

Be Your Best, Beat Stress: Daily Habits to Improve Coping Strategies of Stress
Heather J Van Cleve
Milligan College Honors Program

Introduction

To be your best and beat stress is easier said than done. Everyone experiences stress on a daily basis. In the majority of cases, it is not actually the stressor that causes the most problems, but in fact how the person reacts to the stressor. The human body reacts physically, mentally, and emotionally to stress. The person's response to those events dictates the effect of stress on a their life. Stress has become a negative "buzzword" in the English language, but in reality it should not be directly linked to this negative connotation. Stress is a natural response by the body to external stimuli and, contrary to popular belief, can have positive effects on a person. One major effect is motivation. An assignment or project deadline is a stressor that motivates you to complete the task. This paper will break down the idea of stress, examine stimuli that cause feelings of stress, and determine what stress feels like in the human body. The initial research for this paper focused on stress management in the psychiatric hospital setting, however, quickly became educational material needed by the general public. By understanding personal triggers for stress and how the body reacts to stressors, management of stress through effective coping mechanisms can be learned. By focusing on the four main areas of nutrition, social support, exercise, and sleep, management of stress on a daily basis becomes attainable ("Healthy Lifestyle", 2016).

Methods

The MCSearch database of Milligan College in Johnson City, Tennessee, which includes CINAHL Complete, Health and Wellness Resource Center, Health Reference Center Academic, Health Source: Consumer Edition, Health Source: Nursing/Academic Edition, MEDLINE Complete and PubMed Central as well as the American Institute of Stress (AIS) website were used for the literature review. Keywords such as "stress," "stress management," "coping skills for stress," "effects of stress," "relaxation techniques," and "consequences of unmanaged stress" were used in the compiling of sources for this paper. After initial keywords were searched the sources were filtered by journals, articles, and periodicals only published in the United States and in the English language. For this research, articles only published in or after 2016 were used, simply based on relevance, but a filter for the last five years was used (2014-2019). MCSearch was used for the first wave of data collection, followed by the American Institute of Stress

website. If the process were to be replicated, using the AIS website for the foundation of research would be recommended, followed by the use of the MCSearch Database or an equivalent to find supporting articles and periodicals.

Main Body

What is stress? Everyone, even experts, have their own definition for it. There are many ways to test for it and define it, thus making stress difficult to measure. The American Institute of Stress (AIS) has narrowed “stress” into four categories; acute stress, chronic stress, eustress, and distress (What is Stress, 2018). These categories define subparts of the definition of stress in order to gain a complete understanding of stress. Acute stress is defined as a “fight or flight” response by the body to prepare itself against a threatening outside stimuli. Chronic stress is defined as the cost of daily living (bills, jobs, children), and tends to be ignored because it is ever present. Eustress is defined as the good stress, the type that motivates and aids one in achieving goals. Finally, distress is similar to chronic stress in that it is caused by the everyday life events, but these events (punishments, job loss, injury, financial problems) do not get ignored, instead they remain in the forefront of the mind creating negative responses . Statistics can be found on the AIS website under “What Is Stress”. They report on what the public states as negative symptoms experienced due to stress. These symptoms include fatigue, headaches, GI upset, muscle tension, irritability, nervousness or anxiousness, and lack of energy or motivation (“What Is Stress”, 2018).

Each type of stress brings about the same initial response by the body. Activation of the sympathetic nervous system causes a domino effect within the body as hormones, mainly adrenaline and cortisol, are released in response to the “fight or flight” reflex. As adrenaline activates receptor sites heart rate, blood pressure, and respirations increase, a release of energy reserves and a tightening of muscles occur. The body’s metabolism is sped up. An increase release of glucose and tissue repairing agents occurs as cortisol takes effect. Cortisol is a hormone released in the body in order to decrease the activity of unnecessary functions, in order to conserve resources to fight the perceived threat. The immune system is altered, digestive and reproductive systems are suppressed and growth processes are paused. Not only is the reaction to

these hormones physical, but they play a role in mental health by communicating with centers of the brain connected to mood and fear. The possible bodily responses to these hormones are hypertension, headaches, GI disturbances, and an overall feeling of anxiety and uneasiness. Physical, mental, and emotional health can be impacted if stress is left unmanaged (Karriem-Norwood, 2017).

Unmanaged stress can have long-term effects on the body. The body is designed to handle small periodic doses of stress; however, when it is exposed to large amounts or long-term stress it leads to a break down in defenses. The overexposure to adrenaline, cortisol, and other stress-related hormones leads to a disruption in almost every body system, thereby increasing the risk for major health problems. The following are listed as health problems associated with chronic stress: anxiety, depression, digestive problems, heart disease, headaches, sleep disturbances, weight fluctuation, and memory and concentration impairments (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2016). Learning successful coping and stress management strategies are essential to maintaining optimal health. Through the collective research of numerous sources on successful coping strategies and techniques, four categories have been identified as essential to healthy stress management. They are nutrition, presence of a support system, exercise, and sleep.

The food consumed affects the body in lots of ways, both positively and negatively. Certain foods can decrease effectiveness of the body's ability to manage stress, while others can increase it. Consuming coffee, alcohol and processed foods, as well as skipping meals are examples of habits that create excessive stimulation and imbalances of the blood glucose level leading to changes in mood and anxiety. A balanced diet is a key way to improve stress management. Diets including fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, as well as foods rich in magnesium, zinc, and omega-3s have been proven to help lower anxiety and stabilize blood glucose (Naidoo, 2016). Magnesium can be found in green leafy vegetables like spinach, broccoli, kale and in other foods like legumes, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. Omega-3s are found in fish like salmon and tuna, but also in eggs, dark leafy vegetables and even walnuts. Zinc heavy foods are oysters, cashews, liver, beef and egg yolks. While just eating these foods won't manage your stress alone, it is a vital part to effective stress management (Naidoo, 2016).

A social support network is made up of friends, family, co-workers, and peers. A social support system should be put into place and nurtured while not under stress. The individuals included in a support system care for and have concern for the well-being of each other and offer support in times of need. Many benefits have been shown from having a stable support system as well as negative effects for the lack of a system. The negative aspects focus on the loneliness and isolation felt by the individual. Positive effects include improvement in ability to cope with stressful situations, alleviation of the effects of emotional distress by sharing the burden of stressful situations, and promotion and encouragement of healthy lifestyle behaviors. Multiple avenues exist to cultivate a support system such as volunteering for a local cause, joining a gym, club, or social group, or networking online through social media. A support system will be different for each individual and to how best to form a support system will differ but it takes active involvement and commitment to be successful (“Social Support”, 2018).

Physical exercise is one of the most important aspects to stress management. During exercise chemical reactions take place as well as release of hormones. Some examples include the release of endorphins, that cause mood elevation and a natural pain killing effect, as well as a decrease in secretion of adrenaline and cortisol thereby lowering stress levels in the body. These chemical balances produce an effect of well-being, both mentally and physically. Additionally an increase in stamina, strength, and confidence occurs as results of a routine of daily exercise take effect. A sense of control or mastery over your life along with behavioral changes, in turn decreases stress and anxiety. The workout chosen is not as important as the decision to exercise. Whether the exercise involves running a marathon or walking down the street, the simple act of movement starts the domino effect. Exercising can also be relaxing. Yoga, mediation, or a simple stroll around the park are all good options to get in daily exercise. Suggested amounts of time for a workout are 30-40 minutes of moderate exercise or 20-30 of vigorous exercise with a balance of cardio, strength training, and stretching throughout the week. Whether it is all at once or broken up into increments throughout the day, exercising is one of the best ways to defend against stress. While in the beginning it may seem like too much work or that it just adds more stress, building a routine of daily exercise has shown to improve both physical and emotional health (“Exercising to Relax”, 2018).

Poor sleeping habits can cause many abnormalities in health, but the relationship between sleep and stress can be an especially devastating one. The pattern of stress and sleep is described as cyclical. The effects of this cycle cause more suffering than just a bad night's rest and increased stress levels. When your body is exposed to large or long-term amounts of stress it can struggle to fall asleep at night because of the activation of the sympathetic nervous system previously mentioned. The chemicals released into the body during this time keep the body primed for the perceived approaching threat. The body become tired and worn down after many nights of poor sleep, which in turn alters the body's defenses against stress. Along with these altered defenses the body becomes more vulnerable to stressful stimuli. Getting enough sleep can be challenging, with busy schedules, heavy responsibilities, and a world that never sleeps it can seem unimportant to get the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep a night. The AIS website states that when the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep a night is not met it can increase multiple risk factors for health and well-being. The AIS website recommends multiple ways to achieve this including allowing yourself time to wind down from a busy day, a decrease consumption of caffeinated beverages, an increase in exposure to sunlight, a daily routine of exercise, aromatherapy, diet changes, and talking to your doctor when control seems out of reach (Chambers, 2018).

Conclusion

While healthcare professionals have vast knowledge and research available to them regarding stress and healthy stress management the general public is largely unaware. Stress management and coping skills are foundational for mental health. Patients at Woodridge Psychiatric Hospital in Johnson City, TN were educated using the research information found in this paper. The majority of them upon survey were unaware of the long-term effects and the relatively simple solutions offered for healthy coping. Many of the patients admitted to poor coping skills and self-medicating in the past as an attempt to deal with their stress. Bridging the gap of knowledge for lay people and educating them to manage their stress in healthy ways is essential. The perception of stress has become that it is just a normal part of life and while stress in small short doses is, the distress many people encounter on a day-to-day basis is not meant to be left unmanaged.

Personal recommendations for stress management and coping skills education should be a general curriculum offered in schools and in the workplace. Public health nurses who are already involved in the community could provide education for all ages and occupations. For example, the transition from high-school to college can be challenging and paired with a lack of stress management and coping skills can have negative effects on the health and well-being of students. Colleges should offer classes on coping skills and stress management for new students as they transition into their new roles. By preparing them and setting the stage for the expectations of their college career and in their future workplace, it allows them to positively interact with this new setting and the people around them. In the workplace this could be seen as providing an outlet for employees to manage their stress and educating them on stress relief measures for both inside and outside the workplace.

Limitations exist in this research based on a short time frame for research and writing, a lack of previous knowledge and experience by the researcher on the subject, as well as a small sample size. Along with those limitations, it should be considered that without access to the MCSearch database each of the included databases would need to be searched individually to find sources which would cause time delays in the research process. If the researcher wasn't allowed pre-approved access to Woodridge Psychiatric Hospital in Johnson City, TN by clinical rotations and professor approval then it would be an extensive process to gain this permission. Overall, the limitations did not significantly affect the research of this paper.

The implications of this information for nursing is essential when it comes to educating the public on stress management. All people need and deserve proper education on the effects of unmanaged stress and appropriate coping mechanisms. Preventative education is a focus of nursing care, therefore educating the patient could actually prevent the need for hospitalization from the effects of unmanaged stress. While the focus of the research for this paper was on group learning activities in the psychiatric hospital setting the data presents invaluable information that through sharing with the general public could help with stress management and coping skills before a person needs to be hospitalized. In sharing this information, not only would the health of an individual be affected, but the community at large would benefit from the improved health and interactions between individuals as they begin to manage and cope with stress effectively.

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