

STRESS MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES OF THE DEVELOPING SOCIETY – A PERSPECTIVE

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The 21st century has given many buzzwords to grapple with and stress is one of the most talked about. From the high flying corporate society to the crèches of teething infant's nurseries stress as a subject matter is being discussed rather liberally. Though popular usages bear little semblance to the dictionary meaning yet stress continues to be there in the conversations at even the unlikeliest of the places. There can be little doubt that stress is a major new age challenge that has significant consequences for one and all. Why this is so may be a subject of serious research but it can safely be said with a fair degree of confidence that the very nature of the modern society is stressful. One reason is perhaps the grueling pace of change. It is so fast that coping with it has become a problem. The predicament of the modern day human being is very succinctly brought about by the following lines from the world famous author Lewis Carroll in one of the most widely read books Alice in Wonderland – "now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in a same place. If you want to get somewhere you must run twice as fast". This is what is called the new age rat race in which all of us are running to secure our place. It's a mad scramble, the road to nowhere. This is the greatest challenge of the new age.

Go to any modern day nuclear family and you will understand. An infant's mother complains that the child is not taking food. So she has to take leave from her job. Toddler's parents are stressed because they want to put their child to a good school. A primary school kid's parents are stressed because the child is becoming restive and throwing temper tantrums. A high school goer's parents are stressed because they want their ward to crack the IIT. And college goers' parents are bothered about the idiosyncrasies of the adolescence. Stress spares none or rather none can escape stress.

Talking of joint families, children have stress, parents have stress, and grandparents also have stress. Talking of professionals doctors have stress, teachers have stress, actors have stress, engineers have stress, managers have stress. Talking of organizations right from the oldest industry that is the mining industry to the youngest industry that is the IT and ITES, executives across the board have stress. A study of coal mine executives has found a direct negative correlation between executive stress and perceived organizational effectiveness. It was found that executives that fell in high stress group perceived their organization as low on effectiveness dimension (Pathak P, 1992). Similarly, in a recent study on IT & ITES executives it was found that professionals in these industries were experiencing a fair degree of organizational stress (Bhatt S, 2008). In the agricultural sector farmers' suicide is a major issue in India. Stress, then, can be said to be all pervading

and omnipresent. There are no professions as stressful or stress free profession. There are only stressful minds.

METAMORPHOSIS OF STRESS

Is stress a new phenomenon? Perhaps not. Even in the ancient Indian scriptures like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata instances of stress as being life threatening can be found. The death of King Dasahratha in Ramayana and that of King Shantanu in Mahabharata can be attributed to stress due to guilt. Stress is an old concept and its mention can be found even in the Vedic literature in the form of “Dukha” (Grief) and “Dushchinta” (anxiety). The phenomenon is old and pervades the human life right from the birth to death.

In the prehistoric age, stress was there due to factors like threats of wild animals, natural calamities and climatic dangers, inter group conflicts for searching foods and living resources etc. Stress, thus, has been ever since mankind has existed. Stressors of course have changed with time. Modern day stressors are of a different type. Turn on the television and one is likely be bombarded by stories of stock market crash, terrorist attacks, and natural calamities. The fall outs that can be added to this backdrop are layoffs, illnesses, money woes, temper tantrums, and traffic jams. These are the challenges one is more likely to face in his/ her own life. Thus, we find that stressful situations are constant and inevitable.

A historical background of stress is needed in order to understand how changing times have impacted the nature and effect of stress. In prehistoric days Mother Nature was the source of all stress as the human settlements were not organized and had to depend on vagaries of nature. With progress of science and technology this changed and human beings could manage to face nature with greater confidence. However, other stressors replaced nature. Wars and conflicts for power became source of stress. With the emergence of industrial society new forms of stressors replaced the earlier ones. Rather, they were added to the list of the already existing ones.

Over the centuries we have seen an enormous change in the nature of society and work place. With the advent of mass production in the early 20th century, the nature of society and work place changed. People had to cope with technology as well as nature. In the new millennium things changed further.

New technology and increasing automation of industry has led to simplification of work. The main features of these changes are downsizing and flattened organizational structure rather than pyramidal ones. This period has brought a shift from rigid workforce to flexible workforce. Thus, permanent jobs have given way to short term contract leading to greater insecurity. The changes witnessed in last 50 years have brought new problems for the society and organizations leading to stress in organizations and society as a whole.

STRESS AND THE NEW AGE

Stress is a term which is being used in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is used as a noun when it is mentioned as a challenging event that is faced. It is also used as a verb referring to a mental physical condition. At times it is also used as a verb referring to an activity or a time. This has led to certain degree of disagreement about what exactly is stress but it certainly is a condition that has implications for human beings. The human beings encounter threats of various kinds in their lives which cause stress and thereby disrupt the psychological homeostasis. Attempts to neutralise this stress is what demands efforts on the part of the human beings. The problem arises when the demands thus made tax or exceed the adaptive capacity of an organism resulting in psychological and biological changes which place a person at a risk for disease (Cohen et al 1995). As one cannot live with continuous stress various coping mechanism are resorted to which help in changing perceptions and attitudes and diminishing the impact of stress. It is not just the individual's creation; the society has created a culture of this kind. The result is that the stress tolerance level of individuals has gone down.

Health and stress links are well established. There are studies to support stress and health links dating back to more than six decades ago. The seminal work of Hans Selye has proved this with a considerable degree of certainty. Chronic stress is harmful for individuals and organizations as well. Stress may be responsible for many physical ailments. Some of these are hypertension, coronary heart disease, migraine headaches, peptic ulcer, arthritis, colitis, diarrhea, asthma, sexual problems, muscle tension, allergies, backache and cancer.

The link between stress and illness has to be seen from a broader perspective. There are direct physiological impacts that may create pathological changes in organisms leading to serious health consequences. But there are indirect connections also, for example stress may lead to illness by increasing health risk behaviour of people like alcohol consumption, smoking or taking drugs. Sometimes, stress may affect prognosis and impair the ability to recuperate.

According to many researchers (Pestonjee, 1983) there are three important segments of life in which stress originates, namely organisational, social and intrapsychic. These represent the total work environment; the socio cultural context of one's life and personal and intimate psychological issues, respectively. Stress may emanate from either or all of these. The lifestyle changes that we are witnessing today are both a cause as well as an effect of stress.

Reports suggest that in the last few years people have become impatient and their tolerance level has gone down immensely. They are so stressed that they even think of committing suicides even when the problem is not very big. More often than not it is the society that is to be blamed (The Sunday Pioneer, New Delhi). Although correlating stress and suicide will need far deeper probing, it can safely be concluded that stress is a predisposing factor in suicides. It has been

found that in India one married man commits suicide every nine minutes whereas one married woman takes her life every seventeen minutes. (The Telegraph, Kolkata November 20, 2011). One probable reason is that this is due to work pressure, inability to tackle sorrow and laws bias against men. Thus, it ultimately boils down to cracking under pressure that results in ending one's own life.

Fear of ragging drives students joining top educational institutes to end their lives, failures in plus two examinations culminates in teen age suicides. Self harm is becoming common among women. A Lancet study has found that self harm has become a common global health problem particularly among 15 – 25 year old women. In a systematic study published in Lancet (Times of India, New Delhi) the authors followed a sample of young people from 1992 to 2008. The sample had a mean age of 15 years during the entry period of 1992 – 93 and a mean age of 29 years during the final wave of follow up in 2008. It was found that almost one in twelve young people inflicted self harm as adolescents with more girls being involved in such acts. While the psychologists may give different explanations ranging from depression to anxiety, stress seems to be a major predisposing factor.

Suicide is not the only result of inability to tolerate stress. There are other outcomes also, particularly on the health front. The rising incidence of coronary heart diseases, diabetes and depression point out to the tightening grip of stress on society.

A recent report quoting a Lancet study suggests that the annual spending on account of diabetes treatment in India is pegged at Rs 1.5 lakh crores, 4.7 times the allocation of central Government on health (Times of India, New Delhi). The increase in case of diabetes cases between 1990 and 2013 is 123 percent. The rise in cases of coronary heart diseases has also been attributed to stress.

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

What causes stress is the question that needs to be answered. Difficult to identify, but if we can find the answer we can perhaps conquer stress. Anything and everything can cause stress. Hired, fired, wired or tired – whatever be the situation, it can cause stress. Till one does not have a job the anxiety of finding one causes stress. Once in, the anxiety is about finding a suitable job leading to stress. Sometimes the boss becomes the cause of the stress sometimes the subordinates. And if one is able to cope with these the peers are there to give stress. The demands of the job cause stress, the fear of losing it can also cause stress. The list is unending.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Individuals have a far greater capacity to control psychological and somatic stress response than was earlier supposed. The development and discovery of new technologies and procedures have opened up possibilities for individuals to assume greater control and regulation of stress – impelled problems.

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The answer lies in making individuals more competent to cope with stress by raising their stress tolerance. The basic prescription is resorting to continuous self appraisal leading to self renewal. There are certain simple ways of self renewal which can go a long way in increasing stress tolerance, if practiced regularly. These tips are as under –

- ✓ Prayer or meditation – this is the most common way to fight stress. Surrender to God with complete faith gives a person the courage to face consequences. Sometimes, meditation is treated as something different from prayers but it has to be remembered that prayer also is a kind of meditation. However, there are several myths about prayers largely pertaining to rituals. It needs to be remembered that there can be many best ways of reaching to God.
- ✓ Relaxation – this is largely a person specific response and the problem arises when people start looking for one-size-fits-all prescriptions. However, there are certain universal relaxants. What is relaxation has to be understood first. While there is considerable difference of opinion, one feeling that is closest to relaxation is that it is a state in which a person experiences ‘anand’ or bliss even for a short duration. But, many people seek relaxation in alcohol, tobacco or drugs. This view is erroneous. These things ultimately lead to more stress as they fill the subconscious with some kind of negative feelings.
- ✓ Seek opportunities for laughter – Laughter is always said to be the best medicine and it works. Laughter brings pleasure from within. So laugh your way to happiness and don’t miss the slightest opportunity for laughing. This is basically an attribute of personality and some people are miserly in laughing. A hearty laughter involves a large number of body organs.
- ✓ Exercise the body – fresh oxygenated blood is an important requirement of a healthy body and a healthy body is needed for a healthy mind. Physical exercises are needed for this and are as important as daily breakfast. But, like medicine the dosage is again individual specific so physical exercise is a must but only as much as you can. Aerobics and brisk walking are supposed to be good for all.
- ✓ Exercise the mind – just like the body the mind needs to be exercised. There are studies to suggest that the brain that is not stimulated gradually shrinks. Television and computers are two electronic devices that have been impacting negatively. In fact a Harvard study suggests that excessive dependence on computers or electronic gadgets diminishes brain power. Reading and thinking activities are best stimulants for brain.
- ✓ Proper diet – food and temperament are supposed to be correlated and the ancient Indian scriptures / literature have referred to *satvik* (pure and

vegetarian) and *tamsik* (very spicy, oily and non-vegetarian) food which have positive and negative impact on *swabhava* (temperament) respectively. Fruits, sprouted grains, green vegetables, dry fruits etc. are known to be helpful in keeping a person mentally and physically healthy.

- ✓ Think positive – Pessimism and negative thoughts have been known to increase melancholic feelings leading to poor mental health. Human behaviour and feelings are creations of attitude and it is positive thinking that leads to sound mental health. Human beings are born with three basic emotions, viz, love, hate and rage of which love is positive while the other two are negative. Replace negative with the positive and attain sound mental health.
- ✓ Create balance – Over doing is a tendency which almost always leads to hankering, dissatisfaction and frustration. It is the age old wisdom that excess of anything is bad. The golden mean as advocated by Buddha then is the answer. You work to live and therefore, it is important to ensure that you live so that you can work. Work life balance is important and that holds the key to a peaceful mental state.
- ✓ Seek small pleasures – there is an old story that a person too burdened with work and life pressures went to a doctor for advice. The doctor advised for a rest and change. The person took a vacation to hill station only to return poorer and more distressed, compelled to see the doctor again. The doctor wondered what went wrong. The persons reply serves as an eye opener – “The waiter got the change and the rest went to hotel”. Pleasure is a state of mind that depends not on the hotel or the locale, but on a person’s mental state. Even some hot *pakoras* (snacks) and tea on your terrace can be exciting and enjoyable with a right frame of mind.
- ✓ Get a good night sleep – nothing is as relaxing as a good night’s sleep. But getting it is the trick. Not all are blessed with the ability to sleep peacefully. However, it has to be borne in mind that if you follow the above nine tips sleep will come automatically. On the other hand if you are getting a good night’s sleep you don’t need to follow the remaining nine tips. However, don’t go for those television serials that keep you guessing whats gonna happen tomorrow, just before you sleep. Some children’s stories or light music will definitely help.

CONCLUSION

The changes that have occurred in the world like technological changes, economic changes, socio-cultural changes and political changes have impacted human nature and thought processes. This has resulted in a kind of conflict as the changes demand a corresponding change in the human nature but being fairly slow to adapt the

human nature finds it difficult to meet the demands of these changes. In fact, this problem of adjustment to the external environment has been very succinctly expressed by Fred Luthans in following words, "You can bring the man out of the stone age but you can't bring the stone age out of man." The reason is primarily because man is still born with the same basic emotions of fear, love and rage. And what is happening can again be summed up by another stone age quote that says – "The stone age was marked by clever use of crude tools. The information age is marked by the crude use of clever tools."

We, thus, find the following changes in human personality. There can be little doubt that human being has become more informed and knowledgeable. But when it comes to using this knowledge judiciously human being is found wanting.

There was a time when we believed in the popular adage that little knowledge is dangerous. It may be that the fear of the unknown, the fear of uncertainty created an insecurity syndrome but this has worsened with more knowledge. We find that there is more uncertainty and more insecurity. Human beings are having more but they want to possess more. Moreover, the demands on him from all quarters have also increased. Thus, the environmental demands have also become more pressing. Little knowledge is definitely dangerous but information is proving even more dangerous.

Another problem that has cropped up is the multiplicity of needs which is a result of the bombardment of information as a result of infiltration of media in the highly competitive and consumerist society. Aspirations are rising but achievements do not match correspondingly. This achievement - aspiration gap is a source of frustration that causes stress. Sometimes aspirations are so high that they develop quixotic tendencies. These in many cases develop delusions resulting in paranoid behavior. Modern society is today witnessing a rise in people with such delusions particularly delusions of grandeur and delusion of persecution.

In the new age stress is going to come any case and will have its impact. It can neither be wished away nor can it be cordoned off. The solution lies in keeping stress away for as much time as one can so that the body gets time to rejuvenate. Stress is certainly the greatest new age challenge but mastering it will open far greater avenues for growth. And mastering stress is possible.

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