



Stress among students: An emerging issue

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Received: 29 May 2019, Accepted on: 30 June, 2019 Published on: 3 July, 2019

ABSTRACT

This research paper aims to review the literature on stress; sources of stress; signs and symptoms of stress; and adverse effects of stress on students' health and well-being. Students of the modern era are living in a highly competitive world which exerts lots of stress on students to survive in this era. Stress is an unavoidable phenomenon in all aspects of human life. Stress is an emotional imbalance which may occur due to various reasons such as tests, papers and projects, competitive nature within one's chosen field, financial worries about school and future employment prospects. Stress can be negative or positive to an individual, depending on the strength and persistence of the stress, the individual's personality, cognitive appraisal of the stress, and social support. Stress affects students academically, socially, physically and emotionally.

Keywords: Stress, Stressor, Students, Effect of stress.

Introduction

In today's competitive world every student will feel the effect of stress at some point of time in their life. Some students feel more stressed out in comparison to the others, some students handle the stress more efficiently than others but no one can completely roll out stress from their lives. Thus, stress is an unavoidable phenomenon in all aspects of human life. It is the body's non-specific response or reaction to demands made on it, or too disturbing events in the environment (Rosenham & Seligman, 1989; Selye, 1974). It is a process by which we perceive and cope with environmental threats and challenges (Myers, 2005). It can be explained in terms of sadness, worries, tension, frustration which leads to depression which is temporary or may last for long. The presence of stress depends on the presence of the stressor. Feng (1992) and Volpe (2000) defined stressor as anything that challenges an individual's adaptability or stimulates an individual's body or mentality. Considering the holistic nature of stress, we have reviewed

the concept of stress under the following objectives:

Objectives

1. To understand the concept of stress and sources of stress affecting students.
2. To examine the signs and symptoms of stress; and the effects of stress on students.

The results of the study have been organized objective wise, which are as follows:

Objective 1: To understand the concept of stress and sources of stress affecting students.

1.1. Basic concept of stress

We all talk so much about stress but often it's not clear what stress really is all about? We are well aware of some terms that are used synonymously for stress. These terms are stress, strain, conflict, burnout, depression and pressure. The original definition of stress formulated by Selye (1983) was, "Stress is a non-specific response of the body". Stress is an unavoidable phenomenon in all aspects of human life. Stress is an emotional imbalance which may occur due to several reasons such as tests, papers and projects, competitive nature within one's chosen field, financial worries about school and future employment prospects (Ross et al., 1999; Herold, 2018). According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), stress is a mental or physical phenomenon formed through one's cognitive appraisal of the stimulation and is a result of one's interaction with the environment. The presence of stress depends on the presence of the stressor. Feng (1992) and Volpe (2000) defined stressor as anything that challenges an individual's adaptability or

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Cite as: *Integr. J. Soc. Sci.*, 2019, 6(2), 44-48.

©IS Publications IJSS ISSN: 2348-0874

<http://pubs.iscience.in/ijss>

stimulates an individual's body or mentality. Stress can be caused by various factors like environmental, psychological, biological, and social. It could be negative or positive for an individual, depending on the intensity of the stress. From the above discussion, one can view stress as a *response*, a *stimulus*, and a *transaction*.

Stress as a response

Stress as a response model was initially introduced by Hans Selye (1956), in which he describes stress as a *physiological response pattern*, which he describes within his *general adaptation syndrome* (GAS) model. Selye (1936, 1956, 1974) was popularly considered to be the father of the stress theory; in fact, he gave the field its name and provided one of the first systematic descriptions of stress responses (Roskies, 1991). Selye's (1936) definition of stress is: "the non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it". He postulated that the stress response / GAS consists of three stages, namely the alarm phase, resistance phase and exhaustion.

Stage one: Alarm reaction

The alarm reaction describes Cannon's original flight-or-fight response. In this stage several body systems are activated, primarily the nervous system and the endocrine system, followed by the cardiovascular, pulmonary, and musculoskeletal systems. Like a smoke detector alarm buzzing late at night, all senses are put on alert until the danger is over.

Stage two: Stage of resistance

In the resistance stage, the body tries to revert to a state of physiological calmness, or homeostasis, by resisting the alarm. The body stays activated or aroused, usually at a lesser intensity than during the alarm stage but enough to cause a higher metabolic rate in some organ tissues. One or more organs may in effect be working overtime and, as a result, enter the third and final stage.

Stage three: Stage of exhaustion

Exhaustion occurs when one (or more) of the organs targeted by specific metabolic processes can no longer meet the demands placed upon it and fails to function properly. This can result in death of the organ and, depending on which organ becomes dysfunctional (e.g., the heart), possibly the death of the organism as a whole.

Selye (1956) attempts to popularize the concept of stress as it relates to physical and mental health of an organism which was extremely successful. In contrast, his conceptualization of stress and the details of the GAS have not stood the test of time.

Apart from Selye's GAS model another American physiologist W.B. Cannon (1932) describes stress as a response in his *flight-or-fight model*. In his model, he linked emotional expression to physiological changes in the

periphery (McCarty, 2000). Cannon (1932) proposed that when the organism perceives a threat, the body is rapidly aroused and motivated via the sympathetic nervous system and the endocrine system to regain homeostasis. These bodily systems mobilize the organism to attack the threat or to flee; therefore it is called the fight-or-flight response. Both Cannon's (1932) early fight/flight model and Selye (1936) GAS regarded the individual as automatically responding to an external stressor.

Stress as a stimulus

The concept of stress as a stimulus was introduced in the 1960s and viewed stress as *an important event or change of an individual's life that demands response, adjustment, or adaptation*. Adolf Meyer, was one of the first to consider the importance of daily life events systematically. He noted stressful events in his patients lives through "life charts" and made the important observation that illnesses tended to cluster at those times when major events occurred. Drawing on this finding, Holmes and Rahe (1967) constructed the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) comprising of 42 life events. Each item (life events) was scored according to the estimated degree of adjustment the person was experiencing (e.g., marriage, divorce, relocation, change or loss of a job, loss of loved one). Holmes and Rahe conceptualized that stress was an independent variable in the health-stress-coping equation, which means stress is the cause of an experience rather than the experience itself. This model is a photography-inspired lens-and-filter model to explain the development of illness in response to the experience of stressful life events. Rahe and Holmes originally viewed humans as a passive recipient of stress, who had no role in determining the degree, intensity, or valence of the stressor. Later, Rahe introduced the concept of interpretation into his research (Rahe & Arthur, 1978), suggesting that a change or life event could be interpreted as a positive or negative experience based on cognitive and emotional factors. However, the stress as a stimulus model fails to address the significant variables such as previous learning, environment, support networks, personality, and life experiences.

Stress as a transaction

The transactional theory of psychological stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) has been the most influential theory, generating the most research. This theory suggests that stress only occurs when people judge their coping skills to be inadequate to meet the current demand (Rice, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) assume that stress and health have reciprocal influences, in other words, stress can have a powerful impact on health and health can influence a person's resistance or coping ability. Stress is also described as a relationship between the person and the environment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The theory describes two processes, cognitive appraisal and coping, as a major mediator of stressful relationships between person-environment. Cognitive appraisal is a process through which the individual assesses whether or not a particular interaction with the environment is relevant to their well-being and, if so, how. Lazarus and Folkman (1984)

suggested three appraisals that provide meaning and influence the coping process. *Primary appraisal* involves determining whether the stressor poses a threat. *Secondary appraisal* involves the individual's evaluation of the resources or coping strategies at his or her disposal for addressing any perceived threats. The *reappraisal* process is an ongoing process which continuously reappraises both the nature of the stressor and the available resources to respond to the stressor.

1.2. Sources of stress

Bernstein et al. (2008) define the sources of stress as any circumstances or event that threatens to disturb the day-to-day functioning of an individual and force them to make adjustments. These sources of stress are called "Stressors". Stressors are demands of the internal or external environment that upsets the balance, affecting the physical and psychological well-being of an individual which requires immediate action to restore balance (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). They differ from the degree of severity and duration of stress; however, what is stressful to an individual may not be a stressor to another. Cherian and Charian (1998) found that the main source of students stress was related to the following categories (in descending order of frequency);(i) studies; (ii) work, career and future; (iii) sensitivity, and confidence; (iv) family; (v) economic problems and lack of facilities; (vi) mild neurosis; (vii) sex and marriage; (viii) self-schedule and independence; (ix) social problems; (x) health and physical matters; (xi) self and self-image.

Wills and Shiffman (1985) have classified three types of stressor according to the effects of their duration. The first is called *major life events*, which are acute but of relatively short duration, for example, an illness, a move to another school, or the death of a loved one. The second type is the *everyday problems of life*, such as hassles in dealing with crowds on a bus, waiting in a line, or having an argument with a store clerk. A third type is *enduring life strain* - the chronic, long-term pressures associated with the performance of roles, such as being a student or teenage son or daughter. Pereira (1997) categorised sources of stress within four main areas: *Personal* problems (homesickness, loneliness, suicide, shyness, family problems); *academic* problems (lack of motivation, examination stress, withdrawal and drop out, academic work, facilities, lectures, other students, ethnic problems); *financial and housekeeping* problems (financial problems, accommodation); and *security* problems (sexual assault, violence at student social events, bullying, drugs and alcohol).

Objective 2: To examine the signs and symptoms of stress; and the effects of stress on students.

2.1. Signs and Symptoms of stressful behaviour of students

Individual responses to stress differ depending upon their personality, early upbringing and life experiences.

Everybody has their own pattern of the stress response. Some of us know their stress response pattern and can find the cause of the problem by taking a look at the severity of their own symptoms or changes in behaviour. Few common signs and symptoms of stress are listed below:

- Students may be experiencing irritability because of lack of proper sleep at night.
- They may be unable to concentrate on academics and sports.
- Students may be having unexplained fears or increased anxiety.
- Students separate themselves from family activities or peer relationships.
- Students may be experimenting with drugs and alcohol.
- Students may complain about headaches or stomach aches.
- Students may have a poor appetite and low immunity.

2.2. Adverse effects of stress on students

Students are experiencing high levels of stress in many areas of their life. The combination of a busy life with education is causing stress and depression. Minimal stress is beneficial and may result in excellent performance. However, uncontrolled stress can lead to exhaustion, depression and several other sicknesses. The stress that students experience can test their ability to cope and their ability to adapt. The impact of stress on students can be looked at from various angles. According to Centre (2010); Stress affects students academically, socially, physically and emotionally.

Impact of stress academically

Students are facing various academic problems in today's highly competitive world, which includes exam stress, lack of interest in attending classes, and inability to understand the topic. Academic stress is the major cause of stress among adolescents and may result in low self-esteem. Most of the psychological problems such as depression and suicide occur as a result of low self-esteem (Nikitha et al., 2014; Sahu, 2016). Hussain et al., (2008) observed that the magnitude of academic stress among the public school students was significantly higher while the level of adjustment of government school students was significantly better. However, reverse but significant relationships between academic stress and adjustment have been found for both the student group and each school type whereas Singh and Upadhyay (2008) observed that students in the first year experienced higher degree of academic stress in comparison to the students in the third year and female students perceived more academic stress in comparison of the male students.

Impact of stress socially

Students are social beings by nature, as they have an essential need and wish to uphold helpful social relations. Social relationships can offer nurturance, foster feelings of social inclusion, and lead to reproductive success. Anything that disrupts or threatens to disrupt their relationships with others can result in social stress (centre,2010, Chatterjee, 2018). Arun and Chavan (2009) found a significant correlation between student's perception of life as a burden and the class they were studying. Munni and Malhi (2006) reported poorer school performance and adjustment scores among adolescents exposed to violence. In the long run, all social effects give bad names and status to students displaying these behaviours that will adversely affect their academic life.

Impact of stress physically

Stress that goes on without a break can lead to a condition called distress, a negative stress reaction. Distress can lead to physical problems. The Physical impact of stress basically reflects on the health of the student (centre, 2010; Samuhanand, 2015). Stress can also lead to a change in people's behaviours, such as nail biting, heavy breathing, teeth clenching and hand wringing. When individuals are stressed out, they may experience cold hands and feet, butterflies in the stomach, and sometimes-increased heart rate, all of which are considered as common physiological effects of stress, that can be associated with anxiety (Auerbach & Gramling, 1998). Physical and psychological response to stress mostly occurs together, especially when stressors become more intense. For example, mild chest pain can lead to the psychological stress response of worrying about getting a heart attack. The psychological responses to stress can emerge out as changes in emotions, thoughts (cognition), and behaviours (Bernstein et al., 2008).

Impact of stress emotionally

Stress causes irritability and bad temper in students. Students who stressed easily get annoyed with the Little-little things. Stress in its own way kills the tolerance of student making them vulnerable to temper issues (Rawat, 2018, 2019; Dixit, 2017). Student tries to be calm but because they are worried and disturbed they lose their control easily (centre,2010). Psychiatrists have expressed concern at the emergence of education as a serious source of stress for school-going children (Singh, 2015), leading to an incidence of suicide deaths (D'Mello, 1997). Many adolescents in India are referred to a psychiatrist for school-related distress, depression, high anxiety, frequently missing out school, phobia, physical complaints, irritability, weeping spells, and decreased interest in school work (Chawla, 1997; Rangaswamy, 1982).

Conclusion

An attempt was made in this paper to review the literature on stress among the students and tried to present the sources and symptoms of stress as well as the adverse effect of stress on students. Stress is an inevitable

phenomenon in all aspects of human life. Stress is a physiological and psychological imbalance. It arises due to the demands of a person and that person's inability to meet those demands. Stress may be negative or positive for an individual, depending upon the strength and persistence of the stress, the individual's personality, cognitive appraisal of the stress, and social support. The presence of stress depends on the presence of the stressors. Stressors are demands of an internal or external environment that upsets the balance, affecting the physical and psychological well-being of an individual which requires immediate action to restore balance (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977). Thus, it is the wake up call for parents, teachers, and counsellors to teach students the stress coping skills for their better future and healthy well-being.

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