

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Stress management refers to the wide spectrum of techniques and psychotherapies aimed at controlling a person's levels of stress, especially prolonged stress, usually for the purpose of improving everyday functioning. Stress produces numerous physical and mental symptoms which vary according to each individual's situational factors. Evaluating the effectiveness of various stress management techniques can be difficult, as limited research currently exists. Some are accepted as effective treatments for use in psychotherapy, whilst others with less evidence favoring them are considered alternative therapies. Much more research is necessary to provide a better understanding of which mechanisms actually operate and are effective in practice.

Keywords: Symptoms, Types, Techniques, Models, Programmes.

INTRODUCTION

Stress management refers to the wide gamut of techniques and psychotherapies aimed at controlling a person's levels of stress, especially chronic stress, usually for the purpose of improving everyday functioning. The term 'stress' refers only to a stress with significant negative consequences, or distress in the terminology advocated by Hans Selye, rather than what he calls eustress, a stress whose consequences are helpful or otherwise positive.

Stress produces numerous physical and mental symptoms which vary according to each individual's situational factors. These can include physical health decline as well as depression. The process of stress management is named as one of the keys to a happy and successful life in modern society. Although life provides numerous demands that can prove difficult to handle, stress management provides a number of ways to manage anxiety and maintain overall well-being. Despite stress often being thought of as a subjective experience, levels of stress are readily measurable, using various physiological tests, similar to those used in polygraphs.

Many practical stress management techniques are available, some for use by health professionals and others, for self-help, which may help an individual reduce their levels of stress, provide positive feelings of control over one's life and promote general well-being.

Evaluating the effectiveness of various stress management techniques can be difficult,

as limited research currently exists. Consequently, the amount and quality of evidence for the various techniques varies widely. Some are accepted as effective treatments for use in psychotherapy, whilst others with less evidence favoring them are considered alternative therapies. Many professional organizations exist to promote and provide training in conventional or alternative therapies.

There are several models of stress management, each with distinctive explanations of mechanisms for controlling stress. Much more research is necessary to provide a better understanding of which mechanisms actually operate and are effective in practice.

Historical foundations

Walter Cannon and Hans Selye used animal studies to establish the earliest scientific basis for the study of stress. They measured the physiological responses of animals to external pressures, such as heat and cold, prolonged restraint, and surgical procedures, then extrapolated from these studies to human beings.

Subsequent studies of stress in humans by Richard Rahe and others established the view that stress is caused by distinct, measureable life stressors, and further, that these life stressors can be ranked by the median degree of stress they produce. Thus, stress was traditionally conceptualized to be a result of external insults beyond the control of those experiencing the stress. More recently, however, it has been argued that external circumstances do not have any intrinsic capacity to produce stress, but instead their effect is mediated by the individual's perceptions, capacities, and understanding.

Models

The generalized models are:

- The "emergency response" / fight-or-flight response by Walter Cannon (1914, 1932),
- "General Adaptation Syndrome" by Hans Selye (1936),
- "Stress Model of Henry",
- "Transactional (or cognitive) Stress Model" / stress model of Lazarus after Lazarus (1974)
- "Theory of resource conservation" by Stevan Hobfoll (1988, 1998; Hobfoll & Buchwald, 2004)
- Transactional Model of Stress and Coping of Richard Lazarus
- Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman suggested in 1984 that stress can be thought of as resulting from an "imbalance between demands and resources" or as occurring when "pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope". Stress management was developed and premised on the idea that stress is not a direct response to a stressor but rather one's resources and ability to cope mediate the stress response and are amenable to change, thus allowing stress to be controllable.

Among the many stressors mentioned by employees, these are the most common:

- The way employees are treated by their bosses/supervisors or company
- Lack of job security
- Company policies
- Co-workers who don't do their fair share
- Unclear expectations
- Poor communication
- Not enough control over assignments
- Inadequate pay or benefits

Health realization/innate health model

The health realization/innate health model of stress is also founded on the idea that stress does not necessarily follow the presence of a potential stressor. Instead of focusing on the individual's appraisal of so-called stressors in relation to his or her own coping skills (as the transactional model does), the health realization model focuses on the nature of thought, stating that it is ultimately a person's thought processes that determine the response to potentially stressful external circumstances.

Techniques

High demand levels load the person with extra effort and work. A new time schedule is worked up, and until the period of abnormally high, personal demand has passed, the normal frequency and duration of former schedules is limited. Many techniques cope with the stresses life brings. Some of the following ways induce a lower than usual stress level, temporarily, to compensate the biological tissues involved; others face the stressor at a higher level of abstraction:

- Autogenic training
- Social activity
- Cognitive therapy
- Conflict resolution
- Cranial release technique
- Getting a hobby
- Meditation
- Mindfulness

Types of stress

- **Acute stress**

Acute stress is the most common form of stress among humans worldwide. Acute stress deals with the pressures of the near future or dealing with the very recent past. This type of stress is often misinterpreted for being a negative connotation. While this is the case in some circumstances, it is also a good thing to have some acute stress in life.

- **Chronic stress**

Chronic stress is unlike acute stress. It has a wearing effect on people that can become a very serious health risk if it continues over a long period of time. Chronic stress can lead to memory loss, damage special recognition and produce a decreased drive of eating. The severity varies from person to person and also gender difference can be an underlying factor.

Stress management programs

Many businesses today have begun to use stress management programs for employees who are having trouble adapting to stress at the workplace or at home. Many people have spill over stress from home into their working environment. There are a couple of ways businesses today try to alleviate stress on their employees. One way is individual intervention. This starts off by monitoring the stressors in the individual. After monitoring what causes the stress, next is attacking that stressor and trying to figure out ways to alleviate them in any way.

Employee assistance programs can include in-house counselling programs on managing stress. Evaluative research has been conducted on EAPs that teach individual stress control and inoculation techniques such as relaxation, biofeedback, and cognitive restructuring. Studies show that these programs can reduce the level of physiological arousal associated with high stress. Participants who master behavioural and cognitive stress-relief techniques report less tension, fewer sleep disturbances, and an improved ability to cope with workplace stressors. Another way of reducing stress at work is by simply changing the workload for an employee. Some may be too overwhelmed that they have so much work to get done, or some also may have such little work that they are not sure what to do with themselves at work. Improving communications between employees also sounds like a simple approach, but it is very effective for helping reduce stress.

In the workplace

Stress in the workplace is a commonality throughout the world in every business. Managing that stress becomes vital in order to keep up job performance as well as relationship with co-workers and employers. For some workers, changing the work environment relieves work stress. Making the environment less competitive between employees decreases some amounts of stress. However, each person is different and some people like the pressure to perform better. Salary can be an important concern of employees. Salary can affect the way people work because they can aim for promotion and in result, a higher salary. This can lead to chronic stress.

Measuring stress

Levels of stress can be measured. One way is through the use of psychological testing: *The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale* is used to rate stressful life events, while the DASS contains a scale for stress based on self-report items. Changes in blood pressure and galvanic skin response can also be measured to test stress levels, and changes in stress levels. A digital

thermometer can be used to evaluate changes in skin temperature, which can indicate activation of the fight-or-flight response drawing blood away from the extremities. Cortisol is the main hormone released during a stress response and measuring cortisol from hair will give a 60-90 day baseline stress level of an individual. This method of measuring stress is currently the most popular method in the clinic.

Effectiveness

Stress management has physiological and immune benefits. Positive outcomes are observed using a combination of non-drug interventions:

- treatment of anger or hostility,
- autogenic training
- talking therapy (around relationship or existential issues)
- biofeedback
- cognitive therapy for anxiety or clinical depression

Symptoms

Stress can affect all aspects of your life, including your emotions, behaviour, thinking ability and physical health. No part of the body is immune, but, because people handle stress differently, symptoms of stress can vary. Symptoms can be vague and may be the same as those caused by medical conditions. It is important to discuss them with your doctor. You may experience any of the following symptoms of stress.

Emotional symptoms of stress include:

- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed, like you are losing control or need to take control
- Having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind
- Feeling bad about yourself (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless and depressed
- Avoiding others.

Physical symptoms of stress include:

- Low energy
- Headaches
- Upset stomach, including diarrhoea, constipation and nausea
- Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- Insomnia
- Frequent colds and infections
- Loss of sexual desire and/or ability

- Nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear
- Cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Excess sweating
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth. *Paul Susic MA Licensed Psychologist Ph.D. Candidate.*

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