

Stress Management For A Better Work Life

Stress was called the epidemic of the 20th century, and it still is a raging one even in this 21st century. Stress is something each one of us is familiar with. The more crowded, competitive and polluted our world becomes and the more frenetic the pace of our lives gets, it increasingly becomes an inevitable part of our lives.

Stress is the wear and tear our body and mind experience as we go through our daily lives. It has both physical and emotional effects. Contrary to the popular notion, stress can have positive effects just as much as negative ones. In its positive impact, it can propel you to new heights of energy, offer new perspectives, motivate you to perform at peak levels and uncover in you strengths and talents you never knew you had. On the negative side, stress can harm you emotionally and physically by causing depression, anger, hurt, anxiety, frustration, and when prolonged, in turn, cause a whole host of psychosomatic disorders (health problems with their origin in psychological causes). Headaches, insomnia, ulcers, blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes, skin problems, backache, infertility- chronic stress can lead to many problems and also aggravate any existing health problem you have. Stress is also associated with slow progress in recovery from many illnesses like cancer, heart disease, etc.

There are several warning signs that indicate growing stress. Under stress, the body produces cortisol, a hormone, which is like an alarm telling you that you are stressed and need to do something about it. Those sweaty palms, those palpitations or rapid heartbeat, trembling legs, dried-up tongue, a sense of dread or imminent danger, are all initial symptoms. If you heed them and adopt remedial measures the cortisol production ceases but if you don't, the hormone continues causing possible harm to the body.

Stress could be caused by a single factor or a cocktail of annoying factors. From the homemaker who has to perpetually handle squabbling kids and/or harsh in-laws, to the employee with a boss from hell, or someone who's worked

overtime at the office and had to confront crawling traffic on his drive back home, to a shopper pushing through crowds at the mall, they are all experiencing stress. And if you are a working woman you could singly be enduring all these problems together in a regular day.

Stress is quite a great leveller. Everyone is vulnerable—age, gender, occupation, none of them make a difference.

Countless 70-year-olds or those in their late 60s are stressed from worry about whether and if their children will shift them to old-age homes. The 80-year-old who is living in a happy family loved and respected by all also perpetually frets over whether he will die peacefully or from a long-drawn disease. The person on the verge of retirement worries about how he will manage from then on while the youth—the school and college students—have never had it so hard as now thanks to the ever-growing syllabus and intense competition.

Dr Anupam Chatterjee, Kolkata-based psychiatrist says that in his three decades of practice, it was only in the last decade that he had to deal with students who were collapsing under the pressures of heavy study load and tremendous competition especially at the twelfth grade and graduation levels.

Added to the tremendous competition for those few seats at engineering, medicine or management courses, there are new stressors today adds Dr. Chatterjee,— “the pressure to look good in an increasingly image conscious society and to be in a relationship. To the few resilient types these are challenges they enjoy and surmount but to the vast majority of the youth they are causing needless anxiety and tension.”

What is the solution? With regard to education, the solution lies with parents, teachers and those who frame educational policies and syllabi, explains Dr. K. Neeraja Reddy, Hyderabad-based psychiatrist. “Unless parents have only realistic expectations from children, and also not force them educational streams they are not cut out for, unless educationists make a concerted effort

to reduce syllabi weight and teachers too stop burdening students with excessive homework or needless 'educational projects', will the situation improve."

Job stress is among the most researched and discussed forms of stress. Malicious bosses, unrealistic deadlines and targets, plotting colleagues, excessive travel, long commutes from work, and physically unhealthy work conditions are among the most cited reasons, say psychiatrists and researchers.

In a recent series of interviews of experts in Bangalore, most said that lack of punctuality on the part of their clients/customers or anyone scheduled to meet them, really annoyed them just as they were also frustrated by their own inability to get someplace on time thanks to nightmarish traffic at peak hours this city is now synonymous with. And this from respondents who included a CEO of an MNC and another one who was Country Head of a Brazilian company.

Actually even those who commute by buses find the overcrowded buses and trains and the noise and pollution of bus stands and stations mentally sapping. For Ashish Pandey, Account Manager (International Business), Olive E Business Pvt Ltd, in Delhi, these factors really cause distress every working day. And there are countless commuters in our metros who face the same stressor.

While some employees complain of unfulfilling jobs with few opportunities for travel because they are losing out on exposure in the international scenario and the education that entails (not to speak of the additional bonus of a bit of sightseeing in a new country), there are others who have a problem of plenty. Recently, the employees of a well-known software company who were travelling extensively every month including weekends with the result that their Saturdays and Sundays which were reserved for leisure and family time were being totally lost to office work, finally got together to tell the management that they would not travel on weekends.

All work and no play makes Jack not only a dull worker but a highly stressed one. "The key is balance," explains Dr. Durgesh Kakodkar, Mumbai-based psychiatrist, "between time for work and family/personal life. Unless you also make time for your family and hobbies or just relaxation, you will end up first with stress and then with burnout." He suggests achieving this

by prioritising, learning to let go and delegate, talking it out with your boss to achieve more healthy work schedules, using commute time in your car (given that you are not driving) for finishing off some work so you spend that much less time at the office, etc.

The cellphone and laptop or hand-held PC might have made things so much easier for you but they also ensure that you are always connected, always wired and hence always alert. Many executives like Shankar Dvivedi, VP in an MNC, complain that with these gadgets there is nothing like private time or a getting away from it all—once they are handed these gadgets by the

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company they are expected to be contactable and ready to deliver wherever and whenever, even far from office and even beyond normal working hours.

No one, or at least most people, do not have a perfect job. The key is to adopt a positive approach and make the most of it. For example, when you do have some personal/free time, use it fruitfully advises Dr C.R. Chandrashekar. Professor of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bangalore: "Cultivate a hobby in which the content is vastly different from your workplace activities. Walking and any form of exercise also help tremendously and though one hour is ideal even 15 minutes help."

All the doctors also recommended meditation as a golden remedy. With its largely proven efficacy in reducing heart rate and blood pressure, and calming the mind and alleviating most of the symptoms of anxiety and tension, it is being increasingly and successfully adopted worldwide by those who have high-pressure personal and/or professional lives. Meditation is, in fact, now almost customary prescription by most cardiologists, neurologists and psychiatrists/counsellors.

*Learn yoga. It gives you mind and body control which are among the surest of stress-busters and one of the most effective remedies when stress happens.

*Meditation is part of yoga but for those who only have time for this it is highly effective too.

*Learn to let go and delegate. Get rid of the desire to be everywhere and do everything yourself.

*Learn relaxation measures—slow breathing, positive self-affirmations, etc—to alleviate stress.

*Cultivate a hobby—preferably one that is slow-paced and also is different in nature from that which you do for a living. Cooking, gardening, painting, are all very effective.

*Learn to see things in perspective and adopt a positive attitude. Positive thinking works wonders, especially as a stress-buster.

*Don't hate or curse yourself for your mistakes. See them as valuable lessons. Be confident and hold whatever you are or do in good esteem.

Also, there is the perceptual problem. While recognising that workplaces and relationships can be stressful, many doctors say it could also be a problem of perception. Often the stressor is not as big or harmful as it appears to be—the patient is actually not seeing things in proportion. This could happen

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again due to anxiety and tension which cloud the mind, making clarity of thinking or a calm approach difficult. “The trick therefore is to make the person understand the situation objectively before teaching them ways to handle it,” Dr Reddy reveals.

This is especially effective in dealing with stress from relationships whether between husband and wife or other family members. This is where marriage or family counsellors and psychiatrists become so important—they form the disinterested and out-

side party to whom the warring spouses or parents can open up and discuss everything that is ruining the relationship including the repressed factors. “In most cases where we have been successful in mending a relationship and preventing it from reaching divorce or separation, it is because we have made them see the problem in perspective and realise the situation was more due to their distorted perception or exaggerated view of it rather than what it really was,” says Chennai-based marriage counsellor and social worker Sujatha Ganapathy.

The same principle works in dealing with job-related problems says Dr. Reddy who narrates how she has made many executives become understanding of why bosses or colleagues are acting in a certain way and also how they need not see every situation or person as threatening.

Of course, despite all this, if the problem still goes out of hand there is always an expert's help and your doctor knows best.

However, that is an extreme case. Since stress or rather stressors have become almost omnipresent in these times, the better remedy is prevention or early remedy (see box) rather than letting the situation and your life go out of control. □

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