

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE- STRESS TOLERANCE

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ABSTRACT

Stress is the “wear and tear” that our bodies experience, as we adjust to the continually changing environment. It has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings. As a positive influence, stress can help compelling us to action; it can result in a new awareness and an exciting new perspective. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems. With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, or a new relationship, we also experience stress as we readjust our lives. In so adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder us depending on how we react to it. In this paper, we intend to: (a) Describe the EQ competency of stress tolerance, (b) Understand the various aspects of stress, (c) Improve stress management levels in individuals, and (d) Examine different options to reduce personal stress levels in the workplace.

1.0 Introduction:

Stress (Csikszentmichalyi) is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize. Stress is the

“wear and tear” that our bodies experience, as we adjust to our continually changing environment; it has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings. (Goldberger and Breznitz) Stress Management refers to various efforts used to control and reduce the tension that occurs in these situations (Mandler).

We tend to think that external events are the causes of stress. Events by themselves are not stressful. Rather, it is the way in which we interpret and react to events that makes them stressful. People differ dramatically (Steptoe) in the type of events they interpret as stressful and the way in which they respond to such stress. For example, speaking in public can be stressful for some people and relaxing for others. Stress is a normal occurrence that often arises when you perceive a situation as threatening or when you are dealing with an unusually large number of everyday responsibilities. With the intense demands of home and work life, many people are experiencing intense stress. Stress in one setting can affect stress levels in the other.

The stress we experience is not necessarily harmful. As a positive influence, stress can help compel us to action; it can result in a

new awareness and an exciting new perspective. Mild forms of stress can act as a motivator and energizer. As a negative influence, it can result in feelings of distrust, rejection, anger, and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke. With the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, a job promotion, or a new relationship, we experience stress as we readjust our lives. In so adjusting to different circumstances, stress will help or hinder us depending on how we react to it.

There is no single level of stress that is optimal for all people. We are all individual creatures with unique requirements. As such, what is distressing to one may be a joy to another. And even when we agree that a particular event is distressing, we are likely to differ in our physiological and psychological responses to it (Taylor)

The person who loves to arbitrate disputes and moves from job site to job site would be stressed in a job that was stable and routine, whereas the person who thrives under stable conditions would very likely be stressed on a job where duties were highly varied. Also, our personal stress requirements and the amount which we can tolerate before we become distressed changes with our ages.

It has been found that most illness is related to unrelieved stress. If you are experiencing stress symptoms, you have gone beyond your optimal stress level; you need to reduce the stress in your life and/or improve your ability to manage it. There are two types of instinctive stress responses that are important to how we understand stress and stress management:

A. Fight-or-flight: Some of the early work on stress conducted by Walter Cannon in 1932 established the existence of the well-known fight-or-flight response. His work showed that when an animal experiences

a shock or perceives a threat, it quickly releases hormones that help it to survive. These hormones help us to run faster and fight harder. They increase heart rate and blood pressure, delivering more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles. They increase sweating in an effort to cool these muscles, and help them stay efficient. They divert blood away from the skin to the core of our bodies, reducing blood loss if we are injured. These hormones focus our attention on the threat, to the exclusion of everything else. All of this significantly improves our ability to survive life-threatening events (Seymour and Black).

B. Power, but little control: Unfortunately, this mobilization of the body for survival also has negative consequences. In this state, we are excitable, anxious, jumpy and irritable. This reduces our ability to work effectively with other people. With trembling and a pounding heart, we can find it difficult to execute precise, controlled skills. And the intensity of our focus on survival interferes with our ability to make fine judgments based on drawing information from many sources. We find ourselves more accident-prone and less able to make good decisions. It is easy to think that this fight-or-flight, or adrenaline, response is only triggered by obviously life-threatening danger. On the contrary, recent research shows that we experience the fight-or-flight response when simply encountering something unexpected. The situation does not have to be dramatic: People experience this response when frustrated or interrupted, or when they experience a situation that is new or in some way challenging. This hormonal, fight-or-flight response is a normal part of everyday life and a part of everyday stress, although often with an intensity that is so low that we do not notice it. There are very few situations in modern working life where this response is useful. Most situations benefit

from a calm, rational, controlled and socially sensitive approach.

2.0 Causes and effects of stress:

Both positive and negative events in one's life can be stressful. However, major life changes are the greatest contributors of stress for most people. They place the greatest demand on resources for coping. The behavioral effects of an over-stressed lifestyle are easy to explain. When under pressure, some people are more likely to drink heavily or smoke, as a way of getting immediate chemical relief from stress. Others may have so much work to do that they do not exercise or eat properly (Quick *et al*). They may cut down on sleep, or may worry so much that they sleep badly. They may get so carried away with work and meeting daily pressures that they neglect their physical well-being. All of these are likely to harm health. The direct physiological effects of excessive stress are more complex. In some areas they are well understood, while in other areas, they are still subject to debate and further research. There are several signs and symptoms that one may notice when one is experiencing stress. These signs and symptoms fall into four categories: feelings, thoughts, behavior, and physiology. When one is under stress, one may experience one or more of the following (Sadock and Sadock)

- a) Feelings: Feeling anxious, scared, irritable and moody.
- b) Thoughts: Low self-esteem, fear of failure, inability to concentrate, embarrassed easily, worrying about the future, preoccupation with thoughts / tasks, forgetfulness.
- c) Behavior: Stuttering and other speech difficulties, crying for no apparent reason, acting impulsively, startled easily, laughing in a high pitch and nervous tone of voice, grinding teeth, chain smoking, substance

abuse, being accident prone, loss of appetite or binge eating.

d) Physiology: Perspiration /sweaty hands, increased heart beat, trembling, nervous ticks, dryness of throat and mouth, tiring easily, urinating frequently, sleeping problems, diarrhea / indigestion / vomiting, butterflies in stomach, headaches, premenstrual tension, pain in the neck and or lower back, susceptibility to illness.

e) Stress and heart disease: The link between stress and heart disease is well established. If stress is intense, and stress hormones are not 'used up' by physical activity, our raised heart rate and high blood pressure put tension on arteries and cause damage to them (Davies *et al*). As the body heals this damage, artery walls scar and thicken, which can reduce the supply of blood and oxygen to the heart. This is where a fight-or-flight response can become lethal: Stress hormones accelerate the heart to increase the blood supply to muscles; however, blood vessels in the heart may have become so narrow that not enough blood reaches the heart to meet these demands. This can cause a heart attack.

f) Other effects of stress: Stress has been also been found to damage the immune system, which explains why we catch more colds when we are stressed. It may intensify symptoms in diseases that have an autoimmune component, such as rheumatoid arthritis. It also seems to affect headaches and irritable bowel syndrome, and there are now suggestions of links between stress and cancer. Stress is also associated with mental health problems and, in particular, anxiety and depression. Here the relationship is fairly clear: the negative thinking that is associated with stress also contributes to these.

g) The positive effects of pressure: Sometimes, the pressures and demands that may cause stress can be positive in

their effect. One example of this is where sportsmen and women flood their bodies with fight-or-flight adrenaline to power an explosive performance. Another example is where deadlines are used to motivate people who seem bored or unmotivated.

h) **Negative effects of pressure:** In most work situations jobs, our stress responses cause our performance to suffer. A calm, rational, controlled and sensitive approach is usually called for in dealing with most difficult problems at work: Our social inter-relationships are just too complex not to be damaged by an aggressive approach, while a passive and withdrawn response to stress means that we can fail to assert our rights when we should.

3.0 Identifying the sources of stress:

Knowing what causes stress can help one cope with it better and provide mental and emotional relief. There are many ways to plan for and avert stress. Recognizing specific triggers is one of the first steps in the process of stress management. Common causes of stress include: Work, family, health concerns, unrealistic expectations, cynical and negative attitudes (thinking that things are always going to go badly or end badly), sudden traumatic events (Quick *et al* 1997)

- **Attitude:** The attitude of an individual can influence whether a situation or emotion is stressful or not. Having a negative attitude can predict stress in a person, because this type of person will often paper more stress than would someone with a positive attitude.

- **Physical well-being:** A poor nutritional status places the body in a state of physical stress and at risk of infection. As a result, the person can be more susceptible to infections. A poor nutritional state can be related to unhealthy food choices, inadequate food intake, or an erratic eating schedule (Quick *et al* 1988). A nutritionally

unbalanced eating pattern can result in an inadequate intake of nutrients. This form of physical stress also decreases the ability to deal with situations that are perceived as difficult or unmanageable (emotional stress) because malnutrition will affect the way our brain processes information.

- **Physical activity:** Inadequate physical activity can result in a stressful state for the body. Physical activity has many physiological benefits.

- **Major life changes that can be stressful:** Geographic mobility, going to college, transfer to a new school, marriage, pregnancy, new job, new life style, divorce, death of a loved one, being fired from your job.

- **Environmental events that can be stressful:** Time, pressure, competition, financial problems, noise, and disappointments.

- **Elimination of stress:** Positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life, and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress. Deadlines, competitions, confrontations, and even our frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Our goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us. Insufficient stress acts as a depressor and may leave us feeling bored or dejected; on the other hand, excessive stress may leave us feeling "tied up in knots." What we need to do is find the optimal level of stress, which will individually motivate but not overwhelm each of us.

4.0 Three major approaches to Stress Management:

Refers to various efforts used to control and reduce the tension that occurs in these situations. Stress management involves making emotional and physical changes. The degree of stress and the desire to make the changes, will determine the level of change that will take place. Identifying

unrelieved stress and being aware of its effect on our lives is not sufficient for reducing its harmful effects. Just as there are many sources of stress, there are many possibilities for its management. However, all require work towards change: changing the source of stress and/or changing the reaction to it. The aim of stress management is to help balance the various aspects of life work, relationships and leisure, and to balance the physical, intellectual and emotional aspects of life. People who effectively manage stress consider life a challenge rather than a series of irritations, and they feel they have control over their lives, even in the face of setbacks.

A. Action-oriented: In which we seek to confront the problem causing the stress, changing the environment or the situation. Action-oriented approaches - best where one has some control. To be able to take an action-oriented approach, we must have some power in the situation. If we do, then action-oriented approaches are some of the most satisfying and rewarding ways of managing stress. These are techniques that we can use to manage and overcome stressful situations, changing them to our advantage.

B. Emotionally-oriented: In which we do not have the power to change the situation, but we can manage stress by changing our interpretation of the situation and the way we feel about it. Emotionally-oriented approaches are subtle but effective. If one does not have the power to change a situation, then one may be able to reduce stress by changing the way one looks at it, using an emotionally-oriented approach. Emotionally-oriented approaches (Seears) are often less attractive than action-oriented approaches in that the stresses can recur time and again; however, they are useful and effective in their place.

C. Acceptance-oriented: Where something

has happened over which we have no power and no emotional control, and where our focus is on surviving the stress. Acceptance-oriented approaches - when there's no valid alternative. Sometimes, we have so little power in a situation that all we can do to survive it. This is the case, for example, when loved-ones die. In these situations, often the first stage of coping with the stress is to accept one's lack of power.

These different orientations to stress management address our definition of stress in different ways: the action-oriented approach helps us to manage the demands upon us and increase the resources we can mobilize; the emotionally oriented approach helps us to adjust our perceptions of the situation; and the acceptance-oriented approach helps us survive the situations that we genuinely cannot change.

5.0 Methods:

The usual methods of stress management are as follows:

A. Awareness of our stressors and our emotional and physical reactions.

Notice distress. Don't ignore it. Don't gloss over problems.

B. Recognize what one can change (Seward).

Can one change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely?

Can one reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis)?

Can one shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises)? Can one devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal setting, time management techniques, and delayed gratification strategies may be helpful here)?

C. Reduce the intensity of emotional reactions to stress.

The stress reaction is triggered by our perception of danger, physical danger and / or emotional danger.

Work at adopting more moderate views; try to see the stress as something one can cope with rather than something that overpowers one.

Try to temper excess emotions. Put the situation in perspective. Do not labor on the negative aspects and the "what if's."

D. Learn to moderate physical reactions to stress.

Slow, deep breathing will bring heart rate and respiration back to normal.

Relaxation techniques can reduce muscle tension. Electronic biofeedback can help gain voluntary control over such things as muscle tension, heart rate, and blood pressure.

Medications, when prescribed by a physician, can help in the short term in moderating physical reactions. However, they alone are not the answer. Learning to moderate these reactions voluntarily is a preferable long-term solution.

E. Build your physical reserves (Snyder and Pulvers). (a) Exercise for cardiovascular fitness regularly (moderate, prolonged rhythmic exercise is best, such as walking, swimming, cycling, or jogging). (b) Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals. (c) Maintain ideal weight. (d) Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine, and other stimulants. (e) Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away. (f) Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with sleep schedule as possible.

F. Maintain emotional reserves.

Develop some mutually supportive friendships / relationships.

Pursue realistic goals which are

meaningful, rather than goals others have that one doesn't share. Expect some frustrations, failures, and sorrows. Always be kind and gentle with oneself - be a friend to oneself.

6.0 Reducing stress :

How to reduce stress: If one feels that one is suffering from stress, try to identify the aspects of our life that are causing it. Sometimes one may not be able to change or avoid them, but at other times simple lifestyle adjustments can make all the difference. Many stresses can be changed, eliminated, or minimized.

Tips to reduce our stress levels: (Williamson and Dooley): Awareness about our own reactions to stress. Reinforce positive self-statements. Focus on our good qualities and accomplishments. Avoid unnecessary competition. Recognize and accept our limits. Remember that everyone is unique and different. Plan ahead and avoid procrastination. Make a weekly schedule and try to follow it. Set realistic goals. When studying for an exam, study in short blocks and gradually lengthen the time spend studying. Take frequent short breaks.

• *Support systems:* Almost everyone needs someone in their life whom they can rely on when they are having a hard time. Minimal or absent support systems make stressful situations more difficult to deal with. One of the most effective things we can do when we are stressed is to talk from our heart to a friendly listener who remains calm and listens in a way that makes us feel understood. Studies show that people who are active socially are most capable of dealing with stressful situations and major illnesses. To help reduce stress, develop a network of friends and family members to turn to when stress threatens to overwhelm you. If one is a naturally private or independent person, it might seem challenging to build a support

system. In order to cultivate a circle of friends, one needs to take the first step. Our efforts to create a strong social network will serve well when one is confronted with serious stress. Think of individuals who care and with whom one can share most personal thoughts. Reach out to the people one feels close to. Call them; be open and available to them. Be sure to include some people at least a generation younger so that one won't outlive one's buddies and be left alone. Build relationships based on emotional honesty. Members of inner circle should know how to listen without judging, giving advice, or comparing experiences to theirs.

- *Relaxation:* People with no outside interests, hobbies, or means of relaxation, may be unable to handle stressful situations because they have no outlet for stress.

- *Journalizing:* Has many benefits, including improvement in cognitive functioning, health benefits, and the gift of introspection. The act of writing about feelings of stress, as well as exploring potential solutions to these problems, can soothe and help process difficult feelings and also take proactive steps against future stress. Writing things down has a marvelous way of putting things in perspective. Putting worries into words may help see that one doesn't really have that much to worry about, or it may help get organized and manage stress, rather than letting it manage one. Regardless, keeping a journal should help identify concerns and establish a plan for moving forward. List the situations that produce stress in life (i.e., moving to a new location, work or school demands, balancing priorities, job promotion).

- *Meditation:* There are many ways to meditate, the practice of meditation can greatly reduce stressful feelings that one is experiencing, and counteract some of the

negative effects of stress. Meditation can also be a tool for introspection; one can meditate on the cause of stress that one is experiencing, and as one relaxes, answers may come with ease and clarity.

- *Self-hypnosis:* This is much like meditation, in that it involves unconscious mind and carries many of the same benefits. However, one can also use self hypnosis to address the root cause of stress that one experienced by working on changing habits that may be causing stress, such as negative thought patterns or disorganization, while relieving current stress.

- *Affirmations:* Negative self-talk can cause more stress than most people are aware of. It's the little voice in our head that evaluates things positively or negatively, and tells about things one is experiencing and about one self. One great way to change negative self-talk is to practice *positive affirmations*. It may take a little self-exploration to decide which affirmations to choose, but the results can be stress relief and growth.

- *Assertiveness:* If we're feeling *overscheduled and overstressed* (Flach), it's definitely time to *learn how to say no* to people's demands on our time. One would feel powerful as one does so, and one can prevent the overly busy lifestyle that keeps the cycle of stress going. One can look within to see why one may say 'yes' too often, and take steps to feel better right away.

- *Re-assess areas of self-destruction:* How often does one get so stressed that one lashes out at people without meaning to? If it's a regular event, one may be suffering from *self-destructive thought patterns* that cause additional *mental and emotional stress*. One can look within and change these patterns, reducing future stress in oneself—and those around us.

- *Time management:* It may also be necessary to reorganize schedules in order to maintain a more balanced life. Some strategies for time management include: Make a "to-do" list. Check items off as one completes them. Prioritize tasks and then work on the most important ones. Be assertive. Delegate less important tasks. Schedule extra time for tasks, in case of interruptions. Take frequent breaks and schedule time for relaxation.

- *Developing coping skills for stress relief:* Our attitude has a lot to do with whether events and occurrences produce a feeling of stress. Once we admit that we are not able to control everything, one will be better equipped to handle unexpected situations. Stress management comes down to finding ways to change our thinking and manage our expectations. Other important ways to adjust our attitude include: Be realistic. Shed the Superman/Superwoman image (McGee and Cooper). Don't expect too much of our self or others. Nobody's perfect! Try to be assertive rather than passive or aggressive. Be flexible. Give in sometimes. Rehearse/prepare for presentations and interviews. Think positively. Look at each stressful situation as an opportunity to improve our life. Don't take work problems home or home problems to work. Rely on humor to relieve tension. Organizing and simplifying our life. If one of our main sources of stress is the sheer number of things that need to be done, getting organized should help feel more at peace. A good sense of organization will also make one more efficient. Simplifying life also should help one feel less overwhelmed. Plan the day. Learn to prioritize. Do what is most important first and realize that some things can wait until later. Cut out some activities and delegate tasks. Break large demands into small, manageable parts. Work through tasks one by one. Organize one's home and workspace so that you know

where things are. Keep one's personal belongings in working order to prevent untimely, stressful repairs.

- *Nurturing oneself:* Taking care of our body, mind and spirit can help reduce feelings of anxiety and frustration that often accompany stress. One might be surprised by how much stress relief a long bubble bath or a quick catnap will provide. Practice relaxation techniques such as controlling breathing, clearing our mind, and relaxing our muscles. Get enough sleep. Have a balanced diet. Exercise. It relieves tension and provides a timeout from stressful situations. Reduce or eliminate caffeine (coffee, black and green tea, cola drinks, and chocolate). Because caffeine is a stimulant, it can make you feel more anxious. Avoid or reduce intake of alcohol, tobacco and recreational drugs. Get a massage to relieve tension. Read a good book or see an upbeat movie. Consider getting a pet. A pet's love is unconditional.

- *Taking a break:* Do try to take time everyday to slow down and do something one enjoys even if it is just for a few minutes. Reading a magazine, playing with dog, reading a book to our children, or any other activity that helps one forget the stresses of the day can calm and help one remember what is important. Stop for several mini-breaks during the workday. Take 30 seconds to look out the window or stretch. Set aside some personal time, but limit time spent with negative people. Go for a walk. Listen to music. Socialize. Indulge in sports and recreation. Take some time off to rejuvenate oneself—even if it's just one day midweek or a long weekend. If possible, go on vacation. Do volunteer work or start a hobby. Soak in a hot bath. Pray or meditate. Do Yoga or Tai Chi (Ponder)

As we have seen, positive stress adds anticipation and excitement to life, and we all thrive under a certain amount of stress.

Deadlines, competitions, confrontations, and even our frustrations and sorrows add depth and enrichment to our lives. Our goal is not to eliminate stress but to learn how to manage it and how to use it to help us. Insufficient stress acts as a depressant and may leave us feeling bored or dejected; on the other hand, excessive stress may leave us feeling "tied up in knots." What we need to do is find the optimal level of stress which will individually motivate but not overwhelm.

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It has been found that most illness is related to unrelieved stress. If one is experiencing stress symptoms, one has gone beyond optimal stress level; one needs to reduce the stress in life and/or improve the ability to manage it.

Conclusion:

In the course of writing the paper, we defined stress. Observed the impact stress had on the lives of people. We studied the symptoms of stress and identified its causes. We then explored various methods of stress management, different approaches to stress reduction. We were also able to identify the effective means of

stress management. In some situations, medical intervention is required; we identified a few of them. When one is in the midst of a stressful situation, it's hard to determine whether one is simply feeling stress or something more serious. Stress doesn't just go away. Instead, it goes to work inside the body. The longer it's there, the more likely it is to produce physical and psychological illness. The latest research shows that stress can cause damage to the brain, heart, joints, digestive and immune systems.

If one thinks that one would benefit from help, either in identifying the things that are causing stress, or in learning techniques to help relax, there are many people who can give professional assistance in these areas.

It's time to seek professional help if one: feels that stress is affecting our health, feels that it will never end, feels so desperate that one thinks about quitting the job, running away, taking a drug overdose, or injuring oneself, feel depressed, sad, tearful, or that life is not worth living, lose our appetite and find it difficult to sleep, find that one is overeating, drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking, or using recreational drugs in abnormally large amounts, have worries, feeling and thoughts that are hard to talk about, hear voices telling what to do. Professional help is particularly important if one feels depressed or extremely anxious. These conditions can be triggered by stress and often are overlooked. Stress-induced conditions can be managed and treated, but one must be patient. Stress management does not always come easy. It takes time and practice to reduce anxiety, depression, and stress.

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