
UNIT 3 : FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STRESS

PRONENESS*

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- explain the factors contributing to stress proneness
- discuss the moderators of stress.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Shalini would fall sick every time she had her school examinations. She would prepare very hard and try to learn all the relevant topics, but one day before the examinations, she would fall sick with either fever or stomach upset or some other illness, as a result of which she would not be able to answer her examinations. When a medical doctor was consulted, the Doctor could not find any medical reason. Shalini's cousin who was a clinical psychologist suspected that the reason could be psychological rather than physiological and that Shalini could be falling sick because of stress that she was experiencing before the examination.

You as well may have come across certain individuals who are more prone to stress and those who are not so prone to stress. Thus, it can be said that individual differences exist in the way people deal with stress and some could be more prone to stress than others due to varied factors.

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In the previous Units, we discussed about the concept, nature, and measurement of sources of stress (Unit 1) as well as various models of stress (Unit 2). In the present unit we will discuss about stress proneness and will also focus on the factors contributing to stress proneness as well as the moderators of stress.

3.2 FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STRESS PRONENESS

Let us try to first understand what is stress proneness. Stress proneness in simple words can be described as a tendency of a person to take more stress. Such individuals are more likely than others to experience stress. The opposite of stress proneness is stress resistant and such individuals are less likely to experience stress.

Let us now look at some of the factors that can contribute to stress proneness:

3.2.1 Type A Personality

Schafer (2004, pg. 178) describes personality as “person’s enduring set of habits of thinking, feeling and acting”. Personality traits can be said to determine not only the way an individual reacts to stress but also how he/she will cope with the stressful situation. Type A personality is often linked to high levels of stress as individuals with type A personality perceive stress as threatening and their reactions to stressful situations are intense and faster. On the other hand, individuals with type B personality display lower stress reactivity. Thus, individuals with type A personality are more prone to varied physical and psychological problems that may occur as a result of stress experienced by them.

Let us discuss further about type A personality, that can be termed as one of the factors that can make an individual more prone to stress. Individuals with this type of personality are in a hurry to achieve certain objectives. They often like competition, they are highly alert and display perfectionism. They want to achieve much more than it may be possible within a certain time frame. Such individuals are also likely to be irritable, they lack patience and may also get angry faster. Some of the components of type A behaviour as stated by Schafer (2004) are as follows:

Status insecurity: Individuals with type A behaviour may display status insecurity, which is likely to stem from low self-esteem. Such individuals will constantly compare themselves with others and will find themselves to be inferior in their own eyes. They are also constantly striving to enhance their self-esteem. These individuals often have a very high expectation from themselves and are also highly critical about self. This will often drive them to achieve and accomplish as much as possible.

Urgency of time: The insecurities and low self-esteem experienced by a person with type A personality often leads him/her to gasp with time. Such individuals want to do many things within a certain period of time. Thus, they are in constant hurry to get things done and as a result they think faster, plan faster and carryout activities at a faster pace and this can be reflected in their day to day functioning as well. They also engage in polyphasic thinking and behaviour, that can be described as engaging in thinking and carrying out multiple activities/ things at a time (Schafer, 2004).

Hyper-aggressiveness: Individuals with type A personality may also display hyper-aggressiveness that is denoted by dominating behaviour without any regard to how others feel or any regard for their rights. This aggressiveness may also stem from low self-esteem that such individuals experience and due to the frustration experienced by them.

Free-floating hostility: An individual with type A personality is more likely to perceive others negatively and thus will not trust others and will be suspicious of them. This free-floating hostility is displayed by such an individual whenever he/ she feels something (coworkers laughing, slow sales person at a shop counter, directives by government and so on) is wrong.

Drive towards self-destruction: The lifestyle led by a type A individual can take a toll on them and they often seek escapism and thus in a way they may drive themselves on the path of self-destruction.

Individuals with type A are not only more prone to stress, as was mentioned earlier, but they may display lower satisfaction with regard to job, health, home and life. They may also experience lack of energy and may experience more affective tension and symptoms of distress.

3.2.2 Hostility

Schafer (2004, pg. 194) described hostility as “cynicism towards others’ motives and values, easily and frequently aroused anger, and a tendency to express that anger towards others.” Hostility in this context does not relate to anger that leads to violent behaviour. But this is the irritability and anger experienced by individuals who otherwise seem perfectly normal (Schafer, 2004). Such a hostility may be experienced in simple events in life, like someone spills tea on the office table, a family member does not fold clothes and they are left in the sitting chair and so on, for which individuals who are not hostile may barely react. Such individuals often engage in blaming others, which in turn can make them express anger towards that individual, which could lead to aggressive behaviours directed towards that person. Hostility is, thus, characterised by an attitude that is skeptical or cynical, recurring arousal of anger and manifestation of anger in terms of aggressive behaviour. The long-term effect of such hostility is negative as it not only affects one’s health but can also affect one’s social relationships. Links have been found between hostility and stress (Felsten,1996; Hackett et al, 2015). Thus, hostility can also be termed as a factor that can make individuals more prone to stress.

3.2.3 Perfectionism

Yet another factor that can lead to stress proneness is perfectionism. Perfectionism can be described as expectations that an individual may have from self and others or both and these expectations are demanding in nature which seldom leaves chance for compromise. Perfectionism can be categorised into internal perfectionism (expectations from self) and external perfectionism (expectations from others). Individuals with internal perfectionism will have high expectations from themselves and this can not only affect their health but also their productivity. It can also negatively affect their relationship and self-esteem. Individuals who have external

perfectionism will often find fault with others and are never satisfied with how others work and this can lead them to experiencing frustration as well as hostility.

Following are some of the beliefs that are characteristic of an individual with perfectionism (Schafer, 2004):

- Anything that I do should be carried out perfectly.
- No mistakes should be made by me or others.
- There is always a correct way in which things should be done.
- I am failure if I don't do things perfectly.
- If I make a mistake, I am a total failure.

Such beliefs (all or nothing) can be termed as irrational as they are loaded with injunctions and they can push an individual on the path of distress. An individual having such beliefs is more likely to experience stress than a person with rational beliefs. For instance, an individual who believes, that if he/ she makes a single mistake then he/ she is a failure will experience prolonged sadness and anger with self and may not make any attempts in future. However, an individual who sees a mistake as a learning experience is more likely to make attempts in future and less likely to experience stress or anger. Besides experiencing stress, individuals with perfectionism are also more likely to procrastinate. They are also more defensive and choosy about stuff and things. Further, they may find it difficult to let go and discard things, thus leading to hoarding and they may also indulge in overdoing things.

3.2.4 Procrastination

We discussed earlier that perfectionism may lead to procrastination, but procrastination in itself is also a factor that could lead to stress proneness. Procrastination can simply be described as not doing things/ activities on time and keeping them for later. This can be because the things or those activities are viewed as not appealing/ pleasant or difficult. Procrastination can lead to stress because individuals who procrastinate will not only feel guilty and indulge in condemnation of self, but there could also be external repercussions (for example, examination fee not paid in time, delay in submitting an important report and so on). Procrastination either results from fear (for instance fear of failure or doing well or fear of pain or intimacy and so on), or it can result from laziness, where the individual develops habit of not putting effort or seeking comfort (Schafer, 2004).

3.2.5 Learned Helplessness/ Learned pessimism

The term learned helplessness was put forth by Seligman and it can be described as tendency to become helpless when frequently faced with events that cannot be controlled. Schafer (2004, pg. 215) defines learned pessimism as “the tendency to interpret bad events as personally caused, part of a permanent pattern, and pervasive into all parts of one's life and the tendency to interpret positive events as caused by luck or external forces, temporary, and limited to this one aspect”. The key points in this definition are:

Personalisation: Personalisation can be internal or external. Thus, when a negative event or situation is experienced, the individual will attribute it internally or externally. For instance, getting less marks in examination may be attributed internally (not studying hard enough) or externally (unfair evaluation).

Permanence: Permanence can be in terms of either permanent or temporary. The individual will either perceive the event as being permanent or temporary. For instance, if he/ she scored less marks in an examination, this can either be seen as something that will always happen or as just one event or setback in path of success.

Pervasiveness: This can be described as whether an interpretation is related to one or multiple dimension(s) of life. Thus, it can be either universal or specific. For instance, 'I scored less marks in one subject but scored well in others' or 'Getting less marks is yet another negative event in my life'.

A person with learned helplessness/ learned pessimism is more prone to experiencing stress and needs help to move towards learned optimism.

Check Your Progress I

- 1) List the components of type A behaviour.

- 2) What is procrastination?

3.3 MODERATORS OF STRESS

Besides the above factors, there are also certain moderators of stress that need to be mentioned. The moderators play an important role in the relationship between the stress and corresponding reactions. These moderators may lead to individuals experiencing higher or lower stress.

Locus of control (LOC): Locus of control is a concept that was proposed by Rotter in 1954 and can be explained as the belief system possessed by an individual with regard to whether the outcome of his/ her actions can be attributed to his/ her own actions or to events, objects, people outside his/ her control. Thus, individuals could either have an internal control orientation or an external control orientation. Relationship has been seen between LOC and stress and it was found that individuals with internal locus of control displayed better physical and psychological wellbeing (Ghosh, 2015).

Introduction to Stress

Individuals with internal locus of control perceive stressful situations as a challenge and not as a threat and thus are in a position to deal with stress in a better way.

Hardiness: Hardiness can be described as denoting a likeness for challenges, having a strong sense of commitment and control (Schafer, 2004, pg. 236). Individuals having high hardiness are optimistic and they see a stressful situation as an opportunity to grow. They also put in hard work because they enjoy doing so. Thus, individuals with high hardiness are in better position to deal with stress than individuals that have low hardiness.

Social support: This is one of the significant moderators of stress. A person experiencing stress will be able to deal with it in a better way if he/ she has adequate social support. Social support can be in form of material gifts, finance, food and so on, or in terms of information to comprehend the stress and coping strategies. Social support could also be emotional in nature. Social support not only lowers stress reactivity but individuals receiving social support are also less likely to suffer the negative effects of stress.

Optimism and pessimism: Optimistic individuals are found to be able to deal with stress adequately and thus may not get adversely affected by stress that they experience. Optimism can also be related to resilience that helps individuals to bounce back from stressful situations. On the other hand, individuals who are pessimistic can get affected by stress and are likely to develop the psycho-physiological disorders.

Gender and culture: Besides the above gender and culture may also play an important role as moderators of stress. Socialisation to a great extent may depend on gender as well as culture that can have an impact on not only the personality but also beliefs and attitudes of the individual. And personality, beliefs and attitudes can have an impact on how individual perceives, deals and copes with stress.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) What is locus on control?

3.4 LET US SUM UP

Individual differences exist in the way people deal with stress and some could be more prone to stress than others due to varied factors. Stress proneness in simple words can be described as a tendency of a person to experience more stress. Such individuals, are more likely than others to experience stress. The opposite of stress proneness is stress resistant and such individuals are less likely to experience stress. Various factors that contribute to stress proneness like type A personality, hostility, perfectionism, procrastination and learner

helplessness/ learned pessimism were discussed. Type A personality is often linked to high levels of stress as individuals with type A personality perceive stress as threatening and their reactions to stressful situations are intense and faster. Some of the components of type A behaviour include status insecurity, urgency of time, hyper-aggressiveness, free-floating hostility and drive towards self-destruction. Hostility can be described as cynicism towards others' motives and values, easily and frequently aroused anger, and a tendency to express that anger towards others. The long-term effect of such hostility is negative as it not only affects one's health but can also affect one's social relationships and links have also been found between hostility and stress. Yet another factor that can lead to stress proneness is perfectionism. Perfectionism can be described as expectations that an individual may have from self and others or both and these expectations are demanding in nature which seldom leaves chance for compromise. Perfectionism can be categorised into internal perfectionism (expectations from self) and external perfectionism (expectations from others). Procrastination is also a factor that could lead to stress proneness. Procrastination can simply be described as not doing things/ activities on time and keeping them for later. The last factor discussed was learned helplessness/ learned pessimism. Learned pessimism can be described as the tendency to interpret bad events as personally caused, part of a permanent pattern, and pervasive into all parts of one's life and the tendency to interpret positive events as caused by luck or external forces, temporary, and limited to this one aspect. The key points of this definition include personalisation, permanence and pervasiveness. While discussing factors contributing to stress proneness, the moderators of stress were also discussed. The moderators play an important role in the relationship between the stress and corresponding reactions. These moderators may lead to individuals experiencing higher or lower stress. Various moderators of stress including, locus of control, social support, optimism and pessimism and gender and culture were explained.

3.5 REFERENCES

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3.6 KEY WORDS

Hardiness: Hardiness can be described as denoting a likeness for challenges, having a strong sense of commitment and control.

Hostility: Hostility can be described as cynicism towards others' motives and values, easily and frequently aroused anger, and a tendency to express that anger towards others.

Learned pessimism: Learned pessimism can be described as the tendency to interpret bad events as personally caused, part of a permanent pattern, and pervasive into all parts of one's life and the tendency to interpret positive events as caused by luck or external forces, temporary, and limited to this one aspect.

Locus of control (LOC): Locus of control can be explained as the belief system possessed by an individual with regard to whether the outcome of his/ her actions can be attributed to his/ her own actions or to events, objects, people outside his/ her control.

Perfectionism: Perfectionism can be described as expectations that an individual may have from self and others or both and these expectations are demanding in nature which seldom leave chance for compromise.

Procrastination: Procrastination can simply be described as not doing things/ activities on time and keeping them for later.

Type A personality: Individuals with this type of personality are in a hurry to achieve certain objectives. Individuals with this personality often like competition, they are highly alert and display perfectionism. They want to achieve much more than it may be possible within a certain time frame. Such individuals are also likely to be irritable, they lack patience and may also get angry faster.

3.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) List the components of type A behaviour.

The components of type A behaviour include status insecurity, urgency of time, hyper-aggressiveness, free-floating hostility and drive towards self-destruction.

- 2) What is procrastination?

Procrastination can simply be described as not doing things/ activities on time and keeping them for later.

Check Your Progress II

- 1) What is locus on control?

Locus of control is a concept that was proposed by Rotter in 1954 and can be explained as the belief system possessed by an individual with regard to whether the outcome of his/ her actions can be attributed to his/ her own actions or to events, objects, people outside his/ her control.

3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Discuss Type A personality as a factor contributing to stress proneness.
- 2) Explain hostility as a factor contributing to stress proneness.
- 3) Describe perfectionism and procrastination as factors contributing to stress proneness.
- 4) Discuss learned helplessness/ learned pessimism.
- 5) Discuss the various moderators of stress

