



## Stress management strategies: Techniques that help in living a balanced life

Dharmendra Kumar

Assistant Teacher of Accountancy, Janki Janta +2 High School, Belmohan, Ghoghardiha, Madhubani, Bihar, India

### Abstract

Most people experience a significant period of stress or depression during work. To feel stressed at various times is normal. If we think the stress is excessive and we need help, then we should consult a suitably qualified professional (such as our doctor). Stress is a normal occurrence that often arises when we perceive a situation as threatening or when we deal with an unusually large number or every day responsibilities. With the extended demands of home and work life, many people are experiencing external stress. The aim of stress management is to help an individual balance various aspects of life, work, relationships, and leisure as well as also to balance the physical, intellectual and emotional aspects of life. There are various stress management techniques that can be adopted at the individual level as well as the organisational level.

**Keywords:** Balanced life, distress, eustress, stress management, stressors

### Introduction

Hans Selye was one of the founding fathers of stress research. He said "Stress is not necessarily something bad-it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental". Stress is now viewed as "bad thing", with a range of harmful biochemical and long term effects. These effects have rarely been observed in positive situations. The most commonly accepted definition of stress is that "Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources that individual is able to mobilize". Stress can cause several health problems and, in extreme cases can cause death also.

Is all stress bad? Yes or No is a big question in front of us. Most people define stress as worry, tension and pressure, but all stress is not bad. Some stress can be happy, exciting and challenging. We need stress in our lives; without it life would be dull. For example, right before a race, Pranav always feels a little nervous. This stress helps Pranav stay alert and prepared. Can you name a time when stress helped you stay alert and prepared? Basically what causes stress to be good or bad are our thoughts, feeling and beliefs about a situation, which can make stress good (pleasant) or bad (unpleasant). For example, Shivam's mother informed him that they would be moving to a new city.

Moving to a new place is a stressor that will automatically cause Shivam some stress since it is a 'change'. If Shivam is excited and happy about the move, then this will be considered a good stressor for him. On the other hand, if he is sad or scared about the move, then this will be considered a bad stressor for him. Situations that cause us to feel happy, excited, etc., can be called good stressors and situations that cause us to feel sad, scared, etc. can be called bad stressors.

Too much stress can have negative effect on one's body, mind, and feelings. How we handle our stress has a lot to do with our health. When stress becomes too frustrating and

lasts for long period, it can become harmful distress. Recognizing the early signs of stress and doing something about it can improve the quality of our life, if we have signs of stress very often-Watch out!

### Positive and Negative Stress

Anything that causes change in the body can be called stress. These changes usually come from different feelings we have, like:

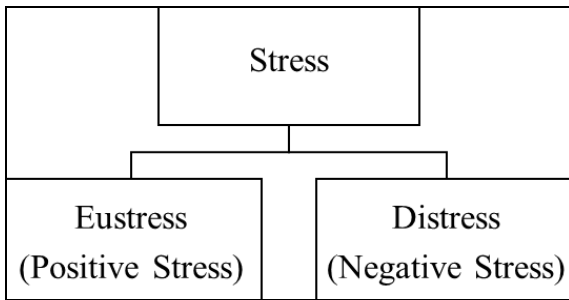
- Happiness
- Sadness
- Scare
- Madness

The term stress is derived from a Latin words 'String ere' which means to clutch, compress or bend. How one's body reacts to change can be called stress. Things that cause stress are called stressors, for example:

- Going to a new school
- Loss of a good friend
- Divorce or separation of parents
- Winning an award
- Taking a test
- Death of a relative
- Being sick
- Moving to a new town

Stress affects us all. Physiologically, stress is the body's reaction to a perceived threat which requires either 'fight or flight' in a stressful situation. The body is placed on a war footing because of the hormones secreted by the body in a stressful situation. This stage is referred to as alarm stage with increased heart beat, high blood pressure, increased respiration etc. This could prove helpful as well as sometimes unhelpful depending upon the circumstances and situation but prolonged stress can prove fatal for individuals and it can also lead to emotional and physical breakdown. Research studies in relation to stress and its relationship with different factors like job etc. are not conclusive, comprehensive and complete.

## Stress is of two types: Positive and Negative



Stress changes our body language and physical, emotional and mental state of an individual while encountering different stimuli in our environment.

1. Eustress, which is positive stress accompanies achievement and joy in physical activity and managerial job.
2. Distress is negative stress and is accompanied by negative state like tension, helplessness, tension, headache, increased heart beat, blood pressure etc.

Stress is caused by job related factors, it can be eustress (i.e. positive stress) which is reflected in job performance but if an individual cannot take the tension and work pressure then it becomes distress. It is very important fact about stress that it does not necessarily follow from a stressor, whether it is caused by a stressor depends upon the personality of an individual, stress condition and the reaction to it, some are affected necessarily and severely by the stressors where as others are not affected this way.

### Nature of Stress

The nature of stress is characterised as follows:

- Stress affects all of us differently.
- It can prove a threat or an opportunity.
- Hormones are released in a stressful situation which change our body language.
- Research studies are not conclusive, comprehensive and complete with respect to different factors related to stress.
- Stress can be positive and negative i.e. (Eustress and Distress).
- Stress is not necessarily followed by a stressor.
- Stress is caused by number of factors like money, relationship, job related factors, school, universities, queuing, computer (slowness of internet) etc.

### Causes of Stress

Causes of stress are known as stressors. Stressors can be physical or emotional. They can be generated internally or externally. Stressors can be events, situation, people or demands that individual perceives to be the source of stress. The most common stressor is change, such as loss of a loved one; career change, illness or injury and lifestyle changes. Stressors also vary amongst people; children, teens and adults. Though all of us are capable of experiencing stress, yet there are some stressors that are specific to the age or type of person.

Stress affects all of us. If it is spotted, it can be managed. Stress has become increasingly common in organisations, largely because of increased job complexity and economic pressure on individuals. Different situations in our lives, job

structure, technological changes, and our environment produce stress. Conditions that tend to cause stress are called stressors. There are various sources of stress which can be categorized as follows:

1. Organisational Causes,
2. Group Causes,
3. Personal Causes,
4. General Causes.

### Strategies of Stress Management

We should remain aware of signs of stress. Stress management is an important part of our daily lives. We all need stress in order to survive. Teams need it to perform well, and in the right choice, it can be very healthy and even enjoyable. However, when stress becomes excessive, it can be damaging. It can harm:

- Health
- Happiness
- Work Performance
- Team spirit and co-operation
- Relationships
- Personal development

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### Stress Management Techniques

The following techniques help in managing stress at the individual level:

**The Sources of Stress:** Knowing what causes stress is perhaps the best way to provide mental and emotional relief. Recognizing the specific triggers is the first step in the process of stress management. Common causes of stress are:

- Sickness,
- High staff turnover,
- Poor communication between teams,
- Bullying,
- Lack of feedback on performance,
- Value and contribution,
- Technological change,
- Lack of clarity of roles and responsibilities,
- Dissatisfaction with non-monetary benefits,
- Long working hours,
- Boring and mundane work,
- Uncomfortable workplace,
- Lack of training etc.

**a. Life's Situations:** Major life events such as divorce, death, midlife crisis, financial worries. Persistent strain of caring for a chronically sick child, nagging health problems

or managing a physically or mentally challenged family member can act as potential stressors. Even conditions such as prolonged unemployment or a sudden lay-off from a job can leave tremendous stress. One has to live through these situations, in the right spirit, to make living a worthwhile experience.

Stress also comes from our personal and social contexts and our psychological and emotional reactions to such conditioning. Here, our mental and emotional disposition, built over the years, decides whether to accept these situations with a fighting or fleeing spirit. Accordingly, we may either be under harmful influences of stressors or be out of it.

Children and women subjected to mental or physical abuses are known to suffer from tremendous stress symptoms of depression, constant anxiety and burnout. Though anger, fear and other negative emotional reactions are natural and necessary, we need to channel them constructively to create a balanced state in our body and mind.

**b. Health concerns:** Because of health problems also, there can be stress like suffering from a problem which is causing headache, body ache, depression, long illness, injury, accident etc.

**c. Unrealistic pleasures:** Unrealistic pleasure can also cause stress in life, if health of an individual is not good and he is not able to lead a good and comfortable life, then all material goods, luxurious goods will only give unrealistic pleasures in life and not real pleasures.

**d. Cynical and negative attitude:** It is said that life acts and we react. Our attitude is our reaction to what life hands out to us. A significant amount of stress symptoms can be avoided or aroused by the way we relate to stressors. Stress is created by what we think rather than by what has actually happened. For instance, handling adopted children, adolescents, academic failures, retirements, tax audits or sudden loss of money needs a relaxed attitude, focused will and preparedness to face the quirks of life positively. Otherwise one tends to feel stressed and reacts in anger and frustration. With a better control of attention one can feel that the world is a more congenial place to live in.

Again, in case of a marital conflict, instead of adopting an accusing and frustrating attitude such as- "You made my life hell" or "You are not meeting my emotional needs". The American clinical psychotherapist Willard F. Harley suggests that accepting. "Yes, we have a problem", helps clear the stress.

Failure in adopting a realistic attitude to events creates symptoms of depression and aggravates stress situations.

"Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstance, than failure, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. I am convinced that life is 10 per cent what happens to me and 90 per cent how I react to it. And so it is with you-"says Charles Swindoll, a Public Speaker.

A right attitude can make a resilient person out of us in the face of stressful situations.

**Living a More Balanced Life:** Stress is experienced when the life is out of balance. We may be spending too much time, energy on work or on caring for others at the expense

of our own health and well being. Following strategies can help in living a more balanced and stress free life:

- Delegating or sharing our responsibilities at work and home.
- Avoiding difficult colleagues, family members and acquaintances.
- Learning to be more assertive.

Techniques at the Individual Level that help in living a balanced life are:

- Doing regular exercise.
- Not using drinks or drugs to cope.
- Eating a healthy, balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables.
- Finding humour in stressful situations.
- Never taking on more than what we can cope with.
- Organizing our time better to get as much done as possible.
- Taking to friends or family and sharing our thoughts and fears.
- Listening to music or relaxation tapes.
- Tensing and then relaxing our muscles, starting at the toes and working up to the head and neck.

**Recognize What We can Change:** Can we change our stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely? Can we reduce their intensity? Can we shorten our exposure to stress? Can we devote time and energy necessary to making a change? If we can do any of these, we can perhaps reduce stress to some extent.

**Managing Time and Scheduling:** It may also be necessary to reorganize our schedule in order to maintain a more balanced life. Some strategies for time management include:

- Make a "to-do" list. We should check items off as we complete them.
- Prioritize tasks and then work on the most important ones.
- Learn to say "no".
- Delegate less important tasks.
- Schedule extra time for tasks, in case of interruptions.
- Take frequent breaks and schedule time for relaxation.

**Accepting Support from Others:** One of the most effective things we can do when we are stressed is to talk from our heart to a friendly listener who remains calm and listens in a way that makes us feel understood. Studies show that people who are active socially are most capable of dealing with stressful situations and major illness.

To reduce stress, we should develop a network of friends and family members to turn to when stress threatens us. If we are a naturally private or independent person, it might seem challenging to build a support system. In order to cultivate a circle of friends, we need to take the first step. Our efforts to create a strong social network will serve us well when we are confronted with serious stress:

- Think of individuals who care about us and with whom we can share our most personal thoughts.
- Reach out to people we feel close to Call them; make dates to see them; be open and available to them. Let them love us.
- Be sure to include some people at least a generation younger than us so that we won't outlive our buddies and be left alone.

- Build relationships based on emotional honesty. Members of our inner circle should know how to listen without judging us, giving advice, or comparing our experiences to theirs.

**Developing Skills for Stress Relief:** Our attitude has a lot to do with whether events and occurrences produce a feeling of stress. Once we admit that we are not able to control everything, we will be better equipped to handle unexpected situations. Stress management comes down to finding ways to change our thinking and manage our expectations.

Some important ways to adjust our attitude include:

- Be realistic. Shed the Superman/Superwoman image. Don't expect too much of our self or others. Nobody's perfect!
- Try to be assertive rather than passive or aggressive.
- Be flexible. Change ourselves when required.
- Rehearse/prepare for presentations and interviews.
- Think positively. Look at each stressful situation as an opportunity to improve our life.
- Don't take work problems home or home problems to work.

**Organizing and Simplifying Our Life:** If one of our main sources of stress is the sheer number of things that need to be done, getting organized should help us feel more at peace. A good sense of organization will make us more efficient. Simplifying our life helps us feel less overwhelmed.

- Plan our day.
- Learn to prioritize. Do what is most important first and realize that some things can wait until later.
- Cut out some activities and delegate tasks.
- Break large demands into small, manageable parts.
- Work through our tasks one by one.
- Organize our home and workspace so that we know where things are.
- Keep our personal belongings in working order to prevent untimely, stressful repairs.

**Nurturing Our self:** Taking care of our body, mind and spirit can help reduce feelings of anxiety and frustration that often accompany stress. We might be surprised to get stress relief that a long bubble bath or a quick catnap can provide.

Other techniques that can help are:

- Practice relaxation techniques such as controlling our breathing, clearing our mind, and relaxing our muscles.
- Get enough sleep.
- Eat a nutritious breakfast and lunch.
- Exercise relieves tension and provides a time out from stressful situations.
- Reduce or eliminate caffeine (coffee, black and green tea, cola drinks, and chocolate) because caffeine is a stimulant, and makes us feel more anxious.
- Avoid or reduce intake of alcohol, tobacco and recreational drugs.
- Get a massage to relieve tension.
- Read a good book or see an upbeat movie.
- Consider getting a pet. A pet's love is unconditional.

**Taking a Break:** We should take time everyday to slow down and do something we enjoy, even if it is just for a few minutes. Reading a magazine, playing with our dog, reading our child a book, or any other activity that helps us forget

the stresses of our day can calm us and help us remember what is important.

- Stop for several mini-breaks during the workday. Take 30 seconds to look out of the window or stretch.
- Set aside some personal time, but limit time spent with negative people. We should go for a walk, listen to music, socialize and indulge in sports and recreation.
- Take some time off to rejuvenate ourselves-even if it is just one-day midweek or a long weekend. If possible, go on vacation.
- Do volunteer work or start a hobby.
- Soak in a hot bath.
- Pray or meditate.
- Do Yoga.

**Keeping a Diary:** Writing things down has a marvellous way of putting things in perspective. Putting our worries into words may help us see that we don't really have that much to worry about, or it may help us get organized and manage our stress rather than letting it manage us.

- List the situations that produce stress in our life (i.e., moving to a new location, work or school demands, balancing priorities, job promotion).
- Describe how we cope with each type of stressful experience.
- Evaluate our responses. Are they healthy or unhealthy, appropriate or unproductive?

**Seek Professional Help for Stress:** We should seek professional help if we:

- Feel that stress is affecting our health.
- Feel that it will never end.
- Feel so desperate that we think about quitting our job, running away, taking a drug overdose, or injuring ourselves.
- Feel depressed, sad, tearful, or that life is not worth living.
- Lose our appetite and find it difficult to sleep.
- Find that we are eating, drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking, or using recreational drugs in abnormally large amounts.
- Have worries, feelings and thoughts that are hard to talk about.

Professional help is particularly important if we feel depressed or extremely anxious. It takes time and practice to reduce anxiety, depression and stress.

**Meditation and Yoga:** Meditation involves quiet and concentrated inner thoughts in order to rest the body physically and emotionally. Meditation along with Yoga helps to reduce stress and helps the individual get out of it.

**Be realistic:** We are not perfect. In our 21<sup>st</sup> Century society, we often try to do it all. We know the superwoman/superman image-the perfect go-to-employee the perfect mom/dad, the perfect community volunteer. These aspirations are themselves wonderful, but realising "you can't do" it all is a major step towards reducing our stress levels.

### Summing-up

When we are in the midst of a stressful situation, it's hard to determine whether we are simply feeling stress or

something more serious. Can we handle our stress on our own, or are we unable to figure out what to do? Stress doesn't just go away. Instead, it goes to work inside the body. The longer it is there, the more likely it is to produce physical and psychological illness. Research shows that stress can cause damage to the brain, heart, joints, digestive and immune systems. If we think we would benefit from help, either in identifying the things that cause stress, or in learning techniques to help us relax. There are many people who can give us professional assistance in these areas.

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