Countering the Stress in Children

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ABSTRACT

Young people, like adults, experience stress. It can come from a variety of sources including doing well in school, making and sustaining friendships, or managing perceived expectations from their parents, teachers or coaches. Some stress can be positive in that it provides the energy to tackle a big test, presentation or sports event. Too much stress, however, can create unnecessary hardship and challenge. Adults can sometimes be unaware when their children or teens are experiencing overwhelming feelings of stress. Tuning into emotional or behavioral cues is important in identifying potential problems and working with your young person to provide guidance and support to successfully work through difficult times.

Stress is a function of the demands placed on us and our ability to meet them. These demands often come from outside sources, such as family, jobs, friends, or school. But it also can come from within, often related to what we think we should be doing versus what we're actually able to do.

So stress can affect anyone who feels overwhelmed — even kids. In preschoolers, separation from parents can cause anxiety. As kids get older, academic and social pressures (especially from trying to fit in) create stress.

Youth of all ages, but especially younger children, may find it difficult to recognize and verbalize when they are experiencing stress. For children, stress can manifest itself through changes in behavior. Common changes can include acting irritable or moody, withdrawing from activities that used to give them pleasure, routinely expressing worries, complaining more than usual about school, crying, displaying surprising fearful reactions, clinging to a parent or teacher, sleeping too much or too little, or eating too much or too little. With teens, while spending more time with and confiding in peers is a normal part of growing up, significantly avoiding parents, abandoning long-time friendships for a new set of peers or expressing excessive hostility toward family members, may indicate that the teen is experiencing significant stress. While negative behavior is not always linked to excessive stress, negative changes in behavior are almost always a clear indication that something is wrong. Adults will want to pay attention to these behaviors and determine an appropriate response or intervention.

KEY WORDS Stress, mechanisms, alternatives, Common changes , Countering techniques

INTRODUCTION

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So stress can affect anyone who feels overwhelmed — even kids. In preschoolers, separation from parents can cause anxiety. As kids get older, academic and social pressures (especially from trying to fit in) create stress.

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Dr. Reed Moskowitz, founder and medical director of the Stress Disorders Clinic at New York University Medical Center says “Stress disorders exist at all ages. The physiological consequences of stress build up over years and decades. The earlier we learn to deal with our stress, the better our health and energy will be as adults.” Children will experience stress, sometimes significant amounts of it, in their lives.

Adults ordinarily fail to recognize the incidence and magnitude of stress in the lives of children. Sadly enough not much is being done in India to study it but symptoms are available to accept that it is more widespread than we are even ready to accept. We are in sort in state of denial – I don’t accept hence it might not exist. But in west it’s accepted as a fact. In fact acceptance helps you to find solutions, denials delay the inevitable.

Our complex modern society has greatly increased the amount of stress adults and children are exposed to. Children are experiencing more stress at younger and younger ages. Even in the womb a child picks up the mother’s stress – stress chemicals such as adrenalin and cortical cross the placenta.

Young children may experience stress from:
• Disrupted homes, blended families, both parents working outside the home;
• Increased exposure to violence, both real and on the screen;
• Excessive screen time;
• Being over scheduled;
• Feeling pressured to perform or behave beyond their ability:
• Sharing very limited resources of family in physical space play space Thus cramming the utilization of their physical energy.

Common stress producers for teens (in addition to the above):
• Failing an exam
• Physical appearance
• Judgment or evaluation by others
• Unrealistic classroom demands
• The future
• Problems with peers
• Problems with a boyfriend or girlfriend
• Any situation that threatens self-esteem
• Disagreements with teachers, parents or other adults
  (Feinstein, *Secrets of the Teenage Brain*, 2004, p.94)

Teachers and administrators are experiencing an increasing amount of stress with the pressures on dwindling resources and attempts to universal education. Their own life’s stress and struggles add to their wards stress.

Yet, they often fail to recognize that this stress filters down to the students. It is essential that adults understand the damaging effects of stress on children’s health, behavior and learning and in turn, value the benefits of a calm, relaxed state. Adults must learn positive ways to manage stress – both for themselves and for the children with whom they live and work.

This essay presents some of the negative consequences of stress, followed by the benefits of a calm mind and body. Examples of calming strategies that can be applied in the classroom are offered in the last section.

**The Negative Consequences of Stress**

Stress is neutral – it is a person’s perception of the event that determines their response.

Stress is positive when the person feels stimulated and able to manage the situation. This positive response prepares the body for action and activates the higher thinking centers of the brain. A positive response to stress can provide the energy to handle emergencies, meet challenges, and excel.

Stress is negative when a person feels threatened and not in control of the situation. These feelings instigate a powerful reaction – affecting both the brain and body in ways that can be destructive to physical and mental health.

**The Stress Reaction: Fight-or-Flight**

Regardless of the cause – our perception of threat triggers the fight-or-flight reaction, a potent mind-body phenomenon designed to save our lives. The fight-or-flight reaction was first proposed by Walter Cannon in 1914 (The emergency function of the adrenal medulla in pain and the major emotions). He described it “as an emergency reaction that prepares an animal for running or fighting.” The fight-flight reaction is now expanded by some to include “freeze” (e.g. become immobilized) and “faint” (e.g. to space-out).

The stress reaction begins with the amygdala, an almond shaped structure deep in the brain’s emotional center – the limbic system. The amygdala scans incoming signals from the senses for anything that could cause distress. If a threat of any kind is perceived, the amygdala acts like an alarm system,

Instantaneously sending a message of crisis to all parts of the brain (Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, 1997, p.16). The sympathetic nervous system releases general stimulants such as noradrenalin (also known as norepinephrine) into the brain and adrenalin (also known as epinephrine) into the body. This release of chemicals does the following
• Increases muscle tension, blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate and blood flow to our muscles. Presumably we’re going to need to fight off danger or run for our lives.
• Raises our metabolism so our body works at the highest levels of efficiency.
• Slows our digestive process to direct our energy to the emergency at hand.
• Dilates the pupils of the eyes for maximum light; directs the eyes peripherally to see danger or locks eyes into tunnel vision.
• Turns up our hormonal temperature.

This is why long after a stressful experience has ended your heart is still pounding and you still feel upset. Cortical, a stress hormone, is secreted to do the following:
• Releases glucose (from liver) and breaks down tissues to release fat into the blood stream to supply muscles with nutrients
• Inhibits protein uptake by 70% while breaking down protein (reduced muscle mass) to supply energy to muscles.

Stress Takes a Toll on Health

Stress isn’t always destructive. It can provide energy to handle emergencies, make changes, meet challenges and excel. But even though some amount of stress is useful, indeed even helpful, the long-term consequences of constant stress are damaging to our mental and physical health. If stress is constant and unrelieved, the body has little time to relax and recover. The stress button keeps getting pushed, continually releasing stress hormones when we don’t need them, putting the body into overdrive. Scientists call this state “hyper arousal”: blood pressure rises, breathing and heart rates speed up, blood vessels constrict, and muscles tense up. Stress disorders can result such as: high blood pressure, headaches, reduced eyesight, stomachaches and other digestive problems, facial, neck and back pain. High levels of the major stress hormone, cortical, depress the immune system. A number of studies found that high levels of cortical are implicated in AIDS, MS, diabetes, cancer, coronary artery disease, Alzheimer’s disease, and Parkinson’s disease (Lewis, survey of children ages 6 – 12-years-old, Stress- Proofing Your Child, 1996, p.4)

“Stressed children are vulnerable to these disorders as well as: sleep disturbances (including nightmares and bed wetting), skin diseases, and infections. Like adults, they become more accident prone. Research suggests that even physical conditions with a genetic basis—like asthma, allergies, and diabetes—can be adversely affected by childhood stress” (Lewis, p.4).We carry the patterns we learn as children into adulthood.

Calm child:

John Gottman, professor of psychology at the University of Washington, states that if children learn to stay calm under stress, they will be less likely to misbehave (Gottman, Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child, 1997, p.67). Gottman says this self-regulation skill “helps a child get along with others – to control his negative responses in a conflict, share, enter new playgroups, make new friends and handle rejection when peers turn away.” “It helps him be better able to handle his own frustration and anger and be more responsive to and cooperative with adult guidance” (p. 33).

A Child Learns and Remembers Best When Calm and Positive

When one is calm and alert, the prefrontal lobes are free to engage in higher level thinking tasks. Positive emotions help a child to pay attention, concentrate, solve problems, be creative, learn and remember(Goleman , p. 85).
Researchers at the HeartMath Institute found that positive emotions such as feelings of love, appreciation, peacefulness, and playfulness produce an even heart beat rhythm. This forms a harmonious, coherent heart pattern that looks like a mathematically regular wave. Coherent heart rhythms create coherent brain waves. These harmonious rhythms allow the thinking brain to optimally receive and create patterns from incoming information (Childre & Martin, *The HeartMath Solution*, p.37, 1999). Feeling relaxed, alert and positive balances the dopamine system so we can pay attention, recognize patterns and think clearly (Bailey, pp. 45-47). Dopamine stimulates the brain’s reward pathways. This drives motivation – it feels good so we want to repeat the experience. Serotonin is associated with feelings of well being. “Serotonin works hand in hand with dopamine. The dopamine system helps us focus, while the serotonin system keeps us from being overwhelmed with too much incoming stimuli. Serotonin is like calming music in the doctor’s office” (Bailey, p. 47).

A Child’s Experiences in Calming Himself may Help his Brain Develop the Ability to Self-Regulate his Response to Stress Throughout Life

Vagal tone refers to the ability to self-regulate our physiological response to stress. Vagal tone is a term that comes from the vagus nerve, which is a large nerve originating in the brainstem responsible for many functions of the parasympathetic nervous system (relaxation). The vagus nerve carries information from and to the brain, heart and other areas of the body. Just as kids with good muscle tone excel at sports, kids with high vagal tone excel at responding to and recovering from emotional stress. These children are good at soothing themselves, focusing their attention and inhibiting action when that’s what’s called for. Learning to be calm helps the child to concentrate in learning situations and to focus on the achievement of specific tasks. The experience children have with emotion while their parasympathetic nervous systems are still under construction may play a big part in the development of their vagal tone – and consequently their emotional wellbeing – later in life (Gottman, pp.38, 39).

Calming Strategies for the Classroom

It is essential that educators minimize stressful events in the classroom as much as possible. Basic needs must be met by providing a safe environment, structure, consistency and positive relationships. In addition to creating a safe, caring environment, educators can help students manage the stressful moments that inevitably come up in the school setting. Instead of viewing them as a disruption, stressful moments can be turned into opportunities to establish self-calming skills. There are a number of well-researched techniques that break the stress cycle and activate the relaxation response to bring the body/mind system back into a healthier balance. These calming techniques may seem very simple, yet they can have immediate profound effects. Any calming technique, applied in a moment of stress, can be powerful. Students can redirect their scattered energy by doing even the briefest exercise. After focusing the student’s attention on managing their stress, students can then be directed to focus on an academic or creative activity. For example, hyperactive children, as a result of training in muscle relaxation, have shown improvement in attention and concentration, behavior and self-concept (Chang and Hiebert, *Medical Psychotherapy*, 1989, p.2).

It’s important for teachers to develop the capacity to notice and detect the stress developing in student. It’s to be understood normal amount of stress is normal need of body but there is an optimum level beyond which its unhealthy.

**Body signals might be:**
- Tight muscles
- Shallow breathing
- Fast breathing
Hot face
Pounding heart
Sweaty hands
Stomach or head ache
Fuzzy brain

**And emotions might be:**
Nervous
Anxious
Scared
Upset
Frustrated
And mad.

**HOW PARENTS CAN HELP**

Parents can help children respond to stress in healthy ways. Following are some tips:

- Provide a safe, secure, familiar, consistent, and dependable home.
- Be selective in the television programs that young children watch (including news broadcasts), which can produce fears and anxiety.
- Spend calm, relaxed time with your children.
- Encourage your child to ask questions.
- Encourage expression of concerns, worries, or fears.
- Listen to your child without being critical.
- Build your child's feelings of self-worth. Use encouragement and affection. Try to involve your child in situations where he or she can succeed.
- Try to use positive encouragement and reward instead of punishment.
- Allow the child opportunities to make choices and have some control in his or her life. This is particularly important, because research shows that the more people feel they have control over a situation, the better their response to stress will be.
- Encourage physical activity.
- Develop awareness of situations and events that are stressful for children. These include new experiences, fear of unpredictable outcomes, unpleasant sensations, unmet needs or desires, and loss.
- Recognize signs of unresolved stress in your child.
- Keep your child informed of necessary and anticipated changes such as changes in jobs or moving.
- Seek professional help or advice when signs of stress do not decrease or disappear.

**WHAT CHILDREN CAN DO TO RELIEVE STRESS**

Encourage your children to discuss their emotions. Help them come up with simple ways to change the stressful situation or their response to it.

Below are some tips that children can follow to help reduce stress:

- Talk about your problems. If you cannot communicate with your parents, try someone else that you can trust.
- Try to relax. Listen to calm music. Take a warm bath. Close your eyes and take slow deep breaths. Take some time for yourself. If you have a hobby or favorite activity, give yourself time to enjoy it.
- Set realistic expectations. Do your best, and remember that nobody is perfect.
- Learn to love yourself and respect yourself. Respect others. Be with people who accept and respect you.
• Remember that drugs and alcohol never solve problems.
• Ask for help if you are having problems managing your stress.

Calming Techniques

Deep Breathing (Dirga Shwas Preksha)
When we are under stress we often “hold our breath” or breathe very shallowly, lifting only the rib cage. Taking slow deep breaths is a quick way to break the stress cycle; it automatically shifts a stress reaction (sympathetic nervous system) to a relaxation response (parasympathetic nervous system). Slow, deep abdominal breathing expands the lower lung area to take in more air and allows the diaphragm to expel stale air from the lungs. This practice of deep breathing is termed as Dirga Shwas Preksah in the Preksha School of Meditation.

Relaxation with Self Awareness (Kāyatsarga)
It is possible to train ourselves to activate the protective mechanism and to influence our reaction to stress. The increased secretion and output of adrenaline can be normalized and the sympathetic dominance counterbalanced by increased parasympathetic activity. Regular practice of kāyotsarga is a potent remedy to manage stress borne diseases. Practice of relaxation is the direct and harmless way of relaxing tension. One cannot hope to enjoy either health or happiness so long as one is under the insidious influence of tension, in spite of possessing amenities and luxuries of life. Anybody who, after learning the technique, practices systematic relaxation every day for 30 to 45 minutes would remain relaxed and unperturbed in any situation. Relaxation, if properly done, can relieve tension and fatigue more effectively in half an hour than many hours of indifferent sleep. It is an exercise of the mastery of conscious will over the body by the technique of autosuggestion. Will, however, is not the tyrant with dictatorial powers, cracking the whip, but as gentle and patient as a loving mother with an obstinate child. In other words, relaxation can never be acquired by force, constraint or violence. In time, relaxation could become a habit, not a mechanical one, but an effortless conscious way of life. One can remain relaxed under the most exasperating conditions. Whatever they may be, one is relaxed, neither tense nor frowning with worry. Auto suggestion is the basic principle of technique of relaxation. Each part of the body is relaxed in turn by coaxing autosuggestion. When relaxation is supported by few other selected components of Preksha Meditation, its effect is increased manifold. Thus, in this modern era of globalization, were a potential antidote of stress is the need of hour, meditation lights a ray of hopes.

References: