

# Stress and its Aftermaths

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Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to increasing demands of our life. People experience challenges with stress at some point during their life. Our brain has an alarm system that provides us protection. When our brain perceives a threat, it signals the body to release a burst of hormones in order to generate the response. This is called the "fight-or-flight" response. Once such a situation is over the body returns to its normal state. However, today residing in a modernized world alarm bell scarcely is turned off rather we can say the bell keeps on ringing off and on. Continuous or high levels of stress can have bad impact on our lives and therefore we should take care of it before it can progress to point of no return. Thus stress can be defined as the brain's response to any demand. It can be stimulated by various triggers that may be real or just the imagination of a person such as daily routines as going to school or work every day, looking after the matters of home, helping children in doing homework etc. and they could be more serious things like death, diseases, accidents etc. Moreover it could be violence and unrest prevailing in the environment of our society leading to emotional and physical trauma and distress.<sup>1</sup>

Stress is not always bad as it may be the sense of responsibility of any person to the assigned task and eagerness to accomplish the task within the specified period with dedication and elegance. So is the stress that is rather involuntary and is associated with conditions as examination, surgery etc. Stress is said to be troublesome when it lingers on and affects the performance of an individual on continuous basis. In short term when we face a dangerous situation our pulse quickens, breath becomes faster, muscles become tense, our brain uses more oxygen and increases activity which is beneficial but if it becomes long term that is becomes persistent even after the situation or task subsides then problems arise. Thus chronic stress is the response to emotional pressure suffered for a prolonged period over which an individual perceives he or she has no control. It involves an endocrine system response causing release of corticosteroids. While the immediate effects of stress hormones are beneficial in a particular situation, long-term exposure to stress creates a high level of these hormones that remains constant. This may lead to high blood pressure and subsequently heart disease, damage to muscle tissue, inhibition of growth, suppression of the immune system and damage to mental health.<sup>2</sup>

Different types of stressors, the timing (duration) of the stressors, and personal characteristics all influence the response of the hypothalamic-pituitary adrenal axis, which is implicated in many theories and relate chronic stress with health morbidities. Symptoms of chronic stress can vary from anxiety, depression, social isolation, headache, abdominal pain or lack of sleep to backpain etc. Other symptoms include hypertension and cardiovascular diseases, hemorrhoids, varicose veins, panic attacks or panic disorder.<sup>3,4,5</sup> The signs and symptoms of stress are mainly categorized into

- (1) Common features such as sleep disturbances, clenching of jaw, grinding of teeth, digestive upsets, feeling of lump in throat, difficulty in swallowing, agitated behavior, twiddling of fingers, playing with hairs, increased heart rate, generalized restlessness, sense of muscle tension in the body or actual muscle twitching, non-cardiac chest pains, dizziness, light heartedness, hyperventilation, sweaty palms, nervousness, stumbling over words, high blood pressure, lack of energy, fatigue etc.
- (2) Cognitive features of stress such as mental slowness, confusion, general negative attitudes or thoughts, constant worry, difficulty in concentrating, forgetfulness, difficulty in logical thinking, inability to solve problems<sup>6</sup>
- (3) Emotional features of stress such as irritation, no sense of humor, frustration, jumpiness, over-excitability, feeling overworked, sense of helplessness, apathy
- (4) Behavioral features of stress such as decreased contact with family and friends, poor work relations, sense of loneliness, decreased sex drive, avoiding others, failing to set aside times for relaxation through activities such as hobbies, music, art or reading.<sup>7</sup> Thus stress makes it difficult to control our emotions, it bring out diseases, can ruin our teeth, heart and mental status, can make us fat and look older and can weaken our immune system<sup>8</sup>

### 5 R'S OF STRESS REDUCTION:<sup>9</sup>

There are 5 core concepts which are used in the reduction of anxiety or stress:

Recognition of the causes and sources of the threat or distress; education and consciousness raising  
Relationships identified for support, help, reassurance  
Removal from (or of) the threat or stressor; managing the stimulus

Relaxation through techniques such as meditation, massage, breathing exercises, or imagery

Re-engagement through managed re-exposure and desensitization

### COPING STEPS TO REDUCE STRESS:<sup>10,11</sup>

The effects of stress tend to build up over time. Before it may cause a vicious circle and compromise our life it should be disrupted through some coping steps:

- Staying in touch with people who can provide

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emotional and other support like friends, family, and community or religious organizations to reduce stress due to work burdens or family issues

- Recognizing signs of our body's response to stress, such as difficulty sleeping, being easily angered, feeling of depression, and having low energy
- Setting priorities and learn to say no to new tasks if they are overloading or burdening us
- Noting always accomplishments at the end of the day
- Trying always but avoiding guilty feeling for things we have been unable to do
- Avoiding lingering on with the problems.
- Trying to get help from others in case of need
- Switching to healthy life style changes such as 30 minutes gentle walking every day
- Scheduling some time on daily basis for healthy and relaxing activities
- Exploring meditation, yoga, tai chi, or other gentle exercises
- Eating simple healthy preferably home-made food
- Seeking help from a qualified mental health care provider for psychotherapy and or medications

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