



Lead Article

Stress Management during the COVID-19 Pandemic

S M Sungoh*

Abstract

Students and teachers are adapting to a host of exhausting new challenges during this period where COVID-19 second wave has emerged yet again. It's hard to believe that more than a year and a half has passed since Educational Institutions have been closed due to the Corona virus pandemic. When the pandemic started and lockdown began, some students and teachers even felt like it might be a much-needed, short break from routine at that point of time. But as weeks turned to months, remote learning brought new stressors for both students and teachers. Students are getting a crash course in working at a computer all day, and also struggling with setting up a schedule studying from home and managing lectures and assignments of teachers. Many students as well as teachers are left wondering how they'll avoid burning out, especially without the face-to-face interaction. As we are watching the events around our country and in particular our state, the outbreak of Corona virus unfurls, and it is not unnatural to feel increasing stress and panic. We see and hear news that can be overwhelming and scary. One may even develop anxiety and fear due to this pandemic such as dealing with at-risk family members, trying to keep our children occupied while being indoors all day, managing to get work done while at home, or simply adjusting to new situations. As days go by where lockdown has continued, stress can add up and affect both physically and mentally. Therefore, this paper attempts to give a conceptual background on stress management and how to cope with it.

Keywords: *Stress, Coping Skills, Strain of Burnout.*

Introduction

When we talk of stress everyone agrees on, what is stressful for one person may be pleasurable or have little effect on others. We react to stress differently. Stress is your mind and body's response or reaction to a real or imagined threat. Stress is the exposure to extraordinarily unfavourable conditions; they need not necessarily represent a threat to life,

*Professor, Department of Education, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India. Email: smsungoh@gmail.com

but they do trigger an “Alarm ”response (e.g. Defensive and Adaptive reactions) in the organism if it is not in a dormant state (Larcher, 1980). It is the confusion created when one’s mind overrides the body’s basic desire to choke the living daylights out of somebody who desperately need it. Researchers define stress as a physical, mental, or emotional response to events that causes bodily or mental tension. So Stress is considered as an outside force or event that has an effect on our body or mind.

Types of Stresses

In our ever tedious and preoccupied lives where we seem to be chasing one thing after the other, feeling stressed has become fairly common. It could be stress from work or personal life, acute or chronic. Even when our body is at rest, our mind never stops thinking which ultimately leads to stress and the feeling of being burdened. Stress is very subjective. It may be temporary in nature due to a certain phase you're going through and your body returns to the normal state once it passes. But if it prolongs, stress can lead to some serious ailments like depression, heart trouble or even high blood pressure. The following are various types of stress that may occur during this second wave of COVID-19.

Acute Stress

This is the most severe form of stress which demands the body’s immediate reaction to a new challenge, event or demand. Acute stress is not always negative. It can even be experienced while on a roller-coaster in the form of fear. Stress suffered as the victim of a crime or life-threatening situation can cause mental health problems like post-traumatic stress disorder or acute stress disorder.

Episodic Acute Stress

Frequent occurrence of acute stress is called episodic acute stress. People who are often anxious, irritable or short-tempered experience this kind of stress. Victims carry a persistent negative outlook to everything and worry over every small issue. Negative health effects occur in people with episodic acute stress. These people accept stress as a part of their life and it is difficult for them to alter their lifestyle.

Chronic Stress

If acute stress prolongs for a longer period of time, it becomes chronic stress. This kind of stress is constant and doesn’t easily go away. It results from financial troubles, an unhappy marriage, a bad job or a dysfunctional family. Chronic stress is harmful for your health and can lead to diseases such as heart ailments and depression.

Physical Stress

Physical stress can occur from trauma due to injury, infection or any kind of surgery, intense physical labour, environmental pollution, inadequate oxygen supply, fatigue, hormonal imbalance, dehydration, substance abuse, and dental problems among others.

Psychological Stress

This includes emotional stress from fears, frustration, sadness, anger and grief and cognitive stress from jealousy, attachments, anxiety, panic attacks or self-criticism. It basically refers to the emotional and physiological reactions experienced when an individual comes across a situation.

Psychosocial Stress

This stress comes from relationship or marriage difficulties. It could be a relationship of an employee-employer, siblings or family. Lack of social support, loss of employment, loss of loved ones and isolation can lead to this kind of stress.

Cumulative Stress

This stress is that which piles up (snowballs). It increases with time, deteriorates through performance, relationships and health.

Causes of Stress

General Causes

Stress is the body's reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. The body reacts to these changes with physical, mental, and emotional responses. Stress is a normal part of life.

The Environment

The environmental stressors such as weather, noise, crowd, pollution, traffic unsafe housing are some of the examples which can cause stress to a person.

Life Causes

The death of a loved one; Divorce; Loss of a job; Increase in financial obligations; Getting married; Moving to a new home; Chronic illness or injury; Emotional problems (depression, anxiety, anger, grief, guilt, low self-esteem)

Stress at work

Common causes of workplace stress include: Fear of being laid off. More overtime due to staff cutbacks. Pressure to perform to meet rising expectations but with no increase in job satisfaction.

Coping Skills for Stress Management during COVID-19

Biological Coping Skills

Everyone needs 7-8 hours of sleep each night. Stress created by the evolving news and information overload can be aggravated by a lack of sleep, Stimulants such as caffeine, alcohol and nicotine before bedtime needs to be avoided. Having a bedtime routine like taking a hot bath, or having a cup of herbal tea before going to bed is a good practice. Eating three healthy meals a day are also very important and necessary. Keeping healthy snacks like fruits, nuts or granola bars is also a healthy practice. Good nutrition will help in keeping the immunity system healthy. Exercising at least 3

days per week for 30 minutes where the heart rate is over 120 BPM is good. For example, Aerobic exercises can still be done within your own home or compound, such as walking, running or climbing stairs. Even playing with your children can help burn out some calories.

Emotional Coping Skills

One needs to express oneself and talk with colleagues and friends through mobile phones, messages; validating and supporting others; monitoring one's own feelings throughout the day; engaging in self compassion and setting limits; connecting with those we love each day.

Cognitive Coping Skills

Recognizing when one's own thinking is being influenced by one's emotional state; avoiding negative thinking; not giving into automatic thoughts that elicit negative emotions; recognizing when the behaviour is contributing to negative emotional states.

Environmental Coping Skills

The environment and surrounding around the house should be kept clean and organised. One needs to identify factors in their environment that are contributing to stress and as far as possible eliminate them. One should be extra vigilant and follow precautions that have been advised. Floors need to be sanitized and clean regularly.

Social Distancing Coping Skills

Maintaining social distancing can be a very isolating and difficult situation. This may raise tensions at home, created loneliness, feeling constrained. One may feel more isolated from colleagues, friends and relatives and following the social distancing rules. Therefore, one needs to find ways to get outdoors or get out of the house that are still safe. One can start a project in one's own yard or around the house. Connecting with friends online is also important as others may feel isolated as well, so one needs to increase virtual communication with friends, relatives or colleagues. Helping people when required can also give one a sense of fulfilment which will calm the restless mind.

Loss of Routine Coping Skills

Another concern is that most people have felt a disruption in their day-to-day routine as a result of the virus. Both in terms of their job and home life, extra precautions and not being able to get resources are challenges which one faces now. So, we need to create a new routine; take initiative to set up routines with friends, relatives and colleagues; one also needs to accept the idea that some things won't get done and there is a need to talking with the administrators about expectations and priorities.

Home Life being Disrupted

The concern is that home is often our escape from the day-to-day stress of work; some of us are having to work from home or manage members of the home. Many of us are not able to visit family that are out of the state. Therefore, one needs to be mindful that one can only do the best one can. Being at home all day may inspire one to re-organised and rearranged things in the house. Further, accept the idea that if one is a parent right now, one is not expected to be perfect. Remember every parent is managing their children right now, and sometimes it may be difficult to cope with the situation.

Loss of Self-care Activities/ Routines

Normally we do all kinds of things to take care of ourselves; unfortunately, many of these activities involve being around others but have been cancelled. For coping skills, one needs to be creative; use YouTube to do exercise, meditation, and mindfulness at home; Get a video game that involves exercise; read those books you have wanted to read; go for a walk; talk to friends online and connect. These will help in eliminating boredom.

Having Special Events Cancelled

The concern is in the wake of social distancing many events have been cancelled or postponed; this includes sports, conferences, vacations, and even weddings. This can produce a sense of grief or loss that feels unfair. One is not alone in feeling this way. One should not fall into the trap of feeling like this is a first world problem and not allowing yourself to grieve. It's okay to be disappointed. The process of making changes can bring people together. More time can make some events even better.

Talking to Kids about Corona Virus

The concern may be struggling to understand what is happening, except they have fewer agencies to manage their lives; being out of school and out of their routine can be difficult for many kids. The coping skills are talk with your children about the topic. Focus on things that are going to stay the same, being together, being loved, supporting each other. Come up with daily routines and rituals for your children. Recognise how your own anxiety may be affecting your children.

What Can Teachers do to Ease this Strain of Burnout?

- a) ***Making a list of everything***: Start making a list of everything you have to do at a specific time slot (Live teaching online).
- b) ***Schedule***: Schedule the things needed to do with more flexible timing (Office hours). Keep timings consistent.
- c) ***Time-boxed***: Keep the time-boxed once a week, (1 day) for students to ask questions or time can be kept for group related task like discussion on a topic together online or the teacher can block off a set time in the schedule to answer all new messages at once, instead of sending one email at a time.

- d) **Take care of one-self:** Because we're living in a time of unprecedented stress, make sure to build in time to take care of yourself and prioritize what's essential too.
- e) **Planning time:** Plan time into your remote learning schedule for breaks, meals, exercise, and sleep, just as you would lesson planning.
- f) **Setting Reminders:** Setting reminders or alarms on your phone and handwriting out a daily to-do list may help keep you on track.
- g) **Working from home:** The transition to working from home has not merely involved a location shift for teachers—it's a completely different way of working. Working from home is not what teachers signed up for. It is a huge challenge because we are not used to sitting at all during the day. By doing this you might develop certain physical stress, like experiencing a tennis elbow, vision problem, etc.

Avoiding Stress while using the Computer

- a) **20-20-20 rule:** Some simple modifications may ease the toll on teachers' bodies. When working at the computer, the screen should be about arm's length away (25 inches) from your face. It is also suggested following the 20-20-20 rule to reduce eye strain: Every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds.
- b) **Contrast and Brightness:** Be aware of the contrast and brightness of your screen too—the screen should not be brighter than the room.
- c) **Breaks for Exercise:** Most importantly, adults need breaks and exercise just like kids, which can help boost mood, improve mental clarity, and relieve stress. Get up and move at least 15 minutes every two hours, doctors advise, even if it's a walk up and down the stairs.
- d) **Free Gym Online Classes:** A number of gyms are offering free online classes—no equipment required—during COVID-19.

Conclusion

Most importantly, adults need breaks and exercise just like kids, which can help boost mood, improve mental clarity, and relieve stress. Get up and move at least 15 minutes every two hours, doctors advise, even if it's a walk up and down the stairs. Because we're living in a time of unprecedented stress, make sure to build in time to take care of yourself and prioritize what's essential too. Plan time into your remote learning schedule for breaks, meals, exercise, and sleep, just as you would lesson planning. Used to being the “sage on the stage,” teachers are struggling to manage the instability caused by the pandemic and no longer feel confident they have the answers. Veteran teachers have compared the feeling to being a first-year teacher all over again. To maintain a level head amid tremendous uncertainty, experts advise keeping focused on what matters most: Reminding yourself you are still a skilled teacher, even if teaching looks different than it used to. To cope, regularly remembering the reasons “why you became a teacher,” or the students' lives you touched, may ease feelings that you have no control over your life.

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