

Adolescent Stress: Management Strategies

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Adolescents today are perpetually experiencing situations of mental pressure and stress. Selye (1956) defines it stating that it is "any external event or any internal drive which threaten to upset the organism equilibrium is stress."

Stress has been defined as the incongruity between the individuals own perceptions and the demands of the environment for fulfilling these. (Vermunt and Steensman, 2005; Topper, 2007; Ussery, 2007; Malach-Pines and Keinan, 2007). While Campbell, 2006 defines stress as the unfavourable reaction which some individuals may have to excessive pressure and the varied demands placed on them. Stress is the outcome of any situation that the individuals perceives as out of their control and are unable to deal with it. Academics is a common stressor for students as there is fear of failure, too much competition, lack of economic independence and work pressure. To add on to this is the problems of managing and coping with relationships with family members, peers and other adults (Fairbrother and Warn, 2003).

Stress can be used to describe the physical, emotional, behavioral and cognitive reactions to happenings that are perceived and evaluated in terms of their priority as threatening or challenging (Saundra & Ciccirelli, 2008). It is an integral part of every individual's lives and can have both positive and negative effects. Stress is good (eustress) in any situation when it acts as a motivator and offers an opportunity to an individual to enhance his/her performance in daily life. Stress is harmful (distress) in situations where an individual is unable to cope with social, emotional and physical stressors. Therefore it becomes imperative to recognize the source and degree of stress, the nature of stressors and develop appropriate coping skills and strategies to combat stress.

Adolescents may often find themselves in situations that can cause stress as they are progressing through a period of tremendous change. This is the stage when the adolescent is experiencing physical and physiological changes, is experiencing a tussle between identity and role confusion, is dealing with academic challenges and career related issues; the adolescent may also have to deal with financial constraints at times. The changes they are dealing with may often stretch their resources both at a personal and a social level leaving them with a feeling of helplessness. This may manifest in physical, sometimes psychosomatic, psychological and behavioural problems amongst adolescents.

Various studies by Schafer, 1996; Fisher, 1994; Altmaier, 1983; Greenberg & Valletutti, 1980, (in Pfeiffer, 2001)

have indicated a strong relationship between stress and college students and young adults. According to Lazarus & Folkman (1984), stress is a mental or physical phenomenon formed through one's cognitive consideration of the stimulus and is one's response to it through interaction with the environment. For stress to appear, the existence of a stressor is required. A stressor, as defined by Feng (1992) and Volpe (2000) is something that questions an individual's ability to adjust or something that fuels an individual's mind, body or action. Stress can result from environmental, psychological, biological and social factors.

When adolescents experience stress, it is coupled with symptoms that can range from headaches to depression. Researchers (Malach Pines and Keinan, 2007; Ongori, 2007; Ongori and Agolla, 2008; Agolla, 2009 in Agolla 2009) have recognized various symptoms that can be associated with stress. Low energy levels, high blood pressure, an increase or loss of appetite, restlessness, concentration issues, tension and anxiety are some that can be experienced commonly.

The impact of the stress experienced, however, may vary greatly based on how the individual assesses the situation s/he is exposed to, whether such a situation has been experienced before, the resilience of the individual, the alertness to come up with solutions that are practical and feasible. Basically, the individuals perception of the situation and the presence of mind to deal with it and strategize how to cope with it and get out of the stressful situation would have a major role to play.

Delineating some of the causes of stress could assist in suggesting strategies to cope with it. As far as adolescents are concerned, the stressors would focus on academics, relationships with parents, siblings, peers, teachers and other persons of relevance in their life. Managing a balanced approach to deal with demands from home, school, assignments and tests and the various relationships would require effective time management that the adolescent may find challenging. Job stress and building the base for a good career and dealing with the competitions of the job market may consume the adolescent often having an impact on the adolescents wellbeing.

Stress has become an all pervasive part of the lives of the youth today. It is essential to attempt to help them manage it so that stress does not create a disruption in their normal lives and routine.

Various methods such as time management, conflict resolution, communication skills, social support, humor, spirituality, meditation, exercise, yoga, and massage have been described as very useful. (Greenberg, 2011). Literature has shown a positive relationship between time management skills and stress levels (Charlesworth, Nathan, 2004). Techniques of listening and communication have been found useful in coping with social stressful situations. Humor can immediately help in reducing the intensity of a stressful situation. Not only can it increase social support, it can build into the tense atmosphere, a feeling of cheerfulness which can dissipate the stress and lead to direction for coping with it. Yoga and meditation as well as mindfulness can be inculcated into the normal routine of the adolescent as stress busters. (Sharma, 2014).

Listening to music leads to a large number of cognitive processes in the brain, therefore, it may also influence the processes that lead to a build up of stress. It has been found that listening to music can lead to reductions in psychological stress, can increase coping abilities and provide a feeling of relaxation. Listening to music may modify anxiety levels as well. (Thoma et al. 2013). Not only listening to music but learning any form of vocal or instrumental music may also provide the necessary diversions that are beneficial in reducing levels of stress.

Dance too has helped in coping with the stressors of life. Dance has the capacity to help an individual to reduce and escape stress. According to Seligmann (2011) it can promote wellbeing. Dance can be a source of being busy, can provide a sense of accomplishment and can also help in building a good sense of self as well as bringing about positivity in relationships and reducing stress. Dance further channelizes the excessive physical energy and strengthens the muscles and other parts of the body which further in assist increased physical wellbeing that can be one of the precursors to reducing stress and enhancing wellbeing.

Just being with age mates, playing games, chatting, using humor can be very effective in coping with the stressful situations that adolescents experience. During adolescence, especially, the interaction with peers gains tremendous importance. There is a sense of better identification with peers probably due to the feeling that they too could be experiencing similar challenges. Also the understanding that solutions can be worked out to deal with stressors collectively may intensify the bonding with age mates. There is also an enhanced desire for belongingness during this stage of development and friends in educational institutions and in the neighbourhood gain more importance. However, this too may be a cause of stress as the need for acceptance by the peer group is high and in case

there is rejection, it may lead to low self esteem and a sense of alienation.

During adolescence, heterosexual relationships are a source of stress as well. As there is a heightened awareness about their own physical self and attraction towards the opposite sex members; all energies are focussed on satisfying the innate needs and desires. This further impacts the self esteem and confidence levels of the adolescents. A vicious circle may develop if self esteem is low leading to unhappy relationships, thereby enhancing stress and the inability to cope with it may play the circle again. Positive self esteem is imperative for positive relationships and can enhance their performance in all walks of life. Hence, guidance from and better communication and interaction with adults would go a long way in helping the adolescent in reducing stress.

The support of the family, the parents and siblings can never be questioned for its value in the life of an adolescent. Acceptance by the family members and encouraging the child to express his/her feelings, anxieties, fears etc. without being judgemental would instill a sense of confidence and a feeling of security among adolescents. The unconditional love and affirmation that the adolescent receives from the significant adults around him/her would contribute towards their wellbeing and reduction of their levels of anxiety and stress. This also requires flexibility and openness on the part of the adults.

At the same time, it is also essential to help adolescents develop a sense of initiative and autonomy, a sense of independence. (Alborzkouh et al. 2015). In a study done by Alborzkouh et al in 2015, it was found that stress management training had a major impact on the way students dealt with their academic life. For this inculcating habits that teach the adolescent to prioritize, manage time, and avoid procrastination would be desirable.

Developing life skills and training for stress management is essential and critical for adolescents today. Adolescents should be made aware of the importance of inculcating a positive psychological state and a positive wellbeing in themselves. This would include instituting in them a purpose in life, and directing them towards achievable goals. Helping them develop positive relations with others is essential. Encouraging the development of social skills to have more meaningful relationships would be beneficial. These directions would facilitate coping with the challenges that they encounter in their present state as well as in their adult life in the real world.

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