

Stress: Its Causes and Management

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Introduction

The human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can be positive; keeping us alert, motivated and ready to avoid danger. Stress becomes negative when a person faces continuous challenges without relief or relaxation between stressors. As a result, the person becomes overworked, and stress-related tension builds. The body's Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) has a built-in stress response that causes physiological changes to allow the body to combat stressful situations. This stress response, also known as the "fight or flight response", is activated in case of an emergency, however, this response can become chronically activated during prolonged periods of stress. Prolonged activation of the stress response causes wear and tear on the body – both physical and emotional.

What is Stress?

Stress is a normal reaction the body has when changes occur. It is a natural feeling of not being able to cope with specific demands and events. When this happens, the body's defences kick into high gear in a rapid automatic process known as the "stress response." It can respond to these changes physically, mentally or emotionally. The stress response is the body's way of protecting one. When working properly, it helps one to stay focused, energetic and alert. In emergencies, stress can save one's life, it gives one extra strength to defend themselves, for example, or it spurs one to slam on the brakes so as to avoid a car accident.

Stress can also help someone rise to meet challenges. It is what drives a person to study for an exam when he or she would rather prefer to watch the TV. Beyond a certain point however stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to one's health, mood, productivity, relationships and quality of life. At this point, it is time to take action to bring one's nervous system back into balance.

Types of Stress

Stress can become a chronic condition if a person does not take steps to manage it. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) recognizes two types of stress: acute and chronic. These require different levels of management.

Acute Stress

This type of stress is short-term and usually the more common form of stress. Acute stress often develops when people consider the pressures of events that have recently occurred or face upcoming challenges in the near future. Acute stress does not cause the same amount of damage as long-term or chronic stress. Short-term effects include tension headaches and an upset stomach, as well as a moderate amount of distress.

Acute stressors are often new and tend to have a clear and immediate solution. Even with the more difficult challenges that people face, there are possible ways to get out of the situations. Repeated instances of acute stress over an extended period can however become chronic and harmful.

Chronic Stress

This type of stress develops over a long period and is more harmful. Ongoing poverty, a dysfunctional family or an unhappy marriage are examples of situations that can cause chronic stress. It occurs when a person can see no way to avoid their stressors and stops seeking solutions. A traumatic experience early in life may also contribute to chronic stress.

A constant state of stress can also increase a person's risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. Depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), can develop when stress becomes chronic.

Chronic stress can continue unnoticed, as people can become used to feeling agitated and hopeless. It can become part of an individual's personality by making them constantly prone to the effects of stress regardless of the scenarios that they encounter. People with chronic stress are at risk of having a final breakdown that can lead to suicide, violent actions, a heart attack or stroke.

The Effects of Chronic Stress

Chronic stress makes it difficult for the body to return to a normal level of stress hormone activity, which can contribute to problems in the systems such as cardiovascular, respiratory, sleep, immune and reproductive. People can protect themselves and improve how they think and feel by learning how to recognize the signs and symptoms of chronic stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

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. Anything that puts high demands on one can however be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college or receiving a promotion.

The NIMH also identify three examples of types of stressors:

- Routine stress, such as childcare, homework or financial responsibilities
- Sudden disruptive changes, such as a family bereavement or finding out about a job loss
- Traumatic stress, which can occur due to extreme trauma as a result of a severe accident, an assault, an environmental disaster or war.

As might be expected, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be internally or self-generated for example when someone worries 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 one's perception of it. Something that is stressful to one may not daunt someone else; they may even enjoy it. At the same time as 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.

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, etc.

Symptoms or Warning Signs of Stress

Chronic stress can wear down the body's natural defences, leading to a variety of physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural symptoms. The physical effects of stress include the following: sweating, general aches and pains, grinding teeth, headaches, indigestion, increase in or loss of appetite, muscle tension in neck, face or shoulders, problems sleeping, weight gain or loss, upset stomach, diarrhoea, etc.

Cognitive symptoms include memory problems, inability to concentrate, poor judgement, seeing only the negative, anxious thoughts and constant worrying; while emotional symptoms are made manifest in depression, anxiety, agitation, irritability or anger, loneliness and isolation as well as other emotional health problems. Behavioural symptoms of stress often include eating more or less, sleeping too much or too little, withdrawing from others, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax as well as developing some nervous habits such as nail biting and pacing. There are however ways of coping with the problem or situation that is stressing us out and regaining our balance.

Ways of Coping with Stress

There are many activities one can employ to help relieve stress and start to feel better. Regular exercise can lift your mood and serve as a distraction from worries; allowing one to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed stress. Rhythmic exercises such as walking, running, swimming and dancing are particularly effective.

Embolden-Connect to others: The simple act of talking face-to-face with another human can trigger hormones that relieve stress when one is feeling agitated or insecure. There is need then to spend time with people to improve one's mood.

Engage the senses: Another fast way to relieve stress is by engaging one or more of the senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch or movement. Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you.

Learn to Relax: There are many relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation and deep breathing which activate the body's relaxation response. These activities, when practised regularly, can reduce everyday stress levels and boost feelings of joy and serenity.

Eat a Healthy Diet: The food one eats can improve or worsen his or her mood and affect their ability to cope with life's stressors. A diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, high-quality protein and omega-3 fatty acids, can help better in coping with life's vicissitudes.

Get Enough Rest: Feeling tired can increase stress by causing one to think irrationally. Find ways to improve your sleep so you feel less stressed, more productive and emotionally balanced.

Stress Management Techniques

Stress management can help by removing or changing the source of stress, altering how a person views a stressful event, lowering the effects that stress might have on the body, learning alternative ways of coping. Stress management therapy pursues one or more of these approaches.

People can develop their stress management techniques by using self-help books or online resources but alternatively, they can attend a stress management course.

A counsellor or psychotherapist can connect an individual who has stress with personal development courses or individual and group therapy sessions.

Conclusion

Being more alert to the effects of stress may help a person manage it more effectively and cope better. Developing coping strategies before stress becomes chronic or severe can help an individual manage new situations and maintain their physical and mental health. Most people have an activity that helps them relax, such as reading a book, going for a walk, listening to music or spending time with a friend, loved one or pet. Joining a choir or a gym also helps some people relax.

Those who often feel as though they do not have the time or energy for hobbies should try some enjoyable new activities that make them feel good. People can turn to their support network if they need ideas. Being part of a group can reduce the risk of stress developing and provide support and practical help when challenging circumstances develop. People who find that stress is affecting their daily life should seek professional help. A doctor or psychiatric specialist can often help, for example, through stress management training.

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