

STRESS... POST PANDEMIC!

Abstract

COVID-19 seems to have left a scar on the world. The situation has impacted us all. The article is an attempt to take stock of the damage with an intention that "all is not lost"

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I. BACKGROUND

Life has become more complicated than ever before. Everyone seems to be running around all the time... stressed!

Story seems to have changed much more since the world went through the pandemic (COVID-19).

COVID started in December 2019 but hit hard in January 2020. UN WHO declared an end to COVID -19 as a public health emergency in May 2023.

According to WHO Coronavirus Dashboard, the deadly virus claimed nearly seven million lives. 1 million deaths were reported in less than a year during 2019 due to Coronavirus. Aside from the death toll, the pandemic triggered significant emotional, physical, and economic problems around the world.

Everything came to standstill... manufacturing units stopped operating... schools, colleges closed ...the whole education system jammed.

Life had become very unpredictable, fearful... hospitals, laboratories, pharmaceuticals started working overtime.

People involved in News world frantically tried to collect, spread and inform the population about the deadly virus.

In India, migrant workers and casual labourers lost their jobs. With no source of livelihood and with an intent to be with their loved ones, people walked for days together. Many migrant workers moved to their native places.

Everyone was stressed... no one was prepared for this kind of calamity. Back to normal was what everyone craved for...

New way to live life emerged. Suddenly Technology came to rescue. Online classes, e – commerce businesses blossomed. Public adapted to the new lifestyle.

Alternative medicines such as ayurveda and yoga became life savers...became popular.

Few days after declaration of pandemic, people started working from home, students started studying online which led to dramatic change of lifestyle. All were doing their respective jobs yet; regularity of routine was compromised.

Students started attending classes without brushing teeth or having bath. Dress code changed, from formal to casual.

So many died yet many remained...disillusioned, unhappy, sad, worried, tensed...
STRESSED.

It didn't end here...in fact a new phase of struggle began. Putting the world back on track was another challenge.

Two years after the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, inflation, money issues and the war in Ukraine have pushed U.S. stress to alarming levels.

Top sources of stress were the rise in prices of everyday items due to inflation (e.g., gas prices, energy bills, grocery costs, etc.) (cited by 87%), followed by supply chain issues (81%), global uncertainty (81%), Russia's invasion of Ukraine (80%) and potential retaliation from Russia (e.g., in the form of cyberattacks or nuclear threats) (80%).

Post COVID-19 the intensity of the people suffering from diverse mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other trauma- and stress-related disorders increased tremendously.

Studies done in India indicated that 24 per cent of Indians are stressed due to their current work situation and 17 per cent due to financial instability. 14 per cent are stressed due to relationship troubles. The current work environment has become stressful with long working hours, lack ... (Stress & Mental Health Study, GOQii India Fit Report 22-23's)

The survey also indicated that the percentage of women stressing has increased from 25 per cent in 2021. One of the reasons attributed to women is the stress/ pressure related to balance family, work and health issues.

'The state of Happiness 2023' data quoted that 35% respondents (sample size of 14000 people from 36 states and union territories) expressed feeling negative or unhappy. The survey concluded that the top 5 factors responsible for these responses are financial issues, workplace pressure, societal norms, loneliness and isolation.

The survey further concluded that the student population was worst hit. "People below 18 years and above 60 years are experiencing anger or sadness higher than any other age group in India. It also found 5 out of 10 reported as unhappy persons in comparison to 2 out of 10 in the previous year," HappyPlus Senior Director and Research Head Shyamasree Chakrabarty said.

Forbes India claimed an increase in headaches due to rise in post Covid.

The fear of contamination has increased to such an extent that people have started showing symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Sleep disturbances, insomnia has increased. Suicidal tendencies, suicide rates, divorce rates, depression and anxiety rates skyrocketed.

People started believing in Nature, natural phenomenon more. Belief in spirituality and occult reinstated.

Attitudes towards life in general have changed dramatically. Human interaction has become complicated. The people have been struggling to make their ends meet; people want to do everything possible to safeguard their interests.

The world has become more alienated than ever before. All seem to be living in their own world. They are finding it hard to prioritise their work. They are finding it difficult to go back to work.

World political order also bore the brunt.

One interesting observation is that Post COVID travel agencies have been working overtime. World now seems to be unstoppable as if everyone is striking back with vengeance, making up for the lost time! Unsure of what future holds!

Educational sector has adopted hybrid mode of learning. Students, young children once were kept away from the mobile phones were suddenly given access for studying. As a result, the versatile gadget became volatile weapon. Now, when they have become addicted, the equation between the parents and their children became skewed.

Higher education also witnessed an incredible change. Foreign universities started online campuses which offer education at reasonable cost as they don't need offline infrastructure. Anytime education has created additional stresses for the teaching profession.

II. WHAT IS STRESS?

All these never before changes have led to negative effects and increased Stress.

Stress... Stress is not a new phenomenon...it has always been there, and technological advances have made the modern generation confused.

Historically stress has been associated with changes in lifestyle, environmental and economic situation of the person. However, the intensity one feels is dependent on the perception of the individual.

1872, The Times attributed stress to be the primary reason for deaths due to heart attacks.

19th century was regarded as “century of stress”.

Eventually in 1978, American Institute of Stress came into force, an initiative taken to educate the public and provide the information related to Stress.

Year 2000- British Health and Safety Execution (HSE) reported 30% increase in occupational stress.

HSE once again in 2009 did research and reported 13.5 million working days were lost to stress each year.

Research done in late nineteenth century established a strong connection between a number of chronic diseases and over work – over worry.

WHO defines Stress as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.

Hans Selye, MD, Ph.D (1907 – 1982) coined the term ‘stress’ to explain the non-specific response of the body that he noticed was common symptom across a range of diseases. He was involved in establishing American Institute of Stress in 1978 with an intent to create awareness and train the professionals in dealing with stress related issue

Coming from the Latin word “Strictus” meaning tight or narrow which corresponds with the internal feelings of tightness and constriction of muscles and breathing felt by someone experiencing stress.

Stress is a natural human nonspecific response of the body that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Stress may manifest itself in bodily symptoms and / or psychological changes.

Research done in this area has emphasised that some amount of stress is necessary to meet our daily challenges. It can be compared with electricity as it provides energy and motivation to complete the task at hand.

Yerkes–Dodson law explains the relationship between the stress and performance. According to this law, too less or too much stress may lead to poor performance. An healthy amount of stress (Eustress) helps in execution of the task.

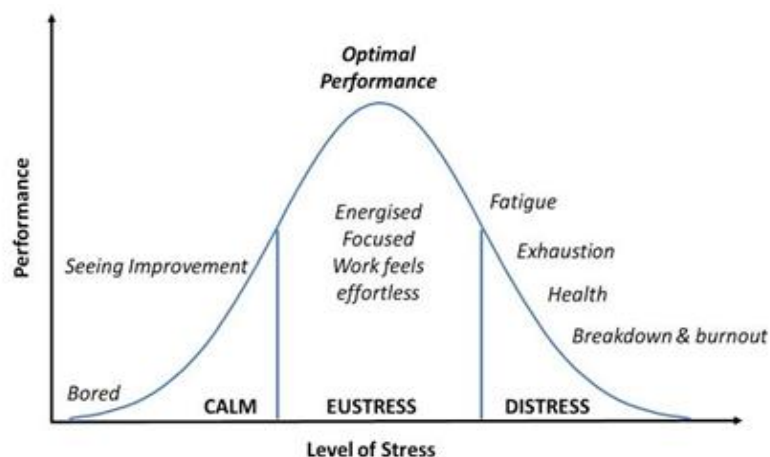


Figure 1: Graphical representation of Yerkes – Dodson Law

The tolerance for stress varies from person to person. Some people have capacity to handle extremely sensitive situations with ease others may buckle down. Too much stress can lead to severe physical and mental health conditions.

Stress may be experienced at individual, group, community or societal level. Stress may be acute, chronic or traumatic.

Stress has been studied by experts of various disciplines...physiology, biology, biochemistry and psychology. The experts have tried to explain why this happens in their own way. The whole life is about coping up with the challenges one faces.

Psychologists believe that the main source of stress can be internal or external but is dependent on individuals' ability to cope with the pressures associated to their lifestyle, thinking, financial situation, social status, stress related to work, family etc.

Research confirmed that changes, good or bad, small or big, sudden or gradual has direct and indirect effect on the quality of life. Sometimes we may remember the reason or forget, and it may resurface in a disguised form.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) gave Transactional Model of Stress and Coping where they defined stress as the body's internal reaction to any external stimulus that is deemed harmful and coping implied to an intricate process of thinking and assigning meaning to it.

Stress is considered cyclic in nature.5 main stages of the stress cycle - external stressor, internal appraisal, physiological response, internalisation and coping.

Environmental stresses such as pesticides, herbicides, automobile exhaust, chlorinated water, industrial pollution has increasingly contaminated the water we drink, the food we eat and the air we breathe and henceforth be a cause of many chronic diseases. (Summer,2023, Combat Magazine,Stress.Org)

Stress may impact and alter the physical, mental or/ and emotional state of the person.

Physical symptoms of stress may be reflected in:

- Aches and pains
- Chest pain or palpitations
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Trouble Sleeping or troubled sleep.
- Headache, dizziness or shaking.
- High blood pressure
- Muscle tension or jaw clenching
- Digestive problems
- Sexual problems
- Weak immune system

After COVID, many people have been complaining about these symptoms all over the world.

Stress can lead to emotional and mental symptoms like:

- Anxiety and irritation
- Frustration
- Depression
- Panic attacks

People, all, young or old have been approaching doctors with these complaints too. Parents of younger children have complained about children's unwillingness to go to school.

Separation anxiety in younger children became more prevalent as the children were at home with their parents during pandemic.

Stress may also affect the individual Socially too...

- Hostility
- Isolation
- Violence
- Mass shooting
- Aggression
- Substance abuse
- Loneliness

III. COMING BACK

Pandemic lasted more than the expected period. After effects are being documented, reported, studied and analysed to understand the damage it has caused- globally.

As discussed earlier, studies have indicated that the stress levels have skyrocketed. The impact is significant in terms of economic growth and mental health. Businesses have gone bankrupt. Millions of people have fallen below poverty line. Inflation has risen Crime has increased. Suicide rates have reached a new high. Overall, the situation has become grim!

I have been working in the area of mental health and with schools as a school psychologist since last 30 years. I have never seen so many students suffering!

Face to face interaction was replaced by online communication during Pandemic and yet I found it easier to deal with students and their parents than dealing with the stress faced after we returned to so called 'normal'.

School reopened and my room was flooded with students to discuss their issues ranging from school refusals, headaches, palpitations etc.

I had never witnessed so many students experiencing Panic Attacks...2 students had hallucinations and had to be referred for psychiatric treatment.

Problems related to academics escalated, especially in the area of mathematics!

Younger children could not write well. Writing skill's deteriorated, students lost the ability to write long answers, speed to write seemed to be affected.

As the students had been confined to restricted places, they became restless. Some were happy to be back at school but took lots of time to readjust.

IV. HELP YOURSELF!

Unmanaged stress is like oxygen deprivation. Stress affects all systems of the body including the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous, and reproductive systems.

It's high time that we start thinking about how to HEAL THE WORLD – it is imperative for the international forums, Individual Governments, NGO's to come together, take initiative, create action plans to educate the people of the world to cope up with Stress, the latest endemic of the modern world.

We must prepare people to be aware about their problems so that they can interpret their bodily responses, distinguish their feelings and thoughts in the crisis situation.

Though one may not have control over all the situations, yet the response can be modified.

A number of techniques can be used to alter the way one responds to stress.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) discovered that the level of stress a person experiences is directly related to how confident he or she feels about dealing with a threat. According to this model, the people should be taught to assess their capability to categorise the event and their coping skills. They divided the coping into two parts:

1. Problem Focused – focuses on action-oriented solutions.
2. Emotion Focused – focuses on psychological aspects.

It is important to start at an appropriate age so that the child is well equipped by the time he grows up. There is a dire need to teach the children 'do it yourself'.

- We need to teach and learn about the importance of exercising. Regular exercise helps.
- Relaxation Techniques- There are innumerable techniques available online / offline.
- Practice Mindfulness and Meditation
- Check your belief system and change it, if required.

Biofeedback mechanisms in form of fitness wrist bands may help with keeping the bodily parameters in check.

Eat well, sleep well policy improves the immunity to fight the stress related symptoms.

Make the rules to guide your life and lifestyle. Follow them, review them and modify them as needed.

I hereby would like to conclude that if we adhere to 2 R's, that is, Routine and Rules, we will definitely be Future Ready.

There is a need to train the people to be resilient and provide support, if affected. Distress walk-in clinics and Half way homes should be within reach. Round the clock Tele counseling should be made available.

WHO published *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress: An Illustrated Guide* is a stress management guide for coping with adversity. The guide has been published in many languages to equip people with practical skills to help cope with stress.

At the end I would like to add the comments from UN chief...

While declaring the end of Coronavirus pandemic The WHO chief said that at one level, the end of the emergency was a moment to celebrate, and he paid tribute to the “incredible skill and selfless dedication of health and care workers” worldwide.

But at another level, it was a time for deep reflection, with COVID continuing to leave “deep scars on our world.”

“These scars must serve as a permanent reminder of the potential for new viruses to emerge, with devastating consequences”, he said.

Many mistakes were made, including a lack of coordination, equity and solidarity, which meant that existing tools and technologies were not best used to combat the virus.

“We must promise ourselves and our children and grandchildren, that we will never make those mistakes again”, he said.

“This experience must change us all for the better. It must make us more determined to fulfil the vision that nations had when they founded the WHO in 1948: the highest possible standard of health, for all people.”
(WHO meeting on May 5,2023)

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