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Stress Management in Youth: Remedies and Suggestions for Stress Management

1.1 INTRODUCTION::

Although we all talk about stress, it often isn't clear what stress is really about. Many people consider stress to be something that happens to them, an event such as an injury or a promotion. Others think that stress is what happens to our body; mind and behavior in response to an event (e.g. heart pounding, anxiety, or nail biting.) While stress does involve events and our response to them, these are not the most important factors. Our thoughts about the situations in which we find ourselves are the critical factor.

When something happens to us, we automatically evaluate the situation mentally. We decide if it is threatening to us, how we need to deal with the situation and what skills we can use. If we decide that the demands of the situation outweigh the skills we have, then we label the situation as "stressful" and react with the classic "stress response." If we decide that our coping skills outweigh the demands of the situation, then we don't see it as "stressful."

Everyone sees situations differently and has different coping skills. For this reason, no two people will respond exactly the same way to a given situation. Additionally, not all situations that are labeled "stressful" are negative. The birth of a child, being promoted or moving to a new home may not be perceived as threatening. However, we may feel that situations are "stressful" because we don't feel fully prepared to deal with them.

Some situations in life are stress-provoking, but it is our thoughts that determine whether they are a problem to us. How we perceive a stress-provoking event and how we react to it determines its impact on our health. We may be motivated and invigorated by the events in our lives, or we may see some as "stressful" and respond in a manner that may have a negative effect on our physical, mental and social well-being. If we always respond in a negative way our health and happiness may suffer. By understanding ourselves and our reactions to stress-provoking situations, we can learn to handle stress more effectively.

1.2 STRESS DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION ::

1.2.1 DEFINITION OF THE STRESS::

Stress is defined as an organism's total response to environmental demands or pressures. When stress was first studied in the 1950s, the term was used to denote both the causes and the experienced effects of these pressures. More recently, however, the word stressor has been used for the stimulus that provokes a stress response. One recurrent disagreement among researchers concerns the definition of stress in humans. Is it primarily an external response that can be measured by changes in glandular secretions, skin reactions, and other physical functions, or is it an internal interpretation of, or reaction to, a stressor; or is it both?

1.2.2 DESCRIPTION ::

Stress in humans results from interactions between persons and their environment that are perceived as straining or exceeding their adaptive capacities and threatening their well-being. The element of perception indicates that human stress responses reflect differences in personality, as well as differences in physical strength or general health.

Risk factors for stress-related illnesses are a mix of personal, interpersonal, and social variables. These factors include lack or loss of control over one's physical environment, and lack or loss of social support networks. People who are dependent on others (e.g., children or the elderly) or who are socially disadvantaged (because of race, gender, educational level, or similar factors) are at greater risk of developing stress-related illnesses. Other risk factors include feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, extreme fear or anger, and cynicism or distrust of others.

1.3 CAUSES AND SYMPTOMS ::

The causes of stress can include any event or occurrence that a person considers a threat to his or her coping strategies or resources. Researchers generally agree that a certain degree of stress is a normal part of a living organism's response to the inevitable changes in its physical or social environment, and that positive, as well as negative, events can generate stress as well as negative occurrences. Stress-related disease, however, results from excessive and prolonged demands on an organism's coping resources. It is now believed that 80-90% of all disease is stress-related.

Recent research indicates that some vulnerability to stress is genetic. Scientists at the University of Wisconsin and King's College London discovered that people who inherited a short, or stress-sensitive, version of the serotonin transporter gene were almost three times as likely to experience depression following a stressful event as people with the long version of the gene. Further research is likely to identify other genes that affect susceptibility to stress.

One cause of stress that has affected large sectors of the general population around the world since 2001 is terrorism. The events of September 11, 2001, the sniper shootings in Virginia and Maryland and the Bali nightclub bombing in 2002, the suicide bombings in the Middle East in 2003, have all been shown to cause short-term symptoms of stress in people who read about them or watch television news reports as well as those who witnessed the actual events. Stress related to terrorist attacks also appears to affect people in countries far from the location of the attack as well as those in the immediate vicinity. It is too soon to tell how stress related to episodes of terrorism will affect human health over long periods of time, but researchers are already beginning to investigate this question. In 2004 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released a report on the aftereffects of the World Trade Center attacks on rescue and recovery workers and volunteers. The researchers found that over half the 11,700 people who were interviewed met threshold criteria for a mental health evaluation. A longer-term evaluation of these workers is underway.

A new condition that has been identified since 9/11 is childhood traumatic grief, or CTG. CTG refers to an intense stress reaction that may develop in children following the loss of a parent, sibling, or other loved one during a traumatic event. As defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), "Children with childhood traumatic grief experience the cause of [the loved one's] death as horrifying or terrifying, whether the death was sudden and unexpected (for example, due to homicide, suicide, motor vehicle accident, drug overdose, natural disaster, war, terrorism, and so on) or due to natural causes (cancer, heart attack, and so forth). Even if the manner of death does not appear to others to be sudden, shocking, or frightening, children who perceive the death in this way may develop childhood traumatic grief. In this condition, even happy thoughts and memories of the deceased person remind children of the traumatic way in which the deceased died.

1.4 FACTOR CONCERED WITH SRESS::

Although just enough stress can be a good thing, stress overload is a different story — too much stress isn't good for anyone. For example, feeling a little stress about a test that's coming up can motivate you to study hard. But stressing out too much over the test can make it hard to concentrate on the material you need to learn.

Pressures that are too intense or last too long, or troubles that are shouldered alone, can cause people to feel stress overload. Here are some of the things that can overwhelm the body's ability to cope if they continue for a long time:

- being bullied or exposed to violence or injury
- relationship stress, family conflicts, or the heavy emotions that can accompany a broken heart or

the death of a loved one

- ongoing problems with schoolwork related to a learning disability or other problems, such as ADHD (usually once the problem is recognized and the person is given the right learning support the stress disappears)
- Crammed schedules, not having enough time to rest and relax, and always being on the go.

Some stressful situations can be extreme and may require special attention and care. Posttraumatic stress disorder is a very strong stress reaction that can develop in people who have lived through an extremely traumatic event, such as a serious car accident, a natural disaster like an earthquake, or an assault like rape.

Some people have anxiety problems that can cause them to overreact to stress, making even small difficulties seem like crises. If a person frequently feels tense, upset, worried, or stressed, it may be a sign of anxiety. Anxiety problems usually need attention, and many people turn to professional counselors for help in overcoming them.

1.4.1 SYMPTOMS ::

The symptoms of stress can be either physical or psychological. Stress-related physical illnesses, such as irritable bowel syndrome, heart attacks, arthritis, and chronic headaches, result from long-term over stimulation of a part of the nervous system that regulates the heart rate, blood pressure, and digestive system. Stress-related emotional illness results from inadequate or inappropriate responses to major changes in one's life situation, such as marriage, completing one's education, becoming a parent, losing a job, or retirement. Psychiatrists sometimes use the term adjustment disorder to describe this type of illness. In the workplace, stress-related illness often takes the form of burnout—a loss of interest in or ability to perform one's job due to long-term high stress levels. For example, palliative care nurses are at high risk of burnout due to their inability to prevent their patients from dying or even to relieve their physical suffering in some circumstances.

1.4.2 DIAGNOSIS::

When the doctor suspects that a patient's illness is connected to stress, he or she will take a careful history that includes stressors in the patient's life (family or employment problems, other illnesses, etc.). Many physicians will evaluate the patient's personality as well, in order to assess his or her coping resources and emotional response patterns. There are a number of personality inventories and psychological tests that doctors can use to help diagnose the amount of stress that the patient experiences and the coping strategies that he or she uses to deal with them. A variation on this theme is to identify what the patient perceives as threatening as well as stressful. Stress-related illness can be diagnosed by primary care doctors, as well as by those who specialize in psychiatry. The Doctor will need to distinguish between adjustment disorders and anxiety or mood disorders, and between psychiatric disorders and physical illnesses (e.g., thyroid activity) that have psychological side effects.

1.5 REMEDIES FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT::

What can you do to deal with stress overload or, better yet, to avoid it in the first place? The most helpful method of dealing with stress is learning how to manage the stress that comes along with any new challenge, good or bad. Stress-management skills work best when they're used regularly, not just when the pressure's on. Knowing how to "de-stress" and doing it when things are relatively calm can help you get through challenging circumstances that may arise.

Here are some things that can help keep stress under control:

- Take a stand against over scheduling. If you're feeling stretched, consider cutting out an activity or two, opting for just the ones that are most important to you.
- Be realistic. Don't try to be perfect — no one is. And expecting others to be perfect can add to your stress level, too (not to mention put a lot of pressure on them!). If you need help on something, like schoolwork, ask for it.
- Get a good night's sleep. Getting enough sleep helps keep your body and mind in top shape, making you better equipped to deal with any negative stressors. Because the biological "sleep

clock" shifts during adolescence, many teens prefer staying up a little later at night and sleeping a little later in the morning. But if you stay up late and still need to get up early for school, you may not get all the hours of sleep you need.

- Learn to relax. The body's natural antidote to stress is called the relaxation response. It's your body's opposite of stress, and it creates a sense of well-being and calm. The chemical benefits of the relaxation response can be activated simply by relaxing. You can help trigger the relaxation response by learning simple breathing exercises and then using them when you're caught up in stressful situations. (Click on the button to try one.) And ensure you stay relaxed by building time into your schedule for activities that are calming and pleasurable: reading a good book or making time for a hobby, spending time with your pet, or just taking a relaxing bath.
- Treat your body well. Experts agree that getting regular exercise helps people manage stress. (Excessive or compulsive exercise can contribute to stress, though, so as in all things, use moderation.) And eat well to help your body get the right fuel to function at its best. It's easy when you're stressed out to eat on the run or eat junk food or fast food. But under stressful conditions, the body needs its vitamins and minerals more than ever. Some people may turn to substance abuse as a way to ease tension. Although alcohol or drugs may seem to lift the stress temporarily, relying on them to cope with stress actually promotes more stress because it wears down the body's ability to bounce back.
- Watch what you're thinking. Your outlook, attitude, and thoughts influence the way you see things. Is your cup half full or half empty? A healthy dose of optimism can help you make the best of stressful circumstances. Even if you're out of practice, or tend to be a bit of a pessimist, everyone can learn to think more optimistically and reap the benefits.
- Solve the little problems. Learning to solve everyday problems can give you a sense of control. But avoiding them can leave you feeling like you have little control and that just adds to stress. Develop skills to calmly look at a problem, figure out options, and take some action toward a solution. Feeling capable of solving little problems builds the inner confidence to move on to life's bigger ones — and it can serve you well in times of stress.

1.5.1 TREATMENT ::

Recent advances in the understanding of the many complex connections between the human mind and body have produced a variety of mainstream approaches to stress-related illness. Present treatment regimens may include one or more of the following:

- Medications: These may include drugs to control blood pressure or other physical symptoms of stress, as well as drugs that affect the patient's mood (tranquilizers or antidepressants).
- Stress management programs: These may be either individual or group treatments, and usually involve analysis of the stressors in the patient's life. They often focus on job or workplace-related stress.
- Behavioral approaches: These strategies include relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, and physical exercise programs including walking.
- Massage: Therapeutic massage relieves stress by relaxing the large groups of muscles in the back, neck, arms, and legs.
- Cognitive therapy: These approaches teach patients to reframe or mentally reinterpret the stressors in their lives in order to modify the body's physical reactions.
- Meditation and associated spiritual or religious practices: Recent studies have found positive correlations between these practices and stress hardiness.

1.5.2 ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT::

Treatment of stress is one area in which the boundaries between traditional and alternative therapies have changed in recent years, in part because some forms of physical exercise (yoga, tai chi, aikido) that were once associated with the counterculture have become widely accepted as useful parts of mainstream stress reduction programs. Other alternative therapies for stress that are occasionally recommended by mainstream medicine include aromatherapy, dance therapy, biofeedback, nutrition-based treatments (including dietary guidelines and nutritional supplements), acupuncture, homeopathy, and herbal medicine.

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