

INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT
SENIOR SECTION
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE AND HUMANITIES
PSYCHOLOGY
CLASS XII

TOPIC/CHAPTER: MEETING LIFE CHALLENGES

Faced with any challenge, we put in additional efforts to mobilize all our resources and the support system to meet the challenge. All challenges, problems and difficult instances thus put us to stress.

Eustress is used to describe the level of stress that is good for you and is one of a person's best assets for achieving peak performance and managing minor crisis.

However, eustress has the potential of turning into **distress** that causes wear and tear.

Strain is the reaction to external stressors.

Hans Selye, the father of modern stress research, defined stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demand, that is, regardless of the threat the individual will respond with the same psychological pattern of reactions. Many researchers do not agree with this definition as they feel that stress response is not as general or non-specific as he suggests. Different stressors may produce somewhat different patterns of stress reaction, and different individuals may have different characteristic modes of response.

Stress is the pattern of responses that an organism makes to stimulus event that disturbs the equilibrium and exceeds a person's ability to cope.

Stress is not a factor that resides in the individual or the environment, instead is embedded in an ongoing process that involves individuals transacting with their social and cultural environments, making appraisals of those encounters and attempting to cope with the issues that arise. Stress is a dynamic mental state, and is a disruption in homeostasis that gives rise to the requirement for resolution of the imbalance or restoration of homeostasis.

An individual's response to a stressful situation largely depends on the perceived events and how they are interpreted or appraised. Lazarus has distinguished between two types of appraisal, primary and secondary.

- **Primary appraisal** – It refers to the perception of a new or changing environment as positive, neutral or negative in its consequences.
- **Secondary appraisal** – It is the assessment of one's coping abilities and resources and whether they will be sufficient to meet the harm, threat or challenge of the event.

These appraisals are very subjective and will depend on many factors such as:

- Past experiences – If one has handled similar situations very successfully in the past, they would be less threatening for her/him.
- Controllability – Does one have mastery or control over a situation?

Due to the various factors at play, the experience and outcome of a stressor may vary from individual to individual. These stressors can be external (environmental factors such as noise, air, and pollution), social (break up with a friend, loneliness) or psychological (conflict, frustration within the individual).

These stressors result in a variety of stress reactions, which may be physiological, behavioural, emotional and cognitive.

At the physiological level, arousal plays a key role in stress related behaviours. The hypothalamus initiates action along two pathways.

- Autonomic Nervous System – The adrenal gland releases large amounts of catecholamines (adrenaline and non-adrenaline) into the blood stream, which leads to physiological changes seen in fight-or-flight response.
- Pituitary Gland – Secretes cortisol which provides energy.

Behavioural responses are virtually limitless, depending on the nature of the stressful event. Confrontative action against the stressor (fight) or withdrawal from the threatening event (flight) are two general categories of behavioural responses.

Stresses experienced vary in terms of intensity (low intensity vs. high intensity), duration (short-term vs. long-term), complexity (less complex vs. more complex) and predictability (unexpected vs. predictable).

Individuals with weak physical health and weak constitution would be more vulnerable to stress than those who enjoy good health and a strong constitution.

Types of stress:

- **Physical and Environmental Stress** – **Physical stresses** are demands that change the state of our body.
Environmental stresses are aspects of our surroundings that are often unavoidable such as air pollution, crowding, noise, heat of the summer, etc. Another group of environmental stresses are catastrophic events or disasters such as fire, earthquake, floods, etc.
- **Psychological Stress** – These are stresses that we generate ourselves in our minds. These are personal and unique to the person experiencing them and are internal sources of stress.
Frustration results from the blocking of needs and motives by something or someone that hinders us from achieving a desired goal.
Conflicts may occur between two or more incompatible needs or motives.
Internal Pressures stem from beliefs based upon expectations from inside us to ourselves, and such expectations can only lead to disappointment.
Social Pressures may be brought about from people who make excessive demands on us.
- **Social Stress** – These are induced externally and result from our interaction with other people. These social stresses vary widely from person to person.

Holmes and Rahe developed a life event measure of stress. A measure of stressful events based on the above scale is known as the **Presumptive Stressful Life Events Scale**.

Sources of stress:

- **Life events** – Changes affect our life from the moment we are born. We learn to cope with small everyday changes but major life events can be stressful, because they disturb our routine and cause upheaval.
- **Hassles** – These are personal stresses we endure as individuals, due to the happenings in our daily life such as noisy surroundings, commuting, shortages, traffic snarls, etc.
- **Traumatic events** – These include being involved in a variety of extreme events. The effects of these events may occur after some lapse of time and sometimes persist as symptoms of anxiety, flashbacks, dreams and intrusive thoughts, etc. Severe trauma can also strain relationships.

Effects of stress:

- **Emotional effects** – Those who suffer from stress are more likely to experience mood swings and show erratic behavior that may alienate them from family and friends. Some examples are feelings of anxiety and depression, increased physical tension and mood swings, etc.
- **Physiological effects** – When the human body is placed under physical or psychological stress, it increases the production of certain hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones produce marked changes in heart rate, blood pressure levels, etc. Although this physical reaction will help us function more effectively when we are under pressure for short periods of time, it can be extremely damaging to the body in the long-term effects.
- **Cognitive effects** – One may suffer from mental overload, and this suffering from high levels of stress can rapidly cause individuals to lose their ability to make sound decisions. Cognitive effects of stress are poor concentration and reduced short-term memory capacity.
- **Behavioural effects** – typical behavioural effects of stress are seen as disrupted sleep patterns, increased absenteeism and reduced work performance.

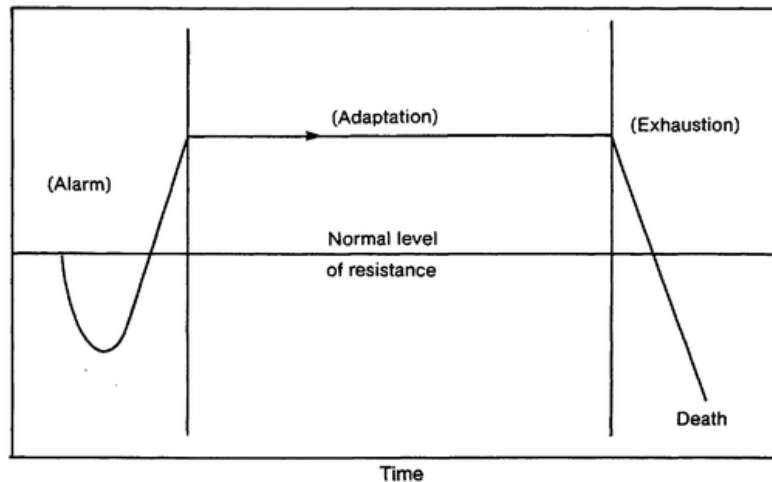
Examination Stress has been characterized as ‘evaluative apprehension’ or ‘evaluative stress’ and produces debilitating behavioural, cognitive and physiological effects no different from those produced by any other stress.

Physical exhaustion due to stress is seen in the signs of chronic fatigue, weakness and low energy. Mental exhaustion appears in the form of irritability, anxiety, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. This state of physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion is known as **burnout**.

Stress can also produce changes in the immune system and increase the chances of someone becoming ill. Stress has been implicated in the development of cardiovascular disorders, high blood pressure as well as psychosomatic disorders including ulcers, asthma, allergies and headaches.

Hans Selye noticed a similar pattern of bodily response to stress in all the patients he studied, and called this pattern the **General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)** which involves three stages.

- **Alarm-Reaction Stage** – The presence of a noxious stimulus or stressor leads to activation of the adrenal-pituitary-cortex system. This triggers the release of hormones producing the stress response. The individual is then ready for fight or flight situations.
- **Resistance Stage** – If stress is prolonged, the resistance stage begins. The parasympathetic nervous system of the body calls for more cautious use of the body's resources. The organism makes attempts to cope with the threat, as through confrontation.
- **Exhaustion Stage** – Continued exposure to the same stressor or additional stressors drains the body of and leads to the of exhaustion. The physiological involved in alarm resistance become and susceptibility related diseases blood pressure more likely.



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Psychoneuroimmunology focuses on the links between the mind, the brain and the immune system. It studies the effects of stress on the immune system.

In the immune system, white blood cells (**leucocytes**) within the immune system identify and destroy foreign bodies (**antigens**). It also leads to the production of **antibodies**. White blood cells include **T-Cells** (destroy invaders), **T-helper cells** (increase immunological activity), **B-Cells** (produce antibodies) and **Natural Killer Cells** (involved in the fight against both viruses and tumours). T-helper cells are attacked by the Human Immuno Deficiency Virus (HIV) that causes Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Stress can affect natural killer cell cytotoxicity, which is of major importance in the defence against various infections and cancer. Studies reveal that immune functioning is better in individuals receiving social support.

Lifestyle is the overall pattern of decisions and behaviours that determine a person's health and quality of life. Stressed individuals may be more likely to expose themselves to pathogens, which are agents causing physical illness.

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Coping is a dynamic situation-specific reaction to stress. It is a set of concrete responses to stressful situations or events that are intended to solve the problem and reduce stress. The way we cope with stress often depends on rigid deep-seated beliefs based on personal experience.

The three coping strategies given by **Endler** and **Parker** are:

- **Task-oriented Strategy** – This involves obtaining information about the stressful situation and about alternative courses of action and their probable outcome. It also involves deciding priorities and acting so as to deal directly with the stressful situation.
- **Emotion-oriented Strategy** – This can involve efforts to maintain hope and to control one's emotions, it can also involve venting feelings of anger and frustration, or deciding that nothing can be done to change things.
- **Avoidance-oriented Strategy** – This involves denying or minimizing the seriousness of the situation, it also involves conscious suppression of stressful thoughts and their replacement by self-protective thoughts.

Lazarus and Folkman have conceptualized coping as a dynamic process rather than an individual trait. Coping refers to constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to master, reduce or tolerate the internal or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction. Coping serves to allow the individual to manage or alter a problem and regulate the emotional response to that problem. According to them, coping responses can be divided into two types of responses.

- **Problem-focused strategies** – These strategies attack the problem itself, with behaviours designed to gain information, to alter the event and to alter beliefs and commitments. They increase the person's awareness, level of knowledge and range of behavioural and cognitive coping options.
- **Emotion-focused strategies** – These call for psychological changes designed primarily to limit the degree of emotional disruption caused by an event, with minimal effort to alter the event itself.

Stress management Techniques:

- **Relaxation techniques** – It reduces symptoms of stress and decreases the incidence of illnesses such as high blood pressure and heart disease.
- **Meditation procedures** – The yogic method of meditation consists of a sequence of learned techniques for refocusing attention that brings about an altered state of consciousness.
- **Biofeedback** – It is a procedure to monitor and reduce the physiological aspects of stress by providing feedback about physiological activity and is often accompanied by relaxation training.

Biofeedback involves three stages:

1. Developing an awareness of the particular physiological response.
2. Learning ways of controlling that physiological response in quiet conditions.
3. Transferring that control into the conditions of everyday life.

- **Creative visualization** – These techniques aim to inoculate people against stress. Stress inoculation training is one effective method developed by Meichenbaum. The essence of this approach is to replace negative and irrational thoughts with positive and rational ones. There are three main phases in this:

1. Assessment – involves discussing the nature of the problem and seeing it from the viewpoint of the person/client.
2. Stress reduction techniques such as relaxation and self-instruction.
3. Application and follow through.

- **Exercise** – It can provide an active outlet for the physiological arousal experienced in response to stress.

Hardiness is a set of beliefs about oneself, the world and how they interact. It takes shape as a sense of personal commitment to what you are doing, a sense of control over your life, and a feeling of challenge.

Stress resistant personalities have control which is a sense of purpose and direction in life, commitment to work, family, hobbies and social life, and challenge, which is seeing changes in life as normal and positive rather than a threat.

Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Our ability to cope depends on how well we are prepared to deal with and counterbalance everyday demands, and keep equilibrium in our lives.

Assertiveness is a behavior or skill that helps us to clearly and confidently communicate our feelings, needs, wants and thoughts.

The major way of reducing time stress is to change one's perception of time. The central principle of **time management** is to spend your time doing the things that you value, or that help you achieve your goals. It depends on being realistic about what you know and that you must do it within a certain time period, knowing what you want to do, and organizing your life to achieve a balance between the two.

Rational thinking involves principles like challenging your distorted thinking and irrational beliefs, driving out potentially intrusive negative anxiety-provoking thoughts and making positive statements.

The key to **improving relationships** is communication, which consists of listening to what the other person is saying, expressing how you feel and what you think, and accepting the other person's opinions and feelings, even if they are different from your own.

In **self-care**, we are better prepared, physically and emotionally, to tackle the stresses of everyday life if we keep ourselves healthy and relaxed.

In **overcoming unhelpful habits**, habits such as perfectionism, avoidance, procrastination, etc. are strategies to help cope in the short term but would make one more vulnerable to stress in the long term.

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. **Positive health** comprises the following constructs: a healthy body, high quality of personal relationships, a sense of purpose in life, self-regard, mastery of life's tasks and resilience to stress, trauma and change.

Resilience is a dynamic developmental process referring to the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging life conditions. It has been described as the capacity to 'bounce back' in the face of stress and adversity. It has been conceptualized as reflecting feelings of self-worth, self-confidence, autonomy, self-reliance, finding positive role models, etc. Resilience has recently been defined in terms of three resources – I have (social and

interpersonal strengths), I am (inner strengths) and I can (interpersonal and problem solving skills).

Factors that act as stress buffers and facilitate positive health are:

- Diet – A balanced diet can lift one's mood, give more energy, feed muscles, improve circulation, prevent illness, strengthen the immune system and make one feel better to cope with stresses of life.
- Exercise – A large number of studies confirm a consistently positive relationship between physical fitness and health. Regular exercise plays an important role in managing weight and stress, and is shown to have a positive effect on reducing tension, anxiety and depression.
- Positive Attitude – Positive health and well being can be realized by having a positive attitude.
- Positive Thinking – **Optimism** is the inclination to expect favourable outcomes and is linked to psychological and physical well being. Optimists use more problem-focused coping strategies, and seek advice and help from others.
- Social Support – It is defined as the existence and availability of people on whom we can rely upon, people who let us know that they care about, value and love us. Someone who believes that s/he belongs to a social network of communication and mutual obligation experiences social support.

Perceived support is the quality of social support and is positively related to health and well being.

Social network is the quantity of social support which is unrelated to well being as it is very time consuming and demanding to maintain a large social network.

Social support can be in the form of **tangible support** or assistance involving material aid. It can also be in the form of **informational support** about stressful events. Supportive friends and family provide **emotional support**, which is reassuring the individual that he or she is loved, valued and cared for.