



Stress Management - The Need of the Hour

KEYWORDS

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INTRODUCTION

Stress is an emotionally disruptive or upsetting condition of mind which occurs in response to adverse external influences. Stress raises the level of adrenaline (a hormone & a neurotransmitter) and corticosterone (a 21 carbon steroid hormone) in the body, which leads to increase in the heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure and puts more physical stress on bodily organs. When something pleasant or unpleasant happens around you, which puts you in a state of strain or pressure, it is called stress.

Everyone experiences stress from time to time, so it is perfectly normal. However, normal doesn't necessarily mean healthy. Nor is it inevitable! Believe it or not, you can learn how to largely eliminate stress. I don't mean eliminate the pressures in your life - those will probably persist. The way I think of it, pressure is what is happening to you, but stress is how you react to those pressures. So, you can keep the pressure and get rid of the stress.

A good example of this comes from the study of stress in executives. Several studies have shown that low and middle level executives show many stress symptoms, like ulcers, high blood pressure, tension, burnout and so on. Top executives, however, as a group show much fewer stress signs. There are exceptions in both directions, of course. Why do big wigs show fewer signs of stress? There may be many reasons, like more control over their lives, but it is hard to believe they don't have pressures. So why don't they get as stressed out? Probably the main reason is that they are either naturally stress resistant or have learned how to handle the pressure without letting it eat them up. It's like the old saying, "If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen".

Fortunately, stress management is largely a learnable skill. Most people can learn how to take the heat in their lives. Before we talk about how, let's consider what stress is in more detail. The way I think of it, stress is a "false alarm". What I mean is that it is the erroneous activation of the "danger alarm" system of the brain. I visualize it as a big red fire alarm inside the head. This is a system we are all born with and it is a good thing to have. However, the biological purpose of this system is to help prepare us for dealing with real, physical danger. When the danger alarm is turned on, it produces a physiological response called the "fight or flight" reaction, which helps us to fight the danger or flee it.

When you are in real, immediate physical danger, it is appropriate to feel afraid. Getting your body charged up with adrenaline may well help to keep you alive. However, most of the time when we feel stressed, there is no immediate danger, so it is a false alarm. The fire alarm is sounding, but there is no fire!

So how do you learn how to manage stress? There are basically two main ways:

1. Learn how to turn off the alarm system through various relaxation methods.

2. Learn how to not turn it on inadvertently in the first place.

Relaxation methods work on the idea that you can't be relaxed and uptight at the same time. Basically, anything you do that is the opposite of what the danger alarm system does will tend to shut it off.

Some examples include:

Deep breathing - taking deep, slow breaths rather than the shallow, fast breathing we feel when we are stressed. This really works physiologically to help shut off the danger alarm.

Muscular relaxation - tensing and relaxing various muscle groups can work wonders. Try your neck and shoulders, your shoulder blades, your forehead and eyes, tensing these groups for a few seconds, then relaxing them. You can also combine this with deep breathing by inhaling while you tense, then exhaling when you relax the muscles. There are more sophisticated versions of these muscular methods, like the shower of relaxation and progressive relaxation.

Visualization - imagine a very peaceful scene, like laying on the beach, out in a fishing boat on a lake, in a mountain cabin or whatever. It can be a real place or you can make it up. Try to invoke all your senses as you imagine being in this very peaceful, relaxing place. What do you see? What sounds are there? What sensations of touch, temperature or smell? For example, you might imagine the sun on your skin, the cool breeze on your forehead, the salt tang of the ocean, the grit of the sand.

Try all these methods and see which works better for you. Some people do better with muscular methods, others with visualization. All these can be learned quite readily and often work very well.

In the long run, however, it is better to learn how to avoid getting stressed out in the first place. So how do you do that? Well, the clue is in the visualization method. Thinking peaceful thoughts makes you feel relaxed. In imagining a peaceful place, you have also distracted yourself from whatever thoughts you were having before. These points out the basic premise of cognitive/behavioral psychology, which our feelings and behaviors are largely caused by our own thoughts. This is oversimplified, because there are many feedback loops that make the connection between thoughts, feelings and behaviors sort of like a chicken and egg problem. But the simple version of the cognitive theory is that peaceful thoughts cause relaxation and stressful thoughts cause stress.

The best way to manage stress is to learn to change anxiety to concern. Concern means you are motivated to take care of real problems in your life, but your danger alarm system is not erroneously activated. Changing your feelings is largely a matter of learning to identify and change the upsetting thoughts that are the immediate and proximate cause of upset emotions.

MANAGING JOB STRESS – AN OVERVIEW

Job stress comes in many different forms and affects your body in various ways. Minor sources of stress may include equipment that won't work or phones that won't quit ringing. Major stress comes from having too much work, not having enough work, doing work that is unfulfilling, fearing a job layoff, or not getting along with your boss.

Usually it is the major sources of stress that lead to burnout, causing people to become unhappy and less productive in their work. Job stress can affect your health and home life as well. Low levels of stress may not be noticeable; slightly higher levels can be positive and challenge you to act in creative and resourceful ways; and high levels can be harmful, contributing to chronic disease.

The major sources of job stress fall into seven categories:

Control: This factor is the most closely related to job stress. Studies show that workers who believe that they have a great deal of responsibility but little control or decision-making power in their jobs are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease and other stress-related illnesses.

Increased responsibilities: Taking on additional responsibilities in your job can be stressful. This can be worse if you have too much work to do and are unable to say no to new tasks or projects.

Competence: Are you concerned about your ability to perform well? Are you challenged enough, but not too much? Do you feel secure in your job? Job insecurity is a major source of stress for many people.

Clarity: Feeling uncertain about what your duties are, how they may be changing, or what your department's or organization's goals are can lead to stress.

Communication: Workplace tension often results from poor communication, which in turn increases job stress. An inability to express your concerns, frustrations, or other emotions can also lead to increased stress.

Support: Feeling unsupported by your coworkers may make it harder to resolve other problems at work that are causing you stress.

Significance: If you don't find your job meaningful or take pride in it, you may find it stressful.

MANAGING JOB STRESS

Here are some options for lowering stress on the job:

Meet with your supervisor at least once a year (every 3 or 6 months is better) to talk about your performance and your job. If a performance review is already part of your job, treat it as a chance to clear up issues that may be causing stress for you.

Discuss the following:

- What is expected of me in this position?
- Where is this company going, and how do I fit into that plan?
- How am I doing? What are my strengths? Areas for improvement?
- What can I expect from you if a problem with my work or my job should occur?
- If I continue my current high-quality performance, how and when can I expect to be rewarded?

Manage your time well. It's important to leave your job at the office, even if your office is a room in your home. If you give up free time to get more work done, you may pay for it with stress-related symptoms. If your employer offers a flexible work schedule, take advantage of it to fit your own work style. For instance, come in earlier to have a longer midday

break or to make time for a yoga class or workout.

Unplug. Technologies such as cellular phones and the Internet have made it possible to be available to everyone, including clients and coworkers, at all times. Do not allow technology to eliminate the boundaries between your time and your employer's time. Leave your work cell phone behind when having it with you is not absolutely necessary, or decide not to answer it during times you have set aside for yourself or your family. Avoid checking work e-mail at home.

Know when to quit. If you are truly miserable because of a stressful job and the suggestions above have not worked, it may be time to think about changing jobs. Make sure you know whether it is you or the job that's the problem. Before quitting, spend time researching other job options. Being unemployed will probably also lead to stress. Getting another job before quitting is ideal, but sometimes that isn't possible. Decide what is less stressful for you: unemployment or being miserable in your current job.

STRESS MANAGEMENT - CAUSES OF STRESS

Long-term (chronic) stress is the type of stress that causes the most serious problems. It is caused by a host of irritating hassles over a period of time, or an ongoing, difficult situation. Conditions that may lead to chronic stress include:

- Health problems, if you have a chronic illness such as heart disease, diabetes or arthritis.
- Emotional problems, such as unexpressed or uncontrolled anger, depression, grief, guilt, or low self-esteem.
- Relationship problems, if you do not have someone to share your feelings with, are having difficulty in a relationship, or feel that you have few friends.
- Your surroundings, if you live in a dangerous or uncomfortable area where overcrowding, crime, pollution, or noise is a problem.
- Your job, if you are unhappy with your work, or your work is dangerous or too demanding. For more information, see the topic Managing Job Stress.
- Your social situation, such as poverty, loneliness, or discrimination based on race, gender, age, or sexual orientation.
- Life cycle transitions and developmental stages, such as becoming a teenager, leaving home, or getting married.
- Conflicts with your belief system-your perceptions and beliefs about the world, life, and yourself. For instance, if you place a high value on family life but don't have the family life you want, you may feel stress.
- A child or teen, or other family member who is under stress because of physical or emotional problems.

STRESS MANAGEMENT - EVALUATING STRESS

Feeling the effects of stress is a normal part of life, especially when you are facing major challenges. But each person responds to stress differently. What causes a lot of stress for one person may not cause stress for someone else. That's because a large part of stress is a matter of perception-how you view a situation determines how much stress it causes you. Therefore, only you can best evaluate the amount of stress in your life and learn better ways to cope with it.

Ask yourself the following questions to learn what is causing you stress and how you respond:

• What job, family, or personal stress do I have?

Chronic stress can be caused by an ongoing stressful situation such as:

- Family or relationship problems.
- Caring for a family member who is elderly, has chronic health problems, or is disabled. Care giving is a major source of stress. For more information, see the topic Caregiver Tips.
- Job stress.
- A family member who is under stress.

Do I have recent major changes in my life?

Stress is an unavoidable part of life and can be good or bad. We routinely experience both types of stress when we go through life changes such as getting married, having a baby, or having a child move away from home.

How am I coping with stress?

Some behaviors and lifestyle choices can interfere with the ways your body seeks relief from stress. For example, as you sleep, your body recovers from the stresses of the day. If you are not getting enough sleep or your sleep is frequently interrupted, you are losing a chance to recover from stress.

Your actions and behavior can be a sign of stress. Some people who face a lot of stress respond by smoking, drinking alcohol, or eating poorly. The health risks posed by these behaviors are made even worse by stress. Your body experiences stress-related wear and tear from two sources: the stress itself and the unhealthy habits you've developed to respond to stress.

Do my beliefs cause me stress?

Some people feel stressed because their beliefs conflict with the way they are living their life. Examine your beliefs to see if conflict between what you believe and what your life is like causes you stress.

If you are not sure that you are stressed or are not sure what is making you feel the way you do, you need to discover what is causing stress. One way to do this is to keep a stress journal, a written record that can help you identify stressors so you can find better ways to cope with them.

CONCLUSION

The postponement and avoidance of Stress is by means of mental make-up by practicing yoga and meditation. The increased concentration power in addition to the nullifying the mental stress will lead to an enriched path is the base for the excellence in human life in all respects.