

Management of Stress for Longer, Healthier and Happier Living: Some Simple Control Measures

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Abstract

Stress was described as any factor which threatens the body, or that has adverse effects on its functioning. Stress is an inevitable health problem confronting us everyday, and only death brings complete freedom from it. Many people are predisposed to many health problems and peoples health challenges are being complicated by factors of stress, and yet many are dying of causes not unrelated to stress. So this study may enable these individuals, not only to identify stressors in their lives, but also be able to apply simple coping devices. The paper is therefore of significance, not only to avoid stressors, but also to mitigate the effects for a healthier, longer and happier living. To this end, this paper may urge every individuals to take up the responsibility of the challenges involved in managing the stress. Though stress predisposes individuals to many health problems, but with appropriate lifestyle modifications, one may be able to manage and cope with stress effectively for a longer, healthier and happier living. Such simple coping devices include; social support, effective communication, physical exercises, adequate nutrition, adequate sleep, time management, belief in God, relaxation, and cognitive technique. Therefore, this paper concludes that individuals should develop and apply the aforementioned coping devices, suitable for them, for effective management and control of stress in their lives.

Keywords: Stress, Relaxation, Physical exercises, Nutrition, Cognitive techniques, Social support

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a response to stressor. Responses may be physical, emotional and behavioral, and are intimately interrelated. The more intense the emotional response, the stronger the physical responses, and effective behavioral responses if not well managed, the greater the deleterious health consequences. Effective behavioral responses can reduce stress, ineffective ones can worsen it (Insel and Roth, 2006). Sometimes people have such intense emotional responses and such ineffective or counterproductive behavioral responses to stressor that they seek professional help with learning to cope. More often, however, people can learn to handle stressors on their own.

However, everybody talk about stress. People say they are “tired”, “overstressed” or “stressed out”. People blame stress for headaches, or ulcers, and many other health problems, and they try to combat stress with physical exercise or with drugs. Most people associate stress with negative events; the death of a close relative or friend, financial problems, or other unpleasant life changes that create nervous tension. However, Insel and Roth (2006) affirmed that stress is not merely nervous tension, and it is not something to be avoided at all cost. Infact, only death brings complete freedom from stress. Stress is unavoidable nobody can run away from it. It is a monster that confronts every individual, irrespective of status, age, race, and sex, in school, business,

workplace, home e.t.c. It is also a health challenge which aggravates other health problems. Yet stress confronts us because of working and living in modern civilization. Therefore, everybody is helpless, and at times oblivious of what to do with stress in their lives. In the light of this, the simple coping devices discussed in this paper became imperative in managing stress and in ameliorating the deleterious health consequences.

Though it is inevitable, stress is not an insurmountable health challenge. Stress may be controlled through appropriate lifestyle modification. Lifestyle modification aimed at avoidance of stressors, social support, communication, physical exercises, adequate nutrition, time management, enough sleep, belief in God, cognitive techniques, thinking and acting constructively, and relaxation techniques, according to Insel and Roth (2006); Barnes et al (2004); Turk (2001); and Brannon and Feist (2007), may be pertinent in stress management. Therefore, these simple and practical methods of dealing with stressful situations were discussed in the paper.

Stress Management

Stress is one of the major health problems that confront us every day. We cannot run away from it, we have to learn to live with it. One has to identify and moderate one’s stressors and learn to control the stress in one’s life instead of allowing the stress to

control us. Those who manage, and control stress effectively, not only are healthier, but also live longer, have more time to enjoy life and accomplish their goals.

Managing one's stress involve, according to Insel and Roth (2006), shoring up one's social support system; improving one's communication skills; developing and maintaining healthy exercises, eating, and sleeping habits; and mastering simple techniques to identify and moderate individual's stressors. Similarly, some authorities considered behavioral techniques to be part of mind-body medicine and thus, part of complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) (Barnes et al; 2004). However, psychologists tend to focus on the behavioural aspects of stress control techniques and to consider them as part of psychology. The practice of stress management most often employs multi-modal approaches that combine several techniques (Turk, 2001). In view of this, Brannon and Feist (2007) suggested relaxation training; hypnotic treatment; biofeedback; cognitive behavior therapy; and emotional disclosure as methods of coping with stress.

However, this paper focused on, and discussed other equally effective techniques for stress management as presented below:

1. **Social Support:** That wise saying goes that "a problem shared is half solved". People need people. Sharing fears, frustrations, and joys, not only makes life richer, but also seems to contribute to the well-being of body and mind. Research by Insel and Roth, (2006) supports this conclusion. Furthermore, Insel and Roth (2006) and Brannon and Feist (2007) opined that participation in a support group has been shown to improve the emotional health of patients; and that people with a strong social support system are better able to withstand the stress of major life changes. It becomes imperative, therefore, to engage in meaningful connections with others to control stress.
2. **Communication:** Some people often find themselves angry at others all the time, and express their anger indirectly by excessively criticizing others or making cynical comments. A person who is angry with others, according to Insel and Roth (2006) often has difficulty forming and maintaining successful social relationships. Develop better communication skills; learn to listen to others and to express your needs and desires non aggressively. Increase you communication skills in order to decrease stress in your relationships at school, at work, and at home. On the other hand, do not suppress your feelings and needs entirely, develop the
3. **Physical Exercise:** Physical exercise helps maintain a healthy body, organs, and mind and even stimulate the growth of new brain cells. Regular physical activities can reduce various aspects of stress as well. Bucher, Sancier and Holman's (2004) study found that taking a long walk can help decrease anxiety and blood pressure. Another study found that just a brisk 10 minutes' walk leaves people feeling more relaxed and energetic for up to 2 hours. Insel and Roth (2006) affirmed that people who exercise regularly react with milder physical stress responses before, during and after exposure to stressor. It is not hard to incorporate light to moderate exercise into your day. Walk to class or bike to the store instead of driving; use the stairs instead of the elevator; take a walk with a friend or a student round the school campus; learn to jog for life; play table tennis, badminton, and do some flexibility and endurance exercise. It is important to find an activity that you enjoy, so it can become a habit and thereby an effective stress reducer.
4. **Nutrition:** Adequate nutrition, comprising balance diet with required calories is imperative for every individual at all times, particularly, during stressful situations. A healthy diet will give you an energy bank to draw on whenever you experience stress (Insel and Roth, 2006; Ajala 2006, Alade 2001). Eating wisely may also enhance individuals feelings of self-control and self-esteem. Avoidance, or limiting caffeine is important in stress management. Caffeine is a mildly addictive stimulant that leaves some people jittery, irritable, and unable to sleep. Insel and Roth (2006) affirmed that consuming Caffeine during stressful situations can raise blood pressure, and increase levels of cortisol. Tea, Cola, some soft drinks, chocolate, and many over the counter drugs, including cold remedies, aspirin, and weight-loss preparations, also contain caffeine, sometimes in high doses.
5. **Sleep:** Adequate sound sleep is good in the management of stress, during which all the organs rejuvenate. Lack of sleep (insomnia) can be both cause and an effect of excess stress. Without sufficient sleep, experts affirmed that our mental and psychical processes steadily deteriorates (Ajala, 2006, Brannon and Feist, 2007; and Insel and Roth, 2006). According to the experts, one gets headaches, feel irritable, are unable to concentrate, forget things, and maybe more susceptible to weight gain and illness, with insufficient sleep.

On the other hand, adequate sleep improves mood, fosters feelings of competence and self-worth, and supports optimal mental and emotional functioning. But acute sleep deprivation slows the day time decline in stress hormones, so evening levels are higher than normal. A decrease in total sleep time also causes an increase in the release of stress hormones. Together, these changes may cause an increase in stress hormones levels throughout the day and may contribute to mental and physical deterioration (Insel and Roth, 2006). Therefore, adequate sleep is a panacea for stress management.

6. **Time Management:** Another method of controlling stress is through time consciousness. A surprising number of the stressor in most people's lives relates to time (Insel and Roth, 2006). Many people never seem to have enough time, and they always seem to feel overwhelmed by the pace of their lives. With time consciousness, individual should allot time for the accomplishment of all their responsibilities, and yet reserve enough for their recreation and rest. Procrastination should be avoided as much as possible and perfectionism should be left to the limit of individual's ability.
7. **Belief in God:** Believing in God involve a high level of faith and commitment with respect to a well-defined belief system that gives a sense of meaning and purpose to existence (Holy Bible, 2004). Believing in God also proves an ethical path to personal fulfillment that includes connectedness with self, others and the Supreme Being. Overall, there appears to be a positive relationship between spirituality and adaptive coping, suggesting that aspects of spirituality and spiritual practices through meditative relaxation can play a significant role as a personal resource for coping with stress (Benson, 1975; Benson, Beary and Carol, 1974). Spirituality can be enhanced through many activities, including participation in organized religion, spending time and money in working for God, helping others, engaging in personal practices such as meditation and prayer.
8. **Cognitive Techniques:** It has been observed by Insel and Roth, (2006), and Brannon and Feist, (2007) that some stressors arise from our own minds. According to them, ideas, beliefs, perceptions, and patterns of thinking can add to our stress level. Therefore, the cognitive techniques described below, though require practice and patience, may help to cope with stress.
 - a. **Think and Act Constructively:** Do not worry yourself about problems, think about things you can control, consider the positive steps you can take to solve them, and then carry them out. Remember that successful prediction of a stressful event is a major factor determining the magnitude of the stress response. For instance, in the evening, try to predict stressful events you might encounter the following day and determine the stress response, e.g. will you see someone who makes you uncomfortable? If so, decide now how you will interact with that person. By so doing, you are likely to manage the stress effectively.
 - b. **Take Control:** A situation often feels more stressful if you are not in control of it. When you feel your environment is controlling you instead of the other way round, take charge. Consider issues critically before you take decision. Do not accept when you have to reject and regret later. Do not say "Yes" when you have to say "No".
 - c. **Modify your Expectation:** The fewer expectations you have, the more you can live spontaneously and joyfully. The more you expect from others, the more often you will feel let down. And trying to meet the expectations others have of you is often futile, and stress may ensue.
 - d. **Maintain Positivity:** If you catch your mind beating up on you, problems surrounding you, near hopeless situation, almost giving-up, talk to yourself and say, I will make it, it is not over yet, smile at the situation, tell yourself that with God, all things are possible e.t.c Learning to talk to yourself positively will encourage you to calm down, thus drastically reducing the stress.
 - e. **Cultivate Your Sense of Humour:** In the words of Insel and Roth (2006), when it comes to stress, laughter may be the best medicine. Even a fleeting smile produces changes in your autonomic nervous system that can lift your spirit. And a few minutes of belly laughing can be as invigorating as brisk exercise. Hearty laughter elevates your heart rate, aids digestion, ease pain and triggers the release of endorphins and other pleasurable and stimulating chemicals in the brain (Insel and Roth, 2006). Furthermore, after a good laugh, your muscles go slack, your pulse and blood pressure dip below normal. You are relaxed. So cultivate the ability to laugh at yourself and you will have a handy and instantly effective stress reliever.
 - f. **Live in the Present:** Brannon and Fiest (2007) and Insel and Roth (2006), opined that dogging one's mind by re-living past events, and clinging to experience and emotions, particularly, unpleasant one's, are very stressful and can be deadly. Forget unpleasant past experiences, clear your mind of the old debris, and free yourself to enjoy life today.
 - g. **Go with the Flow:** The adage says that "the branch that bends in the storm does not break". Try as much as possible to flow with your life,

by accepting the things you cannot change. Learn to forgive of your own faults and those of others. View challenges as an opportunity to learn and grow. Be flexible and avoid being rigid. By so doing you can make stress work for you, rather than against you, thereby enhancing your overall wellness.

9. **Relaxation Technique:**Insel and Roth (2006) described relaxation as a physiological state characterized by a feeling of warmth and quiet mental alertness. This is the opposite of the fight-or-flight reaction. When the relaxation responses is triggered by a relaxation technique, heart rate, breathing, and metabolism slows down. Blood pressure and oxygen consumption decrease. At the same time, blood pressure and oxygen consumption decrease. At the same time, blood flow to the brain and skin increases, and brain waves shift from an alert beta rhythm to a relaxed alpha rhythm. Practiced regularly, relaxation techniques can counteract the debilitating effects of stress (Blanchard and Andrasiki, 1985).

Three of the relaxation techniques that can easily be carried out by individual's are:

- a. **Deep Breathing:** Individual's breathing pattern has been found to be closely related to one's stress level. Deep, slow breathing is associated with relaxation, but rapid, shallow, often irregular breathing occurs during the stress response. With practice, you can learn to slow and quiet your breathing pattern, thereby also, quieting your mind and relaxing your body (Gallagher, 2003). This method of breathing techniques can be used for on-the-spot tension relief, as well as for long-term-stress reduction.

This method involves changing chest breathing to diaphragmatic, that is belly breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing is slower and deeper than chest breathing, and thus helps relieve tension and stress [Stop stress with deep breath, 1996, Breathing for health and relaxation 1995, when you're stressed, catch your breath 1995).

- b. **Progressive Relaxation:** This method involves contracting (tense), and then relaxing the muscles in your body, group by group. This method, also known as deep muscle relaxation, helps you become aware of the muscle tension that occurs under stress. When the tensed muscles are relaxed, consciously, other systems of the body get the message and ease up on the stress response.

You may start the technique with the right wrist first, inhale as you tense it, and exhale as you relax it. Repeat this with the left wrist, involve all other muscles,

breath-in as you contract the muscles, and breath-out as you relax the muscles. This technique is valuable in relieving stress.

- c. **Listening to Music:** Listening to music is a method of inducing relaxation (www.dmta.org). Listening to music has been shown to influence pulse, blood pressure, and the electrical activity of muscles (Insel and Roth, 2006). Exposure to rhythmic music helps people to reduce stress response. To experience the stress-management benefits of music, set aside a time to listen. Choose music that you enjoy and makes you feel relaxed, play it, enjoy it, it will surely relieve your stress response.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consequent upon literature review, this paper concludes that stress is inevitable, and it predisposes individuals to many deleterious health consequences, but it could be managed. On this basis, the following recommendations were made.

1. Adequate nutrition should be taken because it is imperative in the management of stress.
2. Individuals should get involved in social support activities, physical exercises, relaxation, and develop effective communication skills for managing stress.
3. Health education of the masses, focused on the deleterious effects of stress, and coping devices to mitigate the consequences should be carried out by health educators.

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