

ARTICLE

Coping with stress

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Abstract

The strive to keep in pace with the modern life is ushering in lots of stress in the man of today and therefore coping with the stress have become an ardent need. Stress has both mental and physiological components. Stress can cause disorders in both mind and body. The causes of stress are varied. Stress can be subdivided into constructive stress and destructive stress. Two categories of stressful experiences have been identified: acute and chronic. Stress in a way, lies in the eyes of the beholder. An individual's ability to handle stress depends on myriad factors. People usually use two kinds of coping strategies - positive or negative. Relaxation techniques, imagery, mini self-massage, take a break and say cheese are some techniques for coping with acute stress. Studies have found laughter work against stress. Avoid unnecessary stress, alter the situation, accept the things which cannot be changed, adapt to the stressor, build physical reserves, enhance emotional reserves, take a break are some techniques for coping with chronic stress. Stress in various forms is an indispensable part of life and coping with the stress is an art. The goal of stress management is to bring one's mind and body back into balance.

Sarma C. Coping with stress. *Dysphrenia*. 2012;3(1):7-10.**Keywords:** Acute stress. Chronic stress. Coping techniques.**Correspondence:** chaya.majoni@gmail.com

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Modernisation has bestowed man with immense boons and achievements are reaching great heights of success. With the new advances, life is becoming much easier and comfortable. But the strive to keep in pace with the modern life is ushering in lots of stress in the man of today and therefore coping with the stress have become an ardent need.

Before delving deep into the topic, let us understand what stress is. Well, when we talk about stress, we usually indicate the stimulus. Say, we tell our lifestyle is stress, our workload as stress, pollution is stress etc. But actually, these are the mere stimulus (stressors) which causes stress.

Stress is what we perceive within us: it is an internal state caused by various factors like physical demands on the body, environmental factors or social factors which are evaluated as potentially harmful, uncontrollable or exceeding one's resources for coping. Medically stress is defined as a perturbation of the body's homeostasis. The common indices of stress include changes in:

1. Biochemical parameters such as epinephrine and adrenal steroids.
2. Physiological parameters such as heart rate, blood pressure.
3. Behavioural parameters such as anxiety, fear and tension.

Stress has both mental and physiological components. Though some forms of stress are

predominantly psychological, they trigger a variety of physiological changes. Stress can cause disorders in both mind and body. It can cause headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, eating disorder, allergies, insomnia, backaches, lower the body's resistances to other illnesses like colds and flu, increases susceptibility to diseases such as hypertension, asthma, diabetes, heart ailments and even cancer, anxiety, depression, suicide, psychosis and varied other mental disorders.

The causes of stress are varied. They can be simply categorised into common and uncommon stressors. Common stressors include: disease, academic stress, marital discord, separation or divorce, career stress, bereavement and unemployment etc. The uncommon stressors include overcrowding, commuting, sleep deprivation, shifts (home, school and career), malnutrition, drug abuse, phobias, excessive exercise, noise pollution, relationship demands, chronic health problems, pressure at workplaces, traffic snarls, meeting deadlines etc.

Stress can be subdivided into constructive stress and destructive stress. Constructive stress is positive and a good motivating force. Relocation, promotion or layoff, adventurous sports or having a baby etc. are some such stress. It increases productivity and efficiency besides providing stimulation. Destructive stress is counterproductive and detrimental to both psyche and body.

Two categories of stressful experiences have been identified: acute and chronic. Acute stress is of sudden and

intense onset. Say, stuck in traffic jam and getting late for an urgent work. It is of temporary type and goes off once the stressor is removed. Chronic stress is an ongoing process. Say, a chronic illness, a longstanding unsolved problem. It has the most significant and detrimental effects including changing brain chemistry and lowering resistance to illness.

Perceptions of and reactions to the situations that occur in day to day lives lead to stress. This perception of stress varies from individual to individual: a particular situation may be extremely stressing for one, a minimal stress for another and not at all stressful for yet another individual. Stress can be caused by something as simple as breaking a fingernail or by something as serious as losing a finger. Stress in a way, lies in the eyes of the beholder.

An individual's ability to handle stress depends on myriad factors; these includes one's sense of control, inculcating optimistic attitude, having a strong support system, healthy body, ability to adapt to change, ability to handle unpleasant emotions, belief in a higher power or purpose, confidence in oneself and having a good sense of humour.

People usually use two kinds of coping strategies - positive or negative. Positive coping includes time management, proper nutrition, healthy relationships and social support, regular exercise, recreational activities, sufficient sleep, vacations, meditation, relaxation techniques, a sense of humour, auto-suggestion, self-hypnosis, creative visualisation, massage and yoga etc. Negative coping includes smoking, drinking, drugs, food, tranquiliser and stimulants like tea and coffee, even adopting antisocial ways of life.

Before going to manage the stress, it is important to recognise whether one is under stress. Many times, one is under the influence of a stressful condition and the body reacts to it internally as well as externally. But one fails to realise that one is reacting under stress. This usually happens in case of chronic stress when one gets habituated to them. Often one fails to recognise the bodily symptoms such as palpitation, dizzy spells, tight muscles or various bodyaches that result as a consequence of stress.

Coping with acute stress

Acute stress comes suddenly with great intensity and managing it becomes an emergency. Often in the situations of acute stress, one do not get time to compose themselves and react off, inviting a chain of further adverse situations and stress. Say, a person gets scolding from his boss; he could not compose himself at that moment, replies back and ultimately consequent stressful situations followed.

Following are some techniques for coping with acute stress:

1. Relaxation techniques: Engage in exercise or deep breathing 15-20 times, write down your thoughts and feeling, share them with a close one, take a deep breath and count to ten. The stress will ease off.

2. Imagery: This is a technique of mental stress management. Concentrate on visualising calm - close your eyes and take slow breaths. Then spend a few seconds picturing a relaxing scene such as walking in a meadow, kneeling by a brook or lying on the beach. Focus on the details - the sights, the sounds, the smells of the imagined picture and try to enjoy its somber tranquility: the mind will calm down spontaneously. You can also imagine any past event which gave you happiness: like occasions at home, moments with kids or loved ones, hilarious moments with friends etc.

3. Mini self-massage: Massage the palm of one hand by making a circular motion with the thumb of the other. Or use a massage gadget.

4. Take a break: If situation permissible, walk out from the stressful environment, divert your mind over a cup of coffee or talking to someone and come back with a fresh mind.

5. Say cheese: Simply smiling often gives some amount of relaxation and makes us feel happy. Smiling transmits nerve impulses from the facial muscles to the limbic system, a key emotional center in the brain, tilting the neurochemical balance toward calm.

Studies have found laughter work against stress. Its effects are:

1. Laughter lowers blood pressure.
2. It provides good cardiac conditioning.
3. Reduces stress hormones especially epinephrine, cortisol, dopamine and growth hormone which are associated with stress response.
4. Laughter cleanses the lungs and body tissues. It is beneficial for patients suffering from emphysema and other respiratory ailments.
5. It increases muscle flexion, relaxation and blood circulation in body.
6. Boosts immune function by raising levels of infection fighting T cells, disease fighting proteins called gamma interferon and disease destroying antibodies called B cells.
7. Laughter triggers the release of endorphins—body's natural painkillers.
8. Produces a general sense of well-being.

Coping with chronic stress

Every individual usually encounters chronic stress in some form or the other at the different turns of their lives. These brings along abundant detrimental effects. Thus it is

very important one knows the techniques to deal with them. Following are some techniques for coping with chronic stress:

1. Avoid unnecessary stress

Many a times we get entangled in unnecessary stress. Though all stress cannot be avoided, there are a number of stressors in our life that can be eliminated.

Learn how to refuse – In your personal or professional life, analyse your limits and stick to them. Suppose you are getting stressed by added responsibilities imposed on you by a colleague. In such situations learn to be assertive and express in polite tone that you will not allow yourself be unduly exploited without genuine reasons.

Avoid people who stress you out – If someone consistently causes stress in your life, limit the amount of time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely.

Take control of your environment – If the stressful situation is around you, say some TV shows which depresses you, avoid them.

Avoid hot-button topics – If you get upset over any topic like politics, religion etc, remove them from your conversation list. And while interacting with anyone, stop bringing it up or excuse yourself when it's the topic of discussion.

Make a 'to do' list, diary or planner – Often we get stressed by our day to day schedules, as important work get pending, run short of time and finance etc. Usually it is found that this happens from improper management. So analyse your schedule, responsibilities and daily tasks. Life should be organised and prioritised by arranging the varied aspects of life in a systematic way. It is done by allocating due space, time, money and effort to different things, tasks or aspects of life. The listings should be scheduled on a day-to-day and priority basis.

2. Alter the situation

If the stressful situation is one which cannot be avoided, one should endeavour to alter it. For this, we should try to figure out what we can do to change things so the problem is avoided in the future. This involves changing the way we communicate and operate in daily life.

Express yourself through effective communication. Sometimes it happens that we are bothered by something but being unable to express ourselves brings in stress. So it is very important that we communicate our concerns in an open and respectful way. Else the resentment will build and the situation will likely remain the same.

Be willing to compromise. If situation demands that we have to change ourselves as the problem were somehow caused by us, we should be willing to compromise such that the stress is erased off.

Be more assertive. We should deal with problems head on, doing our best to anticipate and prevent them, rather than taking a backseat in our own lives.

Manage time better. Poor time management can cause a lot of stress. Good time management leads to maximising time utilisation, better efficiency and results and sufficient time for different tasks. Goals are achieved quickly and more goals can be achieved. The important tasks are not missed and get enough focus. For effective time management, we should create a balanced schedule for ourselves, prioritise tasks, break projects into small steps.

3. Accept the things which cannot be changed

Some sources of stress are unavoidable such as the death of a loved one, suffering from a chronic illness, some irreparable loss etc. In such cases, the best way to cope with the stress is to accept things as they are. Though difficult initially but time is the best healer. Acceptance will come in due course of time, if effort is on.

Avoid attempt to control the uncontrollable. There are many things in life which are not in our hands. Rather than stressing ourselves over them; we should focus on the things we can control, such as the way we choose to react to those problems.

Look from an optimistic aspect. Rather than grumbling and lamenting over a problem, it should be taken as a challenge put forth to test our capability to deal with it as an opportunity to enhance our self-confidence and personal growth. Then no problem will seem stressful.

Share your feelings. Talk to a trusted friend or a therapist. The stress will be eased to an extent when the associated feeling is ventilated off.

Learn to forgive. Let go of anger and resentments. Free yourself from negative energy by forgiving and moving on. Much of stress will be gone.

4. Adapt to the stressor

If the stressor cannot be changed at all, we should adapt to the stressful situations and regain our sense of control by changing our expectations and attitude.

Reframe problems. Try to view stressful situations from a more positive perspective. Rather than fuming about a traffic jam, look at it as an opportunity to pause and regroup, enjoy some good music or enjoy some alone time.

Look at the big picture. Take perspective of the stressful situation. Assess how important the stressful

situation is in the long run. If it is not that required, focus the time and energy elsewhere.

Focus on the positive. When stress is pulling us down, we should take moments to reflect on all the things we appreciate in life, including our own positive qualities and gifts. This simple strategy can help us keep things in perspective.

5. Build physical reserves

For effectively tackling stressful situations, a healthy physique is a necessity. Exercise for cardiovascular fitness three to four times a week. Moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise such as walking, swimming, cycling or jogging is very helpful. Slow, deep breathing brings heart rate and respiration back to normal. Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback helps to gain voluntary control over muscle tension, heart rate and blood pressure. Eating well-balanced nutritious meals, maintaining ideal weight and getting enough sleep are highly beneficial.

6. Enhance emotional reserves

It is very necessary to develop mutually supportive friendships/relationships with whom we can share our feelings as even talking out eases mental stress, calms the mind, bring in advices and suggestions and directs our mind to new thinking.

7. Take a break

When at times our repeated attempts to overcome a stressful situation prove futile and we feel we are stuck up then going out on vacation, a brief outing with a close one rejuvenates the mind, breaks the stress cycle and encourages us to start our effort anew.

Stress in various forms is an indispensable part of life and coping with the stress is an art. Adopting a positive and optimistic attitude towards life can take the edge off everyday stressors. Not being too serious or in a constant alert mode helps maintain the equanimity of mind and promote clear thinking. Going for a walk, spending time in nature, sweating out tension with a good workout, doing something for someone else, writing out the thoughts, taking a long bath, playing with a pet, gardening, getting a massage, reading a good book, yoga, listening to music, watching a comedy etc. are some healthy stress reducers.

With the stress-related cases growing phenomenally, stress has been termed a 20th century disease. Stress management is thus the need of the hour. The goal of stress management is to bring one's mind and body back into balance. It can be thus done by adopting a positive attitude, learning healthier ways to cope and changing the ways one deal with stress. Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of one's thoughts, emotions,

schedule, environment and the way one deal with problems. The ultimate goal is a balanced life with time for work, relationships, relaxation and recreation—and the resilience to hold up under pressure and meeting challenges.