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Towards Stress Management and Self-Care among School Students

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Abstract

This paper attempts to make aware of the bad effects of stress on academic sphere and thereby points out how to identify the causes of stress and suggests some strategies for making school environment free from anxiety, stress and fear. Moreover, some stress training tips have been suggested so that the stress tolerance capacity of the students may be increased. The author's ultimate aim of writing this article is to make conscious of all concerned to take desirable efforts so that the school children will relieve from stress and anxiety and the present traditional school environment will be shifted to a stress-free joyful friendly environment which will enable them become a complete well-being.

Key Words: Stress, Anxiety, Fear, Strategies, Training- tips.

Introduction: The growing stress among the school children has become a challenge or threat to their physical and mental development. Particularly the negative consequence of stress is highly detrimental to the well-being of the students. Academic activities will go in vain if we ignore the bad effects of stress on the students. But the present traditional school system does not give any importance on the matter. So it is necessary to make aware of all concerned about the causes of stress and its bad effects on the students and also initiate some stress management strategies with self-care for preventing mental hazards and bodily damage and thereby to equip the students with proper degree of stress tolerance capacity for building up a well-adjusted personality.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of study of the article are stated precisely as follows:

1. To know the nature of stress.
2. To identify the causes of stress.
3. To know the effects of stress on body and mind.
4. To know the stress management strategies in education.
5. To make aware of self-care for developing stress tolerance capacity and build up a stress free healthy school environment.

Structure of the Paper:

The present study is structured in the following manner:

In Section I, an attempt is made to understand the concept of stress and the ways by which we respond to stress.

In Section II, it has been focussed on the causes of stress among the students.

In Section III, an attempt is made to point out the harmful effects of stress on body and mind.

In Section IV, some stress management strategies in education have been highlighted.

In Section V, the concluding remarks have been made which reflects the author's own evaluation.

Section-I

Concept of Stress: Stress refers to something that poses a challenge or threat to our well-being. When a person faced with a challenge or a threat, he activates his body's resources to protect himself in two ways- either to 'fight' or 'flight' i.e. to get away. Stress is the feeling that arise when an individual is under pressure. Stressor is a stimulus that causes stress. According to Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, stress may be considered as a consequence from an "imbalance between demands and resources" or as occurring when "pressure exceeds one's perceived ability to cope". Hans Selye refers to both positive and negative stress. Stress in its positive form ('eustress') helps a person to stay focused, energetic and alert to meet the challenges but in negative form ('distress') becomes harmful by causing major damages to the body and mind. Thus it is said, "stress within your comfort zone can help you perform under pressure, motivate you to do you best, even keep you safe when danger looms. But when stress becomes overwhelming, it can damage your health, mood, relationships and quality of life". In this article, we shall focus on stress which is negative in form, harmful to both physical and mental health.

Ways to Respond to Stress:

A person may regulate the nervous systems for responding to stress in three ways:

1. **Social engagement:** Social engagement is the most evolved strategy for keeping oneself calm and safe by connecting the brain to sensory receptors for effective social interaction.
2. **Mobilization:** It is known as fight-or-flight response. When social engagement has become an inappropriate response a person needs to either protect himself or run away from danger. Thus his body prepares for mobilization. As the danger gradually passed, then his body function back down to its normal balance.
3. **Immobilization:** Being faced with a extreme panic stricken situation, someone may find himself traumatized or in a dysfunction stage i.e. unable to arouse his body to a mobilization response. This stress response is used by the body only.

Section- II

Causes of Stress: In order to better deal with stress, it is necessary to identify the possible causes of stress among the learners. The common causes of stress are mentioned below:

1. **High expectation:** Stress is the difference between what is attained and what is desired. High expectation beyond individual's capacity almost leads to non-attainment of desired object and its causes stress.
2. **Traditional school environment:** Rigid rule, forced discipline, authoritative attitude, unbearable academic load, unhappy peer relationships, lack of time management, and dull and monotonous teaching make the school environment stressful. Naturally it induces anxiety and stress among students.
3. **Teacher's defective role:** Teacher's defective behaviour towards students, such as, partial behaviour, rude and fearful treatment, gender bias, mechanical teaching and inconsistent with saying and doing arouse stress and anxiety among the students.
4. **Academic pressure:** Stress in learners is primarily related to academic pressure and sometimes inability to cope with such academic load instigates the students to commit suicide. The multi-tasking daily activity and overburden homework arouse stress and anxiety among them.
5. **Examination pressure:** Students are forced to 'the best' and it is a matter of compulsion rather than a choice. Hence the attainments of marks or grade below the expectations cause mental anxiety and stress.
6. **Over-emphasis on materialistic gratification:** Education is treated as a vehicle of earning for more money power and status. So the students and parents have become the victims of fear and stress about their educational attainments and professional carrier in future. The intense competition for getting admission in reputed institutions and the overall unemployment situation in India have developed stress among the learners.
7. **Parental factors:** Sometimes parent put pressure on their children as tool for realising their unfulfilled dreams which would become stressful to their children. Moreover, the family conflict, alienation from parents and peers, unfulfillment of basic needs, economic insecurity, gender bias, rude disciplinary measures and negative reaction towards children's achievement have led the learners to be victims of stress.
8. **Internal factors:** The internal causes of stress may be noted here as-- chronic worry, pessimism, negative outlook, unrealistic expectations and lack of flexibility. Moreover, if the mental development of the learners is incompatible with their physical or social development, then they may be victims of stress for want of academic adaptations.

Section- III

Effects of Stress in Body and Mind: Stress causes harmful effects on the students in physiological, psychological, cognitive and behavioural point of view. The effects of stress are summed up as follows:

1. Physiological effects:

- Body releases hormone for ‘fight or flight’ response. They increase heart rate, blood pressure and rapid breathing.
- Chest pain, headache and stomach upset.
- Sleeping difficulties.
- Muscle spasms and dizziness.
- Loss of sex drive.
- Immune system goes down.

2. Cognitive effects:

- Memory problems.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Poor judgement.
- Negative approach.

3. Psychological effects:

- Anxiety, irritability or short temper.
- Feeling of insecurity and loneliness.
- Depression and moodiness.
- Restlessness, forgetfulness and sadness.
- Decreasing ability to work.

4. Behavioural effects:

- Sudden angry outbursts.
- Isolating from others and neglecting responsibilities.
- Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax.
- Eating and sleeping too much or too little.
- Interaction problems.

Stress damages both physical and mental health of the students which manifests the symptoms of fear, anxiety, agitation, despair and apathy. The childhood stress is mainly responsible for the act of self-harm, anorexia, aggression bullying, social dysfunction, withdraw and inability to learn. The National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences reported that about 11% of college students and about 7 to 8 percent of high school students have attempted suicide. Another study revealed the fact that 20% of the children were victims of subclinical depression and 30% of them have suffered from mild to moderate depression.

Section- IV

Stress Management Strategies in Education: Stress management provides us some techniques for reducing the levels of stress and maintaining successful well-being. Stress management can prevent mental hazards, bodily damage and help to build up a well-adjusted personality. Education can develop the ability to control over the stress generating situations and their evil effects. Students equipped with proper degree of stress tolerance capacity are found to have proper reasonably balanced behaviour, social adjustment, staying calm and cool, self-confidence, positive thinking, firm goal directed actions, less mistakes in work and go forward towards the achievement of educational goal. Thus education can play a vital role in stress management.

In academic environment, strategies for stress management and self-care may be developed as follows:

- 1. Identifying the stress:** Education makes us aware of the causes and symptoms of stresses by which we can identify the stress that exists in the students.
- 2. Find out the stressors:** It is necessary to find out the correct stressors of a particular stress by analysing the symptoms of different stresses.
- 3. Identifying appropriate strategies:** In order to cope with stress, appropriate strategies should be chalked out on the basis psychological principals. The levels of stress should be measured by using relevant psychological tests and practical stress management strategies must be taken for self-help practice. Self-help approaches as suitable for stress-prevention and resilience-building among the students.
- 4. Stress-free school environment:** The Right to Education Act provides prohibition on corporal punishment and emphasis on the stress-free environment. Learning should be child-centric and joyful and the academic atmosphere should be friendly, conducive and free from stress, anxiety and trauma.
- 5. Child-friendly school:** The traditional school should be shifted a child-friendly school, which would help to recognise each student's needs, interests and potentials, provide facilitative relationship between teachers and students and make learning environment attractive. The school should provide a safe, secure and joyful academic environment by avoiding rigid rules, severe punishment, discrimination, harassment, verbal and sexual abuse and misuse of the teacher's authority. Moreover, co-curricular activities is helpful for reducing the stress. The load of curriculum, daily assignments and evaluation should be justified.
- 6. Conceptual thought of Indian tradition:** According to Indian traditional thought, stress is reduced when 'Sattva' (Purity essence) predominates over 'Rajas' (Energy) and 'Tamas' (Inertia). It can be achieved by controlling passions and purifying mind through the practice of 'Yoga'. Hence, prayer performing prior to commencement of classes, practice of Pranayama (Breath Control), meditation and Yogic postures

under expert guidance in school will help the students to relieve from stress and strain by developing their mental stability and tolerance.

7. **Awareness and right attitude:** Students should aware of the stress-inducing factors, stress symptoms and its harmful effects on them. Moreover, right attitude, optimistic outlook, positive thinking and self-confidence would help them to cope with the stressful situation.
8. **Coping strategies and techniques:** Stress-affected students should be given coping strategies and techniques for effective management of the stressful situation. Some of these are – (a) relaxation strategy, (b) modelling technique and (c) purposeful distracting strategy.
9. **Stress reduction tips:** Stress reduction tips should be provided for prevention of stress. Some effective tips or measures are mentioned here precisely:
 - ❖ **Social engagement:** The face –to-face talking with each other would release hormones that reduce stress. So wide social engagement is needed for preventing stress. Hence, people with a strong network of supportive friends and family members are better able to cope with life’s stressors.
 - ❖ **Moving activities:** Activities that require moving, viz, running, dancing, swimming and exercises can focus the attention on the particular physical sensation which would help to reduce stress, anxiety, worries and refresh the mood.
 - ❖ **Healthy diet:** Healthy diet to be taken for building up well-nourished body which would help better cope with life’s stressors.
 - ❖ **Relaxing body and mind:** Relaxation techniques, such as yoga, meditation, sound sleep and passing ‘alone time’ would strengthen the body’s relaxation and it can help better cope with stress.
 - ❖ **Attitude and outlook:** Optimistic outlook and rational attitude can develop a strong will-force to meet the life-stressors. So optimistic people are often more stress-hardy. They tend to accept the challenges as a part of life,
 - ❖ **Sense of control:** A sense of confidence on ability to influence events and persevere through challenges would enable us strong tolerance for stress.
 - ❖ **Avoid alcohol and cigarettes:** The habit of taking drug for quick relief from stress should be discarded. Because it causes much harm to the body and mind of a man.
 - ❖ **Emotional ability:** The ability to bring emotions into balance should be learned so that a person would stay calm and soothe in a stressful situation.
 - ❖ **Support system:** A comfortable environment consists of near relatives, friends or counsellors based on healthy relationship is needed for reducing stress among the learners. Hobby, leisure and sharing feelings with each other can help to relieve from stress.

- ❖ **Time management:** Learners should chalk out a schedule for daily activities, such as class work, study time, extra-curricular activities, alone time, meal times and sleep in accordance with their ability, priority and choice. All assignments will be completed as per schedule and important due dates should be noted.
- ❖ **Avoidance of multi-tasking:** If learners do too many things at a time, he cannot complete anything well. Then it may cause stress in them. So multi-tasking should be avoided.
- ❖ **Knowledge and preparation:** The knowledge about the stressful situation, personal signals of stress including how long it will last and what to expect is helpful to cope with the stressors.
- ❖ **Other stress-taming tips:** Some stress-training tips for learners may be noted here-
 - Avoid trivial classroom conflicts.
 - Consider each situation separately.
 - Get sufficient rest and deep sleep.
 - See natural beauty around you.
 - Choose a hobby and allow a fixed time for it.
 - Give up negative copying patterns.
 - Assess whether you have any stress-promoting life traps.
 - Encourage self-awareness about stress.
 - Know your limits.
 - Develop mindfulness and meditation.
 - Engage in artistic work or expression.

Section- V

Concluding Remarks: To conclude, it may be said that academic activities in schools will mostly go in vain unless we build up a stress-free friendly school environment. The teachers, parents and of all concerned will have to be conscious about the harmful effects of stress so that their attitude and behaviour towards their students will not cause any anxiety, stress and fear in them. Hence, mass consciousness programme for developing stress tolerance capacity and self-care should be emphasised.

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