

Stress in the 21st century essay



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“ Stress is an epidemic in the 21st century and impacts on people’s behaviour in many ways. Discuss in light of the literature.

” Stress is a term that is frequently used in everyday conversation. The conventional meaning of the word stress - too much to do, too much to worry about - was not part of the vocabulary some fifty years ago. In the 1930s the Hungarian scientist Hans Selye, the godfather of stress research, took an engineering concept and applied it to humans 1. Stress in general refers to force exerted on a system. In human terms however it would more correctly refer to circumstances that either threaten or are perceived to be threatening to a person’s wellbeing and consequently be taxing on their ability to cope with these circumstances 2. There is also stress which is not as particularized or subjective, such as ambient stress.

This stress encompasses situations like constant environmental conditions which are difficult, if not impossible, to control by the individual, i. . excessive noise, traffic, pollution and crowding². According to Ewart and Suchday’s, researchers ⁶ who developed a scale called City Stress Inventory (CSI), urban poverty and violence can also be considered as sources of environmental stress ².

An important point to make is that the perception of a threat can be as stressing as an actual threat and the body and brain can react in exactly the same way as a result. Body and mind relationship have been studied by medical researchers for a long time now. The so-called placebo effect is a good example of this phenomenon where in clinical experiments, people who are given inert substances made to look like medicines, such as a sugar pill,

often experience the same health improvement as those patients who are given real medication. Researchers have also noted that some conditions and illnesses have no physical explanations. Doctors classify these conditions as psychosomatic, as they seem to be caused by the psyche 8.

It is also worth noting that the same event may be stressful to one person and be non-stressful to another³. As Lazarus and Folkman assert, there is both a primary and a secondary appraisal of stress. Therefore, the level of stress that one particular event can produce will depend not only on whether the person views the event as a threat or not (being the primary appraisal), but also how the person will assess their own coping ability towards the level of stress that is anticipated from the event (being the secondary appraisal)

4. It is therefore fair to say that stress lies in the eye of the beholder 2. Dr Suzanne Kobasa also confirmed that some individuals are more stress resistant than others. These “ stress-hardy” people are more likely to have a sense of control over events in their lives, a strong commitment to something outside of themselves, and an ability to view stress and change as challenges and opportunities instead of threats 5.

Shelley Taylor in her book *Positive Illusions* reviews the evidence and concludes that it is the feeling of being in control, more than the actual degree of control we have, that comforts us and insulates us from stress 7. It is important to understand that stress is only harmful when it is excessive, acute and/or chronic. A lot of the stress that we all experience is helpful as it can stimulate, challenge and motivate us. An attempt to avoid stress completely is virtually impossible and would lead to a rather boring

existence. Human beings appear to also need a level of eustress, a type of stress that is fun and excitement, in their life in order to keep them vital.

The problem comes when one experiences too much stress¹. Acute stress is experienced in response to an immediate perceived threat, either physical, emotional or psychological. Chronic stress on the other hand is a state of ongoing physiological arousal¹. This occurs when the body experiences so many stressors that the body's nervous system rarely has a chance to relax. Human beings are better suited to handle acute stress, not chronic stress.

The now well-known "fight or flight response", originally conceptualised by Walter Cannon, was designed to help us fight a few life-threatening situations spaced out over a long period of time. When experienced over prolonged periods it can wear down our bodies and cause us to become ill, either physically or emotionally¹. Chronic stress occurs too frequently from our modern day lifestyle of the 21st Century everything from high-pressure jobs to loneliness to busy traffic can keep the body in a constant state of perceived or actual threat and is now being seen as an epidemic¹¹. "Stress and its related co-morbid diseases are responsible for a large proportion of disability worldwide.

The World Health Organization's Global Burden of Disease Survey estimates that mental disease, including stress-related disorders, will be the second leading cause of disabilities by the year 2020"¹². Of the many types of stress, four major ones tend to stand out; frustration, conflict, change and pressure. . Frustration Frustration is the experience of having one's path or access to a goal blocked. A goal may be blocked because an obstacle has

been placed to prevent access or alternatively a goal may be inaccessible because one lacks the resources to reach it.

This blockage can increase a person's readiness to aggress. This is known as the frustration-aggression principle. Frustration can create anger which may in some people generate aggression. Frustrations would therefore be considered as instances of preventive events 8.

The loss and/or failure to enjoy a comfortable immediate milieu which includes peacefulness, agreeable surrounding temperature, clean air and adequate privacy would also be considered an environmental frustrating and stressful situation. 2. Conflict Conflict is probably the most common stressor. Conflict can be internal such as guilt or blame for not living up to standards. Conflict can also be external in which case it is the experience of incompatible goals or demands. Two people are in conflict when they seek the same limited resource: if one acquires it, the other will not.

Gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin described conflict as involving two kinds of forces between persons and goals: approach and avoidance. Approach is the attraction toward a desired goal, while avoidance is the aversion felt toward an undesirable state or event. Given that conflict involves two or more incompatible goals, approach and avoidance combine to form various forms of conflict 9. A.

Approach-Approach Conflict In approach-approach conflict, one must choose between two mutually exclusive attractive goals, for example deciding between having two types of meals that are favourites: Indian or Thai cuisine. This is the least stressful of conflicts. B. Avoidance-Avoidance

Conflict An unpleasant experience is avoidance-avoidance conflict, where one must choose which of two threatening or unpleasant possibilities can be escaped. Coping with such conflict usually involves choosing the 'lesser of two evils', e. g.

going to the dentist or living with a toothache. C. Approach-Avoidance

Conflict The most difficult conflicts to resolve are approach-avoidance conflicts, where one is both attracted and repelled by the same goal.

Approach-avoidance conflicts are complex and difficult to resolve, because both the attraction and the repulsion create tension, especially as the deadline for making a decision approaches, for example you have been offered the job of your dreams but it involves moving to a city your partner does not want to move to. When avoidance becomes stronger than approach, the result is that one often panics, pulls back, becomes attracted again, and continues in a cycle of fluctuation until matters are otherwise resolved 9.

3. Change Change is a major source of stress. Change challenges us to let go of the past, especially the comfortable, old ways of doing, and to accept new challenges and opportunities for growth. This type of interruption to our daily routines is likely to cause us stress, even when the changes are beneficial and acceptable 2, such as normal life milestones like the birth of a baby, having a child go off to school, or retiring. 4. Pressure There are two varieties of pressure.

The first being the pressure to perform, for example meeting a deadline, getting good grades, completing a required task. The second being the

pressure to conform, e. g. meeting other people's expectations in speaking, dressing, behaving a certain way. It is commonly thought that this pressure to conform or perform is compelled by outside sources; however studies have shown that pressure can also be self-imposed through either unattainable expectations or in an effort to fit in a certain group or to obtain a certain status level 2.

As previously discussed, stress triggers the body's response to perceived threat or danger, referred to as the "flight-or-flight response", originally named for its ability to enable our ancestors to physically fight or run away when faced with danger 10. During this reaction certain hormones like adrenalin and cortisol are released, speeding the heart rate, slowing digestion, shunting blood flow to major muscle groups, and changing various other autonomic nervous functions, giving the body a burst of energy and strength. In our modern world, this response is now activated in situations where neither running nor fighting is appropriate, like in traffic jams or during a stressful day at work. When the perceived threat is gone, systems are designed to return to normal levels via the relaxation response. But in this 21st century due to our constant exposure to stress triggers, these systems are not allowed to return to their normal levels often enough resulting in chronic stress which is damaging our bodies and brains 11.

This type of chronic stress can lead to burn-out which is a physical and emotional exhaustion which also include cynicism and a low sense of self-worth. When faced with an over-activated autonomic nervous system, our body begins to show physical symptoms which at first are relatively mild, like chronic headaches and increased susceptibility to colds. With further long

term exposure to stress more serious health problem may develop. Research has found that psychological and psychosomatic conditions such as depression, diabetes, hair loss, heart disease, hyperthyroidism, obesity, obsessive-compulsive disorders, sexual dysfunction, tooth and gum diseases, ulcers, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, anorexia nervosa, tuberculosis, asthma, arthritis and even cancer are thought to be caused in part, if not fully, by stress.

This is mainly due to the negative effect chronic stress has on the immune system¹¹. In summary, the many sources of stress can be divided into four categories; 1. Our thoughts or the way we think affects how we respond to stressful situations. Negative self-talk, perfectionism, catastrophising, 'all or nothing' thinking, living by "shoulds" and "should nots" and over-generalising all contribute to increased level of stress. 2. Our environment such as crowds, noise, traffic and sharing our space with others either at work, at home or at play.

3. Physiological, such as when we have illnesses, injuries, hormonal fluctuations and inadequate sleep or nutrition. . Our physical reaction to stress: Any stressful situation causes definite physical changes. It is part of the stress syndrome.

As previously mentioned the heartbeat quickens, the blood pressure rises, alertness increases, memory is also increased, sensitivity to pain decreases. Sugar is release to the muscles which increases muscle strength so muscles stiffen. The digestive system is affected as acid production is increased 1.

This natural physical process is designed to build-up and then to release. The

problem arises because many of us in this 21st century do not get to the release part.

We therefore stay in this constant “hyped up” state and this causes stress reactions and our bodies then react accordingly by suffering physical symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, backaches, ulcers, insomnia. The body can also react by experiencing emotional symptoms like irritability, depression, anger, anxiety, mood swings. Cognitive symptoms like difficulty to concentrate, forgetfulness as well as unwanted or repetitive thoughts can also be the result of stress reactions. Cynicism, taking things too personally, inappropriate explosions of anger or tears, alcohol or drug over usage, are the types of important warning signs that can be recognised as indicators that our stress levels are getting too high.

Awareness of the potential effects stress can have on our lives is the only the first step. It is therefore crucial to seek professional help if our own efforts to reduce these high stress levels are unsuccessful before they lead to more long lasting harmful effects to our bodies and minds. Our efforts are not only required towards changing the sources of our stress but also changing our reaction to the stress. List of References 1.

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