

## Understanding and Managing Stress: The health epidemic of 21st Century

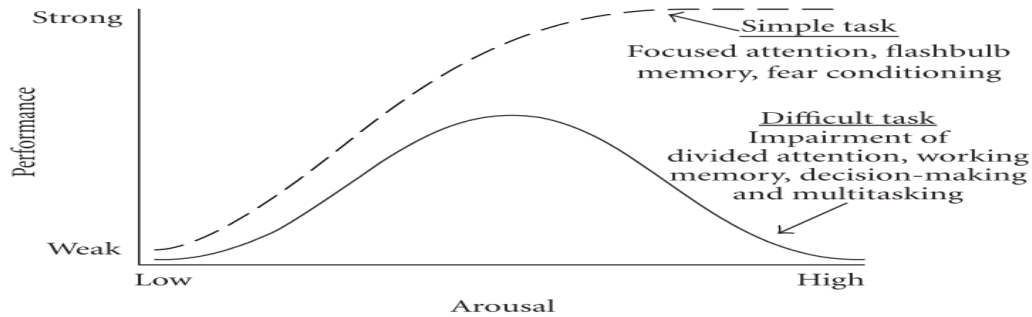
The World Health Organization has called stress the “health epidemic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Anxiety, panic attacks, depression, coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, fears, phobias, irritable bowel, fibromyalgia, ulcers, self-destructive habits like overeating, smoking, alcohol and other drug use all are either caused by or made worse by STRESS. 110 million people die every year as a direct result of stress. That is, seven people every two seconds. As per one of the surveys-

- 80% of workers feel stress on the job
- 42% say their co-workers need help reducing stress
- 40% of workers report their job is “very” or “extremely” stressful (Northwestern National Life)
- 26% said they are “very often burned out by stress” (Yale University)
- Stress is responsible for 30% of all disability claims
- Stress causes American businesses an estimated \$300 billion a year.

So, *it is* important to understand stress.

### **What is Stress?**

Stress occurs when pressure exceeds one’s perceived ability to cope. Stress reaction is something which we have inherited from our caveman ancestors and because of its protective nature, it was passed down genetically through the millennia. Stress reaction is very vital for survival. If a caveman confronts a dangerous animal or an enemy tribe, the stress reaction will be triggered, and his body will go into a temporary state of high alert. And this will make him to fight or take to his/her heels (flight). This is classic “fight or flight response,” mediated by adrenaline, cortisol and other stress hormones, which allowed our predecessors to either defend themselves or flee. Stress can also help in better performance, which is evident from the Yerkes Dodson law diagram given below:



In the first part of the curve, motivation or stress actually improves our efficiency. But past a certain point, the reverse occurs: ongoing stress impedes our effectiveness.

Stress can be positive or negative. *Positive stress* or eustress (also called good stress) is when one perceives a stressful situation as an opportunity that will lead to a good outcome. This positive expectation is in contrast to *negative stress* or *distress* when one perceives a stressor as a threat that will have a poor outcome.

### How stress becomes a problem?

While stress is crucial in real crisis, it is inappropriate in our day-to-day lives. Now think about some scenarios –

- (1) Getting struck in a traffic jam when one is running late to office . Would “fight” or “flight” be an appropriate response? No.
- (2) Not being recognised by the boss, despite hard work. Would “fight” or “flight” be an appropriate response? No.
- (3) You are standing in a long line at the bank. Can you fight or flight? No.
- (4) Government has done demonetization. Can you fight or flight? No.

Dr. Hans Selye, one of the fathers of the stress theory defined stress as “the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it.” The demand can be a threat, a challenge or any change that requires the body to adapt. When one can’t fight or take to one’s heels, stress remains in the body for a long time. Further, our stress reactions are activated far too often, and by situations that are not physically dangerous or life-threatening: rush hour traffic, rude customers, being put on hold, computers that misbehave just when you’re almost finished a document. The result is that we switch on our stress reactions much more often, and for much longer periods of time, than nature intended. The resulting wear and tear on our bodies is not only unpleasant, but unhealthy. The prolonged effect of the stress response is that the

body's immune system is lowered and blood pressure is raised, which may lead to essential hypertension, headaches and more general infection such as colds. The adrenal gland may malfunction, which can result in tiredness, digestive difficulties with a craving for sweet, starchy food, sleep disturbances and dizziness.

### **How would someone know he/she is under stress?**

Stress shows up in four ways: through physical, mental, emotional and behaviour.

- (a) Physical symptoms – The heart beats harder and faster (palpitations), muscles tense, breathing gets faster, the mouth goes dry. We may start sweating or feel a knot in the stomach. There are some chronic symptoms like headaches, dizziness, clenching the jaw or grinding the teeth, tight or sore muscles in the neck or across the tops of the shoulders, chest pains, abdominal symptoms such as indigestion, nausea, cramps, constipation or diarrhea. Back pain and tightness are very common. The hands and feet might tremble or feel cold or sweaty. Appetite may be lost or increased. Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of stress. There are three kinds of insomnia: trouble falling asleep, trouble staying asleep and early awakening.
- (b) Mental symptoms – Difficulty in concentrating. It is hard to remember and memorise things.
- (c) Emotional symptoms – Stressed people feel nervous, anxious, tense, jittery, on edge, restless, or agitated. They may feel irritable, frustrated, impatient or short-tempered. On the other hand, individuals, may find themselves slowing down, feeling flat, apathetic, depressed, sad or blue.
- (d) Behavioural symptoms – Behavioural symptoms include nail biting, compulsive eating, smoking, drinking, talking loudly, blaming or swearing. Some people start moving the knees. Some people fidget or pace back and forth.

### **Where does the stress come from?**

Dr. Hans Selye called these sources “stressors” or “triggers.” The different stressors are as follows:

1. Physical or environmental causes – The first and foremost cause of stress is any physical threat to one's safety. Beyond that, other physical stressors may include noise, big crowds or cluttered surroundings. Some people get stress

by height. Some people get stressed in elevator and some people get stressed in aeroplanes.

2. Social stressors – This includes relationship problems, conflict with co-workers or bosses and feuds with neighbours. Some people who are aggressive, critical, arrogant, loud, unreliable, negative or even boring also causes stress.
3. Institutional stressors – These are the rules and regulations or organizations or society which include arbitrary restrictions, bureaucratic red tape, deadlines, expectations of immediate response (often because of technology), chains of command or pointless formalities, office politics and endless meetings.
4. Major life events – These are changes in life circumstances that can have a stressful impact for months or years, depending on the situation. For example, death of a close relative, losing one's job, separation or divorce, victim of a crime etc.
5. Internal voice – Our internal voice which talks to us also known as “self-talk” or an “internal tape”. The voice comments on everything that goes on. A lot of these statements have a negative tone. We also express stress about what might happen, worrying about the stock market or an upcoming exam. This is called “anticipatory stress”.
6. Stress pathway and our interpretation – Dr Albert Ellis gave rational emotive theory. In the same theory. The same theory can also be defined as stress pathway. The stress pathway consists of four steps. First, an event or situation occurs, which we perceive through our five senses. We then immediately process the information intellectually, forming an interpretation or judgement about what happened. We give meaning to the event – which becomes our “reality”. In the final step, our bodies respond to the interpretation with a stress reaction. But, if you tease it apart, you see these intermediate steps. We react not to the situation, but to our thoughts about the situation. The main assessment we make is (a) “Am I in danger or not?” (b) feeling lack of control (c) anything that hurts your self esteem.
7. Unrealistic expectations – Our unrealistic expectations about situations, people and ourselves also creates stress.

### **Fixed number of stress reactions**

After a certain number of piston thrust thrusts, motors just wear out. Similarly, each of us has a different capacity to withstand repeated stress – a set number of stress reactions programmed into our bodies. Therefore, it would be smart to ask ourselves which situations warrant the expenditure of one of our precious stress reactions.

### **How to cope with stress?**

In order to deal with this epidemic of stress, we can take following steps:

(1) **Maintaining work-life balance** – We should take steps for maintaining balance between work and life. We should make time for a leisure activity. “Leisure” comes from the Latin root “licere” and it literally means permission. So, we should give permission to take time for ourselves. Our decision is not “me first” or “me only,” but “me too.” The good thing about technology is people can reach you anywhere and the bad news about technology is that people can reach you anywhere. Turn off all the tech gadgets and clear the decks so that evening and weekends are for other things. Create decompression or buffer time between work and home by stopping off at the gym or meet a friend. Or, when at home, going for a walk or having a hot bath before starting to prepare for dinner. One should change one’s clothes when one gets home. As long as one wearing office clothes, one feels like one is still at work. Changing into more comfortable clothes creates separation and helps to create a relaxed mindset for the evening.

One of the results of not having work life balance is burnout. This basically happens because of unrealistic expectations, over-identifying with job, career, title or cause, single-minded pursuit of goals, and limited interests and activities beyond the areas of focus.

Another important aspect is delegation for maintaining work-life balance. It is not about passing the buck. It’s about utilizing one’s intelligence, skills and talents to the maximum level. The result is that workers feel valued, trusted and respected. They also feel stimulated, challenged, proud of the responsibility they have been given and validated by the contribution they can

make. When done properly, delegating is a win-win. While delegating following things should be taken care

- Pick the right people
- Give them clear instructions.
- Confirm that they understand the assignment and the timelines.
- Be available to coach or give feedback.
- Hold them accountable for their work.

(2) **Saying No** – One of the most empowering word in English language is also one of the smallest. People who are able to say No have less pressure and feel more in control of their lives. They also have more free time, increased energy and feel better about themselves. Saying No is about recognizing our limits and being selective in what we choose to do. We should say no when

- (a) When exhausted or stressed out.
- (b) When overloaded and out of time.
- (c) When there are higher, more pressing priorities.
- (d) When it's not our job or responsibility.
- (e) When it's not our area of expertise and someone else could do it better.

How to say No? If one says "No" properly, one never actually uses the word "No".

- a) Express a wish to help: "I'd like to do that for you" or "I wish I could be helpful"
- b) Give an explanation: "I am working on a tight deadline" or "I have to get to a dental appointment"
- c) Offer an alternative: "Barb's really good at this"
- d) Offer to do it later: "I can't help you now, but I can do it next Tuesday"
- e) Offer to do part of the task
- f) Ask him/her to help you prioritize: "Which of these projects would you like me to set aside in order to do this one?"
- g) Ask for time to think about it

(3) **Taking care of Sleep** – The biggest disaster for sleep was invention of bulb in 1913 by Thomsan Edison. Until that time most of the adults were getting eight to nine hours of sleep which is needed by a normal person. 100,000 road

accidents a year are attributed to sleepy drivers in United States. If one wonders whether if one is getting enough, here are some criteria to help decide:

- Need for an alarm clock to wake up in morning? Or, two alarm clocks? If the answer is “Yes” then one is sleep deprived
- Wake up feeling refreshed or tired? If the answer is “tired” then one is sleep deprived
- How is the daytime energy? Running out of steam by late afternoon? If the answer is “Yes” then one is sleep deprived
- Sleep Latency Period – How quickly does one fall asleep at night? This is known as sleep latency period. For normal, well-rested people, this transition period takes fifteen to twenty minutes. If one sleeps in less time than that, one is sleep deprived.

Every one hour of sleep lost results in drop of one point of IQ. So, it makes sense to take care of sleep.

(4) **Reduce Caffeine** – Caffeine is such a socially sanctioned substance that we forget it's drug. It stimulates adrenaline release and also blocks a relaxing brain chemical called adenosine. The net result is that it jazzes up the body and produces a stress reaction. It may be better to call coffee “stress in cup.” If one quits caffeine for three weeks, one will feel more calm and relaxed, sleeping better and have more energy, less heartburn and less muscle ache. Caffeine interferes with deep sleep cycles – they get the quantity of sleep but not the quality they need for optimal rest and rejuvenation. Caffeine gets into one's system within minutes, peaks at about an hour and stays in one's system six to ten hours.

(5) **Take break between work** – The need for periodic breaks is supported by science, Dr. Ernest Rossi, in his excellent book “The 20-Minute Break”, explains that we have two-hour cycles throughout the day in which our energy and activity levels rise, peak and then come down. Then our bodies go into a state of physiological rest for about twenty minutes. Dr. Rossi calls these “ultradian” cycles and advocates taking “ultradian healing breaks”. He suggest that, because our productivity is reduced anyway, we should use these twenty-minute periods for rest and recovery. They are a smart investment.

(6) **Taking holiday before one needs them** - This way, one would never *need* the holidays, one can just *enjoy* them. It is a good idea to take timely vacations when one still has the energy to enjoy them.

(7) **Triage** – This is a classic illustration of “first things first” from medical world but the same principle applies in all workplaces. The Stephen Covey’s bestseller “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” gives a model for deciding the first thing first. The Covey model is based on a crucial distinction between things that are urgent and those that are important. Urgency and importance may seem like the same thing, but they’re not. Urgency merely reflects very short time frames, but it may involve trivial matters. Dr. Covey uses a “Time Management Matrix” (see the picture below) to illustrate his principle. There are four quadrants. The top left is for tasks that are both urgent and important. Obviously, this is the place to start. The bottom right contains tasks that are neither urgent nor important. So why even bother doing them? These items should simply fall off the table. The key question is which quadrant should be second. Dr. Covey advocates doing the important things, even if they are not urgent. In fact, if one deals with tasks before they are urgent, they’ll never actually become urgent. This is a key to good prioritization: one needs to be more proactive and less reactive.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<b>1. Necessity - Reduce</b> <b>Tasks that need your immediate attention. Reactive 'fire-fighting'</b>	<b>2. Quality - Increase</b> <b>Habitual, proactive actions that reduce quadrant 1.</b>
Not Important	<b>3. Deception - Manage</b> <b>Things that appear to be worth doing.</b>	<b>4. Waste - Avoid</b> <b>Time wasting activities</b>

(8) **Communication Skills** – Missed communication and mixed messages where people may say one thing and do quite another, creates a lot of stress. Some of the thoughts on improving communication are as follows:



Distinguish between content and process – Every discussion has two parts: the content, or subject matter and the process, or dynamics, of the conversation. The content might be parenting issues, financial problems, social plans, home renovations or each other's behaviour. The process might involve one person monopolizing the conversation (the other has to make a reservation to get a word in!), not paying attention while the other is talking, rambling and going off topic, asking a question and not waiting to hear the answer – or refuting the answer as soon as it's given.

Listen to other persons "reality"- listen with open mind but one can learn a lot if one just listens to understand, not to judge.

Avoid "right/wrong, good/bad, win/lose" conversations – As discussion is not a debate, it should be an honest exchange of ideas and information, a sharing of feelings or an attempt to solve a problem.

**(9) Dealing with difficult people** - Try to lower the expectations from the people accept people and accommodate them. Accepting the people as they are and somewhere accommodating them also lowers the stress. One should be assertive and not aggressive while dealing with people.

**(10) Relaxation techniques – (a) Deep Breathing** - under stress, the chest expands, the shoulders rise and we breathe rapidly in order to take in air quickly. This is sometimes called "military breathing" (as in "chest out, tummy in, look smart"). During relaxation, the abdomen expands with each breath in. This is the way we all breathed when we were infants, and how we still breathe when we are asleep.

**(b) Progressive (muscle) relaxation-** This way of accessing the relaxation response involves focusing on different muscle groups and consciously letting them relax. It goes like this:

- Start from the toes and work up, going slowly and with conscious awareness.
- Focus attention on the muscles of the toes and allow them to relax.
- Then move attention to the muscles of the feet and let them relax.

- Move up to the ankles, then shins, calves, knees and so on, until one has focused on every muscle group in the body.
- As one lets go of tension in each muscle group, continue to be aware of the muscles one has already relaxed, so that one can feel the wave of relaxation rising in the body.

## **Conclusion**

We are living in a stressful world. There are many things we can't control. But if we take more control of the things we do control, we can keep our stress at an optimal-or at least a manageable level. The goal is stress reduction, not stress elimination. There's no such thing as a stress-free life – and even if there was, it'd probably be pretty boring. Stress adds spice to our lives and brings out the best in us. So, one must enjoy the positive stress (eustress) that serves one well and reduce the negative stress (distress) that makes one upset and unwell.

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## **References:**

1. The little book of stress relief – David Posen, MD
2. Stress in health and disease - Dr Hens Selye
3. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey

Disclaimer: The handout is for information purposes only. Readers may refer to relevant circulars/laws/guidelines in this regard.