse, divorce, an accident, migrating to a new city, natural calamities, entering into a new institution (e.g. old age home, hostel) etc. The stress experienced by an individual out of that stimulation depends on its threshold.

The most common definition of stress adopted by psychologists has been that it is a stimulus. Stress stimuli are most commonly thought of as an event impinging on the person. Stimulus definitions include conditions arising within the person, for example, drive stimuli such as hunger, or sex, which are based on tissue conditions and stimuli arising from neurological characteristics, as in White's (1959) "effectance drive."

Miller (1953) defines stress as "any vigorous, extreme, or unusual stimulation which being a threat, cause some significant change in behavior ...". Basowitz, Perssky, Korchin, and Grinker (1955) defines it as "stimuli more likely to produce disturbances." Lazarus and Cohen (1977) speak of three types of stressors: major changes, often cataclysmic, and affecting large number of persons, major changes affecting one or a few persons; and daily hassles.

Stress as transaction

Transaction is basically a process of continuous reciprocal way of interaction

between person and the environment, both affecting and being affected by each other. The transactional paradigm of stress states that explanation of stress as a stimulus and as a response is incomplete because the mediating factor that is cognition actively works in between stress perceived as a stimulus and the response given. This is the reason behind the same stressor eliciting different pattern of strain among different people.

Thus event that we experience as provoking stress also depends upon the cognition that is how we evaluate the event. Sarafino (2006) in his book *Health Psychology* mentioned that “transaction in stress generally involves an assessment process...” (p.63). Lazarus (1999) termed this transaction as cognitive appraisal. So we can say that appraisal is the cognitive evaluation of stressful event where we evaluate two things broadly: (a) whether the demands of an event is threatening the wellbeing (i.e. physical and psychological), and (b) whether we have coping resources to fulfill the demands of the event.

Stress as a response

Among the theories pertinent to explain stress as a response, the theory of Hans Selye in his book *The Stress of Life* published in 1956 is most prominent in the field. In that he gave physiological perspective of stress. Selye (1956) defines stress as a non-specific response of the body to noxious stimuli. In the same response paradigm of stress he gave a chain of reflex actions known as GAS- Generalized Adaptive Syndrome. The three responses to stress are purely physiological in nature, namely, alarm stage, resistant stage and stage of exhaustion.

Thus the notion of stress as a response largely explain the physiological reaction to stress where there is marked absence of cognition over stress. Stress as a response also emphasis on three things: (a) change is a universal phenomenon and therefore

experienced by all, (b) changes are stressful because they continuously pinch the coping mechanism of an individual, and (c) the response given to those changed life circumstances depend on how successfully an individual mobilize his coping mechanism to get supremacy over stress.

Kushnir (1986) defines stress as an adaptive response that is a consequence of any external action, situation or event that places special physical and or psychological demands upon a person. Williams and Huber (1986) define stress as “a psychological and physical reaction to prolonged internal and/or environmental conditions in which an individual’s adaptive capabilities are overextended.” They argued that stress is an adaptive response to a conscious or unconscious threat.

Responses to stress can either be psychological or physiological in nature. A stimulus is a stressor which produces a stressful behavioural or physiological response, and this response is stressful if it is produced by a demand, harm, threat, or load. Feeling of nervousness, hot flashes, chills, worry are some common psychological responses. Psychological responses to stress include hypertension, rapid palpitation, muscle twitchiness etc. Sarafino (2006) mentioned that “the psychological and physiological responses to stressor are called strain” (p.62).

The sources of stress may range from environmental, to social, to spiritual and these are as follows:-

Environment as a source of stress

We all want to have a stress free life but, what if the environments where we dwell become a continuous source of perceived stress? Environment as a source of stress is not only limited to different kinds of environment pollution such as pollution in water, air and noise but have reached far beyond that. The category of perceived environmental stressor includes:

- Overcrowding
- Inadequate health services in the local area
- Crime peculiar to specific area, and
- Racial/caste discrimination
- Travel and Traffic jams
- Natural disaster
- Residential environment

Above are all the physical stressors which impinge psychological impact. The point behind raising this issue is that these environmental stressors are working more prominently in urban and semi-urban areas affecting the well-being of the whole community. Among the entire factors, major contributory factor to environmental stress is overcrowding or we can say population density at a particular territory. Heimstra and McFarling (1974) define population density as “the number of people or other types of animals occupying a given unit of space. Space in this case may refer to a room, a building, a city, or any other definable unit” (p.154). The term density involves so many types that could add up to become stressors such as social density, spatial density, inside density and outside density. Thus when the density of people cross the optimal number of people who could live comfortably in a limited area it becomes overcrowding. According to Heimstra and McFarling (1974) “when density increases and people are forced to live closer and closer to one another, at some point a person will feel overcrowded and will perceive the situation as involving some degree of threat and, consequently, will experience stress” (p.155).

Psychological studies of individual differences suggest that some people perceive environmental stressor as stressor while some do not. The difference lies in channelizing the emotion felt as a result of environmental stressors. For example, problem of traffic jam is

very common in metros but we find that some people just listen music while others continuously honk and thereby disturb their own well-being as well as of others. So the difference lies in the emotional coping mechanism of an individual. To eradicate environmental stressors, community level program is needed to be run but how far these programs will be efficacious in our country is another topic of investigation. Maloney and Ward (1973) while discussing their research in this area mention that “most people say they are willing to do a great deal to help curb pollution problems and are fairly emotional about it, but, in fact, they actually do fairly little and know even less” (p.585). Thus both community-environmental awareness as well as active participation to correct the macrocosm is needed.

Social factors as the cause of stress

Social factors represent human life as an existence. Today, social factors are creating stress in our life in terms of inharmonious relationship with family members and others, that in turn is affecting our existence. Social factors include: the locale of residence, migration from rural to urban areas, divorce, tension, discrimination, group conflicts, unemployment, inflation, scarcity, poverty, aggression, violence and terrorism. These factors affect individuals, families, and communities that in turn become the challenge of existence.

Spiritual distress

“A man’s concern, even his despair, over the worthwhileness of life is a spiritual distress but by no means a mental disease” (Frankl, p.163). Spiritual distress is a disturbance in a person's belief system. Spiritual Distress is defined as “a disruption in the life principle that pervades a person's entire being and that integrates and transcends one's biological and psychological nature.”

Spiritual distress can be a devastating experience. If it occurs during the course of an

illness, a time when there is increased likelihood that it can affect the patient's course, outcome, and quality of life then the outcome is majorly negative and destructive. Spiritual distress can prevent growth, healing, and recognition one's own potential for change and coping at a time when such entities are immensely helpful. Mostly spiritual distress or spiritual pain is defined as a loss of a sense of wholeness. There is a feeling that things are not right and that life has lost meaning, hope, and purpose. There may also be a feeling of loss of identity, since the patient may no longer have his/her usual role or independence. In addition, a sense of disconnectedness may occur where relationships with family, friends, and the world may seem to lose its usual character. Thus the patient may experience a sense of floating where nothing makes sense for him and his life stops seeming as worthwhile.

Conclusion

Stress is a relativistic phenomenon. The phenomenon of stress discussed above flow from the previous studies. This is an important article from the perspective of the conceptualization of stress. The problem of stress has become a prime concern of psychologists, psychiatrists, and medical researchers. We suggest that 'stress and well-being' should be a top priority research area in future because stress is alarmingly increasing in modern technology period, causing a heavy human life loss.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar says: "As it is almost impossible to reduce the workload and increase the time, the only option we are left is to increase the energy level within us. When we have enough energy and enthusiasm, we are able to handle any challenge," with practise of yoga and meditation one can develop the inner source of energy.

No matter how much time we spend to manage or avoid it altogether the burden of stress is ever dominant. But if we focus on the ways to use stress to our advantage we can free ourselves from the unnecessary worry of getting rid of it.

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