



STRESS & SURGEON

Dr Piyush Ranjan

Additional Professor, Department Of Surgical Disciplines, All India Institute Of Medical Sciences, New Delhi.

Kaustav Gour**Asmita Patil**

Additional Professor, Department Of Physiology, All India Institute Of Medical Sciences, New Delhi.

Rohit Verma

Additional Professor, Department Of Psychiatry, All India Institute Of Medical Sciences, New Delhi.

KEYWORDS :

Stress is a change in environmental conditions that demands behavioural alteration which includes a series of neural and chemical reactions meant for physical survival. A change in environmental conditions that demands behavioural alteration -any change; good or bad, can induce a stress response. Stress is not what happens to you, but how you react to what happens.

Internal stressors may be a state of chronic worry, dread of future, pessimism towards life, negative and self-deprecating self-talk, rigid or orthodox thinking, attitude problem, perfectionism etc. External stressors may be situations like change of job/duties or office, financial crisis, time constraints, loss of a loved one, family problems etc. Similar situations may elicit different responses in a given set of individuals which is dependent on personal or individual factors that affect stress appraisal. These factors are the intellectuality of the given person, the degree of motivation to perform a stressful task, the type of personality traits and his beliefs.

The Surgeons' story

The prevalence of stress in everyday life is universal. It stems from various sources in life like financial difficulties, personal and workplace relationships and in course of conduct of professional responsibilities. Similarly, the impact of stress is felt in all walks of life, meaning to say, it affects all dimensions of our living. The negative impact that stress has upon an individual's performance is variable, ranging from only occult insecurities in the heart and mind of a person to downright embittered relationships and gross incompetency in execution of one's duties. It is commonplace knowledge that doctors lead a life steaming with stress. But, there are two paradoxes associated with this phenomenon. Firstly, the general populace is largely indifferent to the plight of doctors, albeit at times sympathetic. Second, the very administrative system and community of which the doctors are a part of undermine and ignore the inherent flaws deeply entrenched in our practice, thereby predisposing all of us to the negative strokes of stress. Unfortunately, many of our difficulties arise at the hands of each other.

Chief among the brethren of doctors who are vulnerable to stress and its adversities are surgeons. The practice of surgery entails long hours spent in OPD and OT. The thrill of operating becomes the greatest delight of life of those who call themselves surgeons, but over the years, as they hone their skills and attain mastery of this craft, it also takes a toll on their body, mind and relationships. Although, the ability to operate under stressful conditions (eg. difficult anatomy, sick patient, time deadlines) is considered a hallmark of expertise (which most surgeons are inwardly proud of), it comes not without its attendant damages.

The genesis of stress in a surgeon's life is multifactorial, with causes differing and overlapping at all times of his/her career.

- 1) A young surgical resident, right from the initial days of residency, weathers extreme duty hours, sleep deprivation and lack of timely, nutritious meals. This is never questioned or complained of, because surgical residencies have traditionally always been hectic and demanding, right from the days of first residency training programs started by Sir William Halsted at Johns Hopkins.
- 2) The young resident feels anxious about learning the principles and craft of surgery amidst all the work in the ward that he does. The desire for "cutting" is deeply ingrained in the hearts of all budding surgeons, and chances of performing surgery are craved for, which may be often hard to come by.
- 3) As resident progresses through his career, he is confronted with the choices of various super-specialties and fellowships, which are only gained by hard and gritty competition and a sense of delayed gratification.
- 4) A young surgeon is in constant consternation about the direction his career might take. Conflicting decisions have to be made at some point as to pursue practice in a private hospital or a public institution and finally "start" a career. Each path has its own thorns to be wary of.
- 5) Once a surgeon begins his private practice, his greatest concern is that of the reception he will get from the society. With a larger and larger number of surgeons entering the healthcare business every year, this anxiety only grows, and is an issue not only in metropolis but also in smaller cities.
- 6) A surgeon then tries to deliver his best, investing long working hours, at a time when he/she has also undertaken another big venture in life: a family. If the spouse belongs to same profession, it can add further stress in management of family space and time.
- 7) With unjust and growing mistrust afflicting the minds of common public in India, a surgeon is perpetually wary of medicolegal lawsuits and violence throughout his/her career. Also, those surgeons who establish practice in underprivileged areas feel disappointed and curtailed because of the lack of amenities needed to perform surgeries.
- 8) A surgeon is a highly social person. He has to manage multiple and delicate relationships not only with his patients but also with his colleagues, including anesthetists, radiologists and pathologists.

These are just a few of the factors which account for the "stressful" lives surgeons lead. The impact which these can have has been a subject of exploration, understanding and intervention beginning only in last few decades. The greatest flaw in the plan is that we often discount these negative

incidences in life as "regular and unavoidable" and "just get on with it". The disregard for these happenings is so strong that we choose to ignore the betterment that might occur if we were to address these issues.

Stress may have a direct effect on ongoing illness, or it may interact with pre-existing vulnerabilities and predispose to new illness. Chronic stress may adversely affect health habits like diet and sleep, thereby reducing the body resistance. There may also be an additive influence of excessive caffeine ingestion, smoking, alcohol or drug abuse in an attempt to combat stress.

Tackling Of Stress

There are various techniques available to help a person to cope with chronic stress. This helps in restoring normalcy of body function and improvisation of the social productivity.

Many professional organizations exist to promote and provide training in conventional or alternative therapies. The effectiveness of any given therapy would depend on the care provider, the trainer and also the sincerity of the given individual.

It is important to realize that communication with people around is paramount. When one works in a system, the system has to ensure the well-being of all its members. This has to happen right from residency to the final phase of one's career, at all echelons.

The main principles for effective stress management are avoid, alter, adapt, accept:

1. Avoid unnecessary stress: Try to avoid domineering or discouraging people and negative situations.
2. Alter the situation: Can be done by a change of work place, taking a vacation etc.
3. Adapt to the stressor: Learning to cope with the situation by changing self-attitude.
4. Accept the things you can't change: Acceptance of negativity and moving towards a positive outlook.

Managing Stress: Strengthening Physical Health

A healthy mind dwells in a healthy body. Lifestyle modifications are essential in improvisation of overall health and thereby increasing the resistance of the body to fight diseases; which may be something as simple as common cold to a serious disease like cancer. Healthy diet plays an important role in the above. Balanced meals taken at regular times in the day are essential for well-being. Adequate sleep duration and the timings should be maintained. These may be aided by various relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation, and deep breathing. Regular exercise helps in physical fitness and also as a mood elevator by the release of endorphins, the happy hormones!

Managing Stress: Relaxation Therapy

Aims to either reduce the state of hyper arousal caused by chronic stress or by curbing the emotional-physiological reactivity. The various modalities that can be performed are:

- Progressive muscular relaxation
- Mental imagery
- Meditation
- Autogenic training

"You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step."

- Martin Luther King