
UNIT 1 : STRESS : AN INTRODUCTION*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Concept of Stress
- 1.3 Nature of Stress
 - 1.3.1 Types of Stress
 - 1.3.2 Symptoms of Stress
- 1.4 Sources of Stress
- 1.5 Measurement of Stress
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 References
- 1.8 Key Words
- 1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress
- 1.10 Unit End Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- explain the concept of stress.
- describe the nature of stress.
- discuss the sources of stress.
- describe measurement of stress.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Nirav was a very studious boy. He pursued MBA and was a topper in his institute. He was also able to secure a good job as a manager in one of the leading multinational companies. Nirav was very excited about his new job. Though, as he started working, his parents and friends started noticing change in Nirav's behaviour. He was always irritated, angry, barely interacted with any one, was not eating and sleeping adequately. His colleagues also noticed the change in his behaviour as they felt that otherwise effective and jovial Nirav was becoming secluded and that was affecting his performance at work.

Samina was eldest child in her family and was a bright student. She wanted

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Introduction to Stress

to become a doctor when she grew up. However, her mother fell very sick and Samina had to leave her studies and take care of her ailing mother and her three younger siblings. Subsequent to death of her mother, Samina was not same as before. She started falling sick often and doctors could find no physiological reasons for her sickness. She also lost interest in her studies and in fact did not even bother to appear for her examination.

Ravi was sure that he will be promoted to senior manager's post after this year's performance appraisal. He had worked very hard and felt that he deserved the promotion. However, as the news with regard to promotions in his department was announced, he was shocked to see that he was not promoted. Ravi felt very frustrated after this news as he felt that his work and sincerity were not appreciated by his superiors. He lost interest in his job and his productivity started declining. The frustration experienced by him also affected his family relationship and he started having fights with his spouse. This led to further frustration and anger and Ravi ended up having a psychological breakdown.

Above are three different examples of individuals who experienced stress in one way or other in their lives. Nirav was stressed due to the job pressure that he experienced, with which he was not able to cope, and that had an impact on his wellbeing. A very negative and tragic life experience of losing a parent led Samina to experiencing stress that affected her physiological wellbeing. Stress as a result of frustration experienced by Ravi led him to become psychologically distressed and experiencing a psychological breakdown. The three examples also imply that there are various reasons why a person may experience stress and the symptoms of stress as displayed by the individuals also vary. Though, one thing can be stated clearly, that is, if stress is not identified and managed in time or on regular basis it can have detrimental effects on the individual. His / her functioning and productivity will decrease and it can also have a negative impact on the significant people in his/her life like parents, spouse, children, friends and even colleagues. Stress has a negative impact on both psychological and physiological wellbeing of a person and thus needs to be dealt with adequately using suitable intervention strategies. Though, before the techniques of stress management are discussed, it is important to understand what is stress, its nature, its symptoms and sources.

In the present unit we will make an attempt to understand the concept of stress and will also focus on the symptoms and sources of stress. Further, measurement of stress will also be discussed.

1.2 CONCEPT OF STRESS

After reading the above examples you may have developed some idea about what is stress. In the present section of this Unit we will discuss about the concept and nature of stress so as to develop a better understanding about this term.

The term stress has been derived from 'stringere' that is a Latin word and means 'to draw tight' (Cox, 1978). It has today become a very commonly used term in every context whether school, workplace, day to day life

and so on. We often come across people who say that they are stressed or experiencing stress in their lives. We ourselves experience stress often.

The origins of stress can mainly be traced to physical sciences (Schafer, 1998). During the 17th century it was exceedingly used to denote affiliations and hardships experienced by individuals and during the 18th century it came to be described mainly in terms of pressure, strain or force (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997). The initial conceptualisation of stress mainly focused on stress as an external stimulus. Though later it came to be described as a response of an individual to certain disturbances. The study carried out by Cannon can be mentioned in this context, where he mainly studied the fight and flight reaction. The focus of the study by Cannon was on the effect that stress has on animals as well as humans. Cannon also observed physiological changes in the participants of his study and he attributed these changes, as displayed by individuals, to stress.

Hans Selye (1974) described stress as a response of the body to certain demand that is made on it and he further stated that this response was non-specific. Baum et al. (1981) have defined stress as a “process in which environmental events or forces, called, stressors, threatens an organism’s existence and wellbeing”.

Schafer (1998, pg. 6) defined stress as “arousal of mind and body in response to demands made on them”.

Both the above definitions focus on the demand and an individual’s response to the same. Thus, the onus here is on the response of the individual. Though the first definition focuses only on body the second definition brings in the important aspect of mind, implying that stress is a response of both body as well as mind.

Yet another definition of stress was given by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, pg. 19). They define stress as “a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his/ her resources and endangering his/ her wellbeing”. This definition emphasises the relationship between person and the environment, though here the stress is presented in a negative light, stress is not always negative and may have its own advantages. Lazarus and Folkman put forth the transactional model of stress and coping that focuses on how an event is interpreted or appraised by an individual, which in turn will determine the stress experienced by the individual. This model highlights that stress and coping with stress as being interrelated processes.

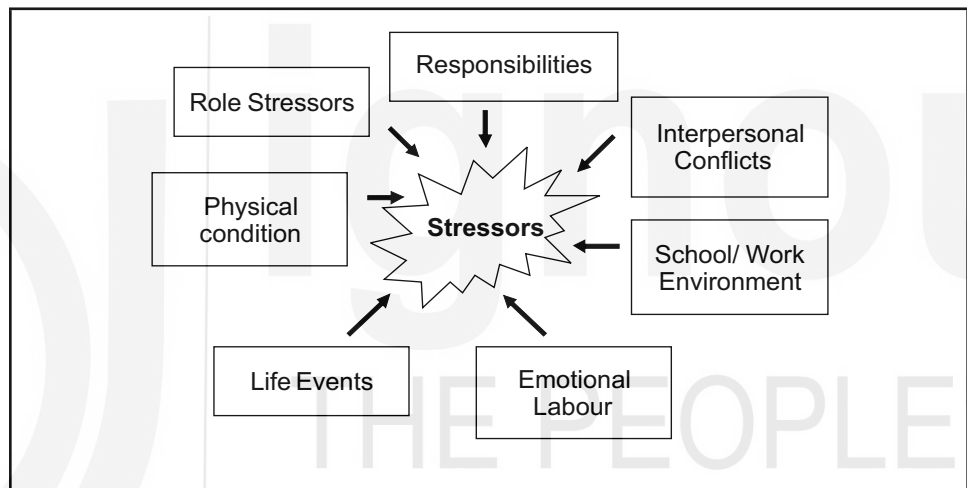
Truxillo et al. (2016, pg. 440) defined stress as “the body’s reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response”. This definition has further elaborated the response as being physical, mental or emotional in nature.

The above definitions mainly looked at stress from a western perspective. If we describe stress from an eastern perspective, it denotes absence or lack on inner peace (Seaward, 2014). And thus, the stress managing techniques would also focus on achieving the inner peace.

Introduction to Stress

While discussing the concept of stress it is also important to understand the term stressor, that can be described as situation, event, person or anything that leads to the stress response. Gerrig and Zimbardo (2005, pg. 430) defined stressor as a stimulus event that places a demand on an organism for some kind of adaptive response". At a given point of time an individual may have various stressors in his/ her life. It could be an upcoming official event, an impending report, examination and so on. Stressors can also be described as varied external and internal stimuli that may lead to stress. Stressors can be categorised into physical, psychological, environmental, social and as life events. Stressors could range from adjusting to change, financial issues and problems, life events like separation, divorce, illnesses or death of a loved one, managing varied roles and responsibilities, facing frequent challenging situations and even technological changes and development. Some of the stressors that an individual may have in one's life are shown in figure 1.1.

Fig. 1.1: Showing various Stressors



Check Your Progress I

- 1) Define Stress

1.3 NATURE OF STRESS

Stress as such is like salt and pepper and a life without stress would be without motivation, as stress often motivates us to work in certain direction. Thus, without any stress in life, any individual will not be motivated to perform or carry our varied activities. As, more salt than required can make food taste bad. In a similar manner, stress beyond optimal level can have a negative effect on the individual and will interfere with his/ her day today functioning. When stress experienced exceeds the optimal level of an individual, the individual may find it exceedingly difficult to cope with it and it can have detrimental effects on the wellbeing (both psychological and

physiological) and performance and productivity of the individual. Stress is not altogether negative and does have numerous advantages.

It is therefore important that stress is managed and is kept below the optimal level.

In the present section of the Unit, we will discuss about the types and symptoms of stress.

1.3.1 Types of Stress

Stress can be categorised into different types as follows:

- 1) **Eustress:** Stress can be good stress that is explained as 'Eustress'. Eustress can be defined as "good stress, caused by a positive response to a desired stressor, such as a wedding or a new job" (Truxillo et al. (2016, pg. 441).
- 2) **Neustress:** When stress is not helpful nor harmful, it can be described as 'Neustress' (Schafer (1998, pg. 7).
- 3) **Distress:** This is the third category of stress that most people commonly relate stress with. 'Distress' occurs when the arousal experienced by the individual is very high or very low (Schafer (1998, pg. 8). Distress can also be categorised into acute and chronic stress. Acute stress can be termed as stress that is intense but does not last for a prolonged period of time. Whereas, chronic stress may not be as intense but may exist for a prolonged period of time.
- 4) **Hyperstress:** Excessive stress is termed as 'Hyperstress'.
- 5) **Hypostress:** Insufficient stress is termed as 'Hypostress'.

1.3.2 Symptoms of Stress

Stress can have an impact on various aspects of life that include behaviour, cognition, emotions as well as physical health. Though stress will have a different effect on different individuals and each individual will react to stress in a different way, there are certain symptoms that can be related with stress. These are discussed as follows:

Physical symptoms: The physical symptoms of stress include low levels of energy, stomach upset, headaches and migraines, pain and aches, chest pain, rapid heartbeats, lack of sleep, dryness in mouth, experiencing tension in muscles, frequent infections and so on.

Emotional symptoms: The emotional symptoms include, displaying frustration, getting irritated or agitated easily, feelings of worthlessness, feeling lonely and even depressed.

Psychological symptoms: The cognitive symptoms related to stress include worrying constantly, experiencing racing thoughts, lack of organisation in thinking, forgetting, not able to focus, lack of judgement or poor judgement and also pessimism.

Behavioural symptoms: The behavioural symptoms of stress include

Introduction to Stress

deterioration in performance effectiveness, indulgence in substance use, prone to accidents, nervous mannerism, poor time management, displaying checking rituals, changes in appetite, procrastination, eating faster, even talking or walking faster, impaired speech and so on.

Table1.1: Symptoms of Stress

PHYSICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIOURAL
- Rapid Pulse	- Feeling upset	- Anxiety	- Deterioration in performance effectiveness
- Pounding Heart	- Inability to concentrate	- Depression	- Smoking or use of alcohol or other recreational drugs
- Increased Perspiration	- Irritability	- Anger	- Accident Proneness
- Tensing of arm and leg muscles	- Loss of self confidence	- Guilt	- Nervous Mannerism (foot tapping, nail biting)
- Shortness of breath	- Worry	- Jealousy	- Increased or decreased eating/ Anorexia
- Gritting of teeth	- Difficulty in making decisions	- Shame	- Increased or decreased sleeping/ sleep disruption
- Headaches	- Racing thoughts	- Impatient	- Phobias
- Indigestion	- Absent mindedness	- Suicidal feelings	- Eating/ walking/ talking faster
- Numbness			- Poor time management
- Dry mouth			- Impaired speech
- Pain			- Checking rituals
- Cold sweat			
- Abdominal cramps			

Thus, the symptoms of stress can be categorised into the above main four categories, but it is to be remembered that individual differences do exist in the symptoms displayed by different individuals.

Check Your Progress II

1) What is neustress?

2) What are the cognitive symptoms of stress?

3) Explain the physical symptoms of stress?

1.4 SOURCES OF STRESS

As we have developed a clear idea about the concept and nature of stress, we will now move on to the sources of stress.

As such, the sources of stress can be categorized into three main sources, namely, Frustration, Conflict of motives and Pressure (Coleman, 1970).

Frustration: Frustration can be described as occurring when a goal oriented behaviour of an individual is thwarted. As stated by Mangal (1984, pg. 46) “a wide range of environmental obstacles, both physical and social and the internal factors in the form of personal limitations, biological conditions and psychological barriers may lead to frustration of our needs, motives and efforts”. For example, Ravi expected his promotion, however, when he did not receive the same, he experienced frustration.

Conflict of Motives: The next source is conflict of motives that can cause stress as an individual has to choose between alternatives and decision making in this regard can lead to stress. Conflict of motives can be of four different types, approach - approach conflict, avoidance - avoidance conflict, approach - avoidance conflict and double approach - avoidance conflict.

- 1) **Approach-approach conflict:** In this type of conflict the individual has to choose between two goals that are positive and are similar. For example, an individual may have to choose between two similar job opportunities.
- 2) **Avoidance- avoidance conflict:** The next type of conflict of motives is avoidance- avoidance conflict. Here again there are two goals that are similar but as opposed to approach- approach conflict, the goals here are negative. For example, an individual may have to take decision whether he/ she wants to remain unemployed or take up a mediocre job that he/ she is not interested in.
- 3) **Approach- avoidance conflict:** Here there is a single goal which is both positive and negative. For example, an individual taking up a job abroad may be excited about the opportunity but also has to face the fact that he/ she will have to stay away from the family. Thus, this goal has both negative and positive consequences and thus the individual may experience stress.
- 4) **Multiple approach-avoidance conflict:** It may so happen that the conflicts faced by us are quite complex and they are combinations of approach and avoidance conflicts. In this conflict the individual has to choose between the options that have both positive and negative

consequences. For example, a student may have to choose between two educational opportunities, one of pursuing music that he/ she is interested in which will make his/her parents unhappy and the other of pursuing engineering, which will make his/ her parents happy but he/ she is really not interested in it.

Pressure: Pressure is yet another source of stress that can be external or internal. External pressures are result of demands from the environment, responsibilities and obligations that are mainly social in nature as well as demands and expectations of the significant persons in our lives. With regard to internal pressures, Mangal (1984, pg. 46) states that “Internal pressures are caused by our own self for maintaining the picture of ourselves - as we think we could and should be”. An example of external pressure is when a child is pressurised by parents to do well in examination and an example of internal pressure is when a child himself/ herself feels that he/ she needs to study and do well in examination.

Thus, any stress can be categorised into the above three sources, though a person may experience stress due to more than one or all the three sources as well.

Besides the above sources, stress can also be as a result of personality factors that may make an individual prone to stress. Past experiences, basic temperamental factors, perception of control over the situation causing stress play an important role in determining the reaction of individual to stress (Parmeswaran and Beena, 2004). In the context of personality, the type A and type B personalities can be discussed. Individuals with Type A personality display hurriedness, restlessness and are often involved in carrying out various activities at the same time. They are also competitive, anxious and are often achievement oriented. The individuals with type B personality, on the other hand, display behaviour that is relaxed. It can be said that individuals with type A personality are comparatively more prone to stress when compared with individuals with type B personality (Parmeswaran and Beena, 2004).

Further, certain life events, like death of a near or dear one, divorce, pregnancy, child leaving home, change in conditions of living, retirement, marriage, losing one's job and so on can also lead to stress (Nolen- Hoeksema, 2009).

Frustration, conflict of motives and pressure can be termed as broad sources of stress. Though stress can also result due to ineffective interpersonal relationships or interpersonal conflicts, family related issues, lack of work life balance, work pressures and work overload and even environmental pressures that could be due to noise pollution, crowding and so on.

Let us now discuss some of the specific sources of stress.

Life events: Stress can be caused due to varied life events. These could be death of a loved one, divorce or separation, losing one's job, marriage and so on. These could be termed as significant life events in one's life that may put pressure on the adjustment and coping resources of the person as they expose the individual to certain new and unique challenges. Thus, life events can lead to stress which in turn can have detrimental effects on the

day to day functioning as well as physical and psychological health of the individual.

Daily hassles: Similar to life events, daily hassles can also create stress. Daily hassles like lack of time, work overload, daily roles, responsibilities and duties and so on can lead to stress.

Interpersonal relationships: Stress can also be caused due to issues related to interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships could be in the context of family, work or it could be with peer groups. Conflicts could occur between individuals that can have an impact on the interpersonal relationship, which in turn may lead to stress. Issues in interpersonal relationship could range from misunderstandings to violence and abuse and can have negative impact on the physical and psychological wellbeing of the person.

Stress as a result of social conditions: Social conditions in which the individual exists can also lead to development of stress. These social conditions can be related to crowding, discrimination, technological developments and changes, pollution and so on. The individual today exists in a world that is much more complex. There is globalisation, increased competition, and high amount of social pressure. These have a negative impact on the individual and makes him/ her prone to stress.

Check Your Progress III

1) What is frustration?

2) Explain stress as a result of social conditions.

1.5 MEASUREMENT OF STRESS

Measurement of stress is a prerogative for effective diagnosis of stress. There are various ways in which stress can be measured. These are discussed as follows:

1) **Physiological measures:** Physiological measures could serve great purpose in identifying and understanding stress experienced by an individual. While discussing the models of stress in the next unit, we will discuss at length the physiological changes that take place as the individuals experience stressful situations. The physiological

responses in terms of increase in blood pressure, rapid pulse rate, breathing rate and so on can be measured to understand the stress experience by the individual. This can be done by using various instruments and machines, for instance a Polygraph. Further, stress can also be measured with the help of biochemical measures, as hormones, like epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol and so on, are released as stress is experienced. Though, physiological measures seem to be effective in detecting stress, there are a number of limitations. Firstly, the physiological changes may occur due to some other reasons and not stress. Secondly, the whole process of taking the physiological measure could create stress in the individual, as either blood test is taken or the individual is plugged to a machine. Further, the tests could also be costly and time consuming.

- 2) **Psychological tests:** A psychological test can be explained as a measure of sample of behaviour that is objective and systematic in nature. Various psychological tests that are standardised, reliable and valid can be used to measure stress. Such psychological tests could be self-report inventories. In self report inventories, the individual is expected to provide responses to certain statements and based on the responses interpretations can be made. One main advantage of self-report inventory is that the individual will answer them on his/ her own and as he/ she is in a better position to understand the stress experienced, he/ she will be able to report adequately. They are simple, less costly and easy to administer. Though, there could be issues related to social desirability and language. Individual may not understand the language in which the test is available or he/ she may not comprehend certain statements or words.
- 3) **Checklist:** A checklist can also be used to measure stress. For instance, a checklist can be used for major life events. The individual is asked to check the major life events from a list that the individual has undergone in a given period of time. The list of major events is carefully prepared and includes representation of major life events that may occur in any individual's life. The major life events could include, death of a near or dear one, divorce, transfer and so on. Any major event in one's life can put pressure on the individual's coping resources as he/ she is trying to adapt to the situation. Also, if an individual is undergoing number of major life events at the same time, the stress that he/ she will experience is much more.
- 4) **Interview:** Yet another method for measurement of stress is interview, where in-depth information is collected from the individual face to face. Interview can be structured, unstructured or semi-structured. Though with the help of interview method a lot of relevant information can be collected, it is a very time-consuming method as well as costly. Further, interviewer needs to be adequately trained in interview methods.

It is also possible that the above methods are used together to get an adequate picture of stress experienced by the individual.

- 1) List the limitations of physiological measures.

- 2) What is a psychological test?

1.6 LET US SUM UP

To summarize, the term stress has been derived from ‘stringere’ that is a Latin word and means ‘to draw tight’ (Cox, 1978). It has today become a very commonly used term in every context whether school, workplace, day to day life and so on. We often come across people who say that they are stressed or experiencing stress in their lives. We ourselves experience stress often. Stress is like salt and pepper and a life without stress would be without motivation. Stress often motivates us to work in a certain direction and therefore stress is not altogether negative and does have numerous advantages. Hans Selye (1974) described stress as a response of the body to certain demand that is made on it and he further stated that this response was non-specific. Various definitions of stress were also discussed in this Unit that mainly described stress in terms of demand and an individual’s response to the same. The concept of stressor was also described that can be explained as a situation, event, person or anything that leads to the stress response. Stressors can be categorised into physical, psychological, environmental, social and as life events. Various types of stress including eustress, neustress and distress were also discussed in the Unit. The Unit then moved on to explain the various symptoms of stress that were categorised into behavioural symptoms, cognitive symptoms, emotional symptoms and physical symptoms. Further, the sources of stress mainly, frustration, conflict of motives and pressure were also explained. Lastly, the Unit focused on the measurement of stress, that is a prerogative for effective diagnosis of stress. There are various ways in which stress can be measured. Varied methods of measurement like physiological measures, psychological tests, checklist and interview were discussed.

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1.8 KEY WORDS

Conflict of motives: Conflict of motives is a source of stress that occurs when an individual has to choose between alternatives and decision making in this regard can lead to stress in the individual.

Frustration: Frustration can be described as occurring when a goal oriented behaviour of an individual is thwarted.

Interview: In interview, in-depth information is collected from the individual face to face.

Pressure: Pressure is a source of stress that can be external or internal. External pressures are result of demands from the environment, responsibilities and obligations that are mainly social in nature as well as demands and expectations of the significant persons in our lives. Internal pressures are caused by our own self for maintaining the picture of ourselves- as we think we could and should be.

Psychological test: Psychological test can be explained as a measure of sample of behaviour that is objective and systematic in nature.

Stress: Stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his/ her resources and endangering his/ her wellbeing.

Stressor: Stressor can be described as situation, event, person or anything that leads to the stress response.

1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

1.) Define Stress

Hans Selye (1974) described stress as a response of the body to certain demand that is made on it and he further stated that this response was non-specific.

Schafer (1998, pg. 6) defined stress as “arousal of mind and body in response to demands made on them”.

Check Your Progress II

1) What is neustress?

When stress is not helpful nor harmful, it can be described as neustress

2) What are the cognitive symptoms of stress?

The cognitive symptoms related to stress include worrying constantly, experiencing racing thoughts, lack of organisation in thinking, forgetting, not able to focus, lack of judgement or poor judgement and also pessimism.

3) Explain the physical symptoms of stress?

The physical symptoms of stress include, low levels of energy, stomach upset, headaches and migraines, pain and aches, chest pain, rapid heartbeats, lack of sleep, dryness in mouth, experiencing tension in muscles, frequent infections and so on.

Check Your Progress III

1) What is frustration?

Frustration can be described as occurring when a goal oriented behaviour of an individual is thwarted.

2) Explain stress as a result of social conditions.

Social conditions in which the individual exists can also lead to development of stress. These social conditions can be related to crowding, discrimination, technological developments and changes, pollution and so on. The individual today exists in a world that is much more complex. There is globalisation, increased competition, and high amount of social pressure.

Check Your Progress III

- 1) List the limitations of physiological measures.

The limitations of physiological measures are as follows:

- (a) The physiological changes may occur due to some other reasons and not stress.
 - (b) The whole process of taking the physiological measure could create stress in the individual, as either blood test is taken or the individual is plugged to a machine.
 - (c) The tests could also be costly and time consuming.
- 2) What is a psychological test?

Psychological test can be explained as a measure of sample of behaviour that is objective and systematic in nature.

1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Explain the concept of stress.
- 2) Discuss the various types of stress.
- 3) Explain various symptoms of stress.
- 4) Describe the sources of stress.
- 5) Explain various ways in which stress can be measured.