



Thrive On Stress

This issue is devoted to stress and its management. It is clear that we cannot avoid stress, stress inducing factors right from childhood till death. It is therefore wise to learn ways to manage stress so that it is positive stress and we *thrive on stress*.

Writing under the above title, Dr Robert Sharpe and David Lewis analyse all the relevant factors in their book and outline various strategies to handle stress and always be on top of it. "Stress" is defined as an individual's perception and assessment of his environment. What we see, hear, feel and taste is a source of stress. At the same time our brain *assesses* the environment as per "our unique collection of memories and *learned responses*". Thus each individual's stressors are unique and the same stressor may not have any effect on another operating in the same environment. Emphasizing the fact that one cannot avoid stress, the above authors argue that for each individual there is a particular level of stress at which he can function and operate efficiently; this they call 'Optimum Stress Level (OSL)' In other words, so long as one is performing a task or behaviour efficiently, enthusiastically and happily, without feeling any mental or physical ill effects, then his OSL is being realized. By corollary stress levels which either rise drastically above OSL or fall below, it will produce responses which make it more difficult or unpleasant to perform a particular work or behaviour; these they term as "Negative stress responses". Stress produces in each individual *strain* as he has to cope with the stress factors and there are three levels of such strain.

- a) High level of stress- high level of strain resulting in high negative stress responses.
- b) Optimum stress level- Optimum strain level leading to ideal mental and physical responses without adverse effects; ie "Eustress"
- c) Low level of stress (boredom or routine or repetitive work) - low level of strain- negative stress responses.

The authors state whether a person will experience OSL or a higher or lower level of stress will have to be analysed in all areas of his life such as - work and study; family, marriage and intimacy; social and inter personal relationships and leisure and sport. The authors had compiled a detailed checklist to assess one's stress response analysis in each of the above areas. A few examples will clarify and will help if *NJH* readers also analyse themselves.

WORK AND STUDY AREA:

I. WHEN WORKING AGAINST A TIGHT DEADLINE

- a. My thoughts become confused and work unproductive
- b. I feel physically tired and lazy
- c. I feel tense and anxious
- d. My mind goes blank on the task
- e. I usually meet the deadlines efficiently

II. WHEN APPROACHING OR TAKING EXAMINATIONS

- a. I become anxious and tense
- b. I become sleepy or succumb to other activities
- c. I lose concentration and day dream
- d. Thoughts are jumbled and cannot recall facts
- e. I feel confident and well prepared

III. FAMILY, MARRIAGE, SEX AND INTIMACY

When I am upset with my wife or partner

- a. I begin to feel bored and disenchanted
- b. I tremble with suppressed rage
- c. I leave the situation without tackling it
- d. My mind races with thoughts of what I may say or



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- c. I am able to express my feelings and talk things over reasonably

IV. SOCIAL AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS:

When dealing with an unwelcome request from a friend:

- a. I agree because I cannot summon courage to argue against it
 b. I agree because I feel sure that I may have to give in eventually.
 c. I become tense and anxious and talk confusedly about my other commitments
 d. My mind is confused and racing with objections and feelings of obligation
 e. I can say "no" without feeling guilty.

By truthfully analyzing one's responses to these types of situations, one can assess whether one is operating on OSL level or producing negative mental or physical responses.

These authors also have evolved a CHECKLIST FOR ANALYZING LIFESTYLE STRESSORS under six categories as under. It is recommended that we, the practitioners, use these pointers in designing our questionnaires for different class of patients

- a) **Performance stressors**- Sources of stress inherent in carrying out a piece of mental or physical behaviour
 b) **Threat stressors**- Arise from situations perceived as dangerous physically or mentally traumatic
 c) **Boredom stressors**: From situations assessed as lacking in physical or mental stimulation
 d) **Frustration stressors**: (most common)- From situations assessed as being undesirable but beyond one's power to control
 e) **Bereavement stressors**: It is also real in many cases when there is death of a loved one due to serious or sudden illness or accident
 f) **Physical stressors**: situations causing physical damage to the person

The level of stress and consequent strain one will ex-

perience will depend on

- a) Intensity of the stressor,
 b) Duration of exposure and
 c) Number of other life stressors already present.

Fight or Flight phenomenon has already been explained in this issue. It is impossible for the body to be both anxious, ready to flee and burn more energy in the process and at the same time be relaxed and enjoy the situation. We can be only in one of these states.

Before we discuss the strategies for coping with stress it is relevant to discuss another aspect viz: **TYPE A BEHAVIOUR**, which when present in an individual, is a serious stumbling block to handle stress. Not only that he cannot handle stress, but also he creates stress in others with whom he works or is involved. This type of personality is prone to coronary attacks. This term was coined by Dr Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman and discussed in detail in their bestseller "Type A behaviour and your heart" Dr Friedman along with Diane Ulmer published a sequel to that book titled "Treating Type A Behaviour and your heart" (published in 1984) in which they discussed in detail the methods of treating this behaviour which is also very relevant in handling the stresses and strains of living if one is to avoid the serious illnesses which mishandling of stress situations produce.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TYPE A PERSON

- i) **Insecurity of status**: Type a person struggles ceaselessly and also senselessly because he has a poor self-esteem. His doubts about his status are not based on what his family or friends feel about it, but his own assessment in comparison with others and his own unreasonable expectations of himself.
 ii) **Hyper-aggressiveness**: He has not only a desire to win in all but also to *dominate* with total indifference to feelings and rights of his competitors or opponents. It may involve an active attempt to put down the other person and damage his self-esteem with some ruthlessness.



- iii) Free-floating hostility: These persons simultaneously develop free-floating hostility towards others and situations. "It is a permanently indwelling anger that shows itself with ever-greater frequency in response to increasingly trivial happenings". Initially others will find his anger justified such as waiting in a long queue in a bank, a driver too slow to start his car after the change of signal or a computer which is slow to respond or getting an engaged signal in a phone; sooner or later, others will realize that this Type A person has too many things to get upset about and getting more angry than what the situation calls for.
- iv) Speedup of daily activities and sense of time urgency: Type A person wants to achieve much more in a limited time and takes on more load; consequently he is forced to accelerate the rate at which he thinks, plans and executes almost all his daily functions. In the process he not only forces his pace and expects others to keep pace with him. His speech is faster and expects other also to speak faster, walks and eats faster and does talk on phone while in breakfast
- v) Polyphasic thinking and performance: Type A person finds that the time available for the overload he carries is inadequate and hence is not satisfied that he is accomplishing enough every minute of his waking hours. He unconsciously tries to gain more time or accomplish more by trying to think or do two or more things simultaneously. While driving his car he may have his breakfast or dictate memos or make reminder cards when there is red signal or listen to radio news while shaving.

It is important to realize that all the above components are inter-dependent; increase in the severity of one increases that in others. Type A person thus creates avoidable stress for himself and others who work with him or his family and in the process is on the road to self-destruction resulting in serious illness such as heart attacks.

TYPE B PERSONALITY:

The authors of the above books call the person who does not suffer from the traits of Type A behaviour, as Type B personality. In essence such persons have

- i) No sense of time urgency; while not frittering away their time, they are not unduly perturbed if they do not accomplish in the time what they had planned to do or give the impression when in social or professional activities that the other party is boring or feel that they have better things to do with that time. "The Type B person has learned to value and enjoy himself as much or more for what he has already done or experienced as for what he may accomplish in the future." He takes time to enjoy the present and gain spiritual sustenance from his work or creations.
- ii) No free floating hostility: This absence stems essentially from their own good self-esteem and sense of security and hence do not find it necessary to engage in ceaseless struggle to bolster their own low self-esteem by finding fault with others. They rarely feel tense or induce tension in their families and others and can overlook minor mistakes and shortcomings in their wives and children. They are capable of giving and receiving praise and affection.
- iii) A sense of self-esteem and sense of security: They will do their best and will not get unduly upset if they fail because they have their own self-esteem which is not measured in numbers or acquisitions. They feel no shame of their shortcomings. To sum up Type A person believes in "worth having" in titles, numbers and objects while Type B person is more interested in "worth being"

COPING STRATEGIES

The inability to cope with stress can produce physical and/or mental negative responses and it is more pronounced in Type A personalities. Physical negative responses will include muscular tension, high blood pressure, trembling or dizziness or blurred vision etc,



which can be overcome by appropriate exercises coupled with medication and relaxation techniques. Negative *mental* responses are more common and

more damaging in Type A persons for the reasons already discussed and the strategy involves in re-engineering oneself to develop a Type B approach to events and circumstances. One under stress has to concentrate on three areas – alleviating the sense of time urgency, reducing the level of free-floating hostility and alleviate the sense of self-destructive tendency.

A. Alleviating a sense of time urgency:

- i) Recognize that you are suffering from a sense of time urgency. And find out its causes. Many under stress feel that they will be unable to cope with the workload and lose their self-esteem in the eyes of their superiors and peers. This has to be deliberately corrected
- ii) Learn time management techniques so that the available time is spent wisely and productively without stress. Remind yourself that life itself is an unfinished business and one should not expect that all the projects taken up would be completed as scheduled. Stop trying to do more than one thing at a time. Tell yourself frequently that few enterprises ever fail because they are executed too slowly or too well; at the same time ask the question whether hastening or hurrying had ever aided you in good judgment and taking correct decisions. Refrain from imposing your own sense of time urgency on others. Eliminate the words "how much" and "how

many" from your vocabulary. One has to read books, which have no relevance to the profession one holds, so that his perspective changes. Learn to interrupt your long periods of work with short bouts of relaxation times.

Alleviating free-floating hostility:

- a) Detect the cause of this trait. The research done by Dr Meyer Friedman and others into the life history of Type A personalities who suffered heart attacks or serious illnesses invariably revealed that these persons *did not receive sufficient love and affection from their parents in their childhood*. This bred insecurity and consequently it develops into free-floating hostility. One has to change his beliefs in this regard such as -others are inept, I cannot help having this trait or giving or receiving affection is a weakness and is a waste of time or the belief that I need some amount of hostility to get ahead in this world. One has to develop compassion, love and understanding and forgiveness when dealing with others. Monitor your hostility and stop using obscenity in expressing your reactions.
 - b) If you do become angry, avoid food
- This advice is very relevant and life saving for those Type A personalities who had suffered a heart attack.

The ideas and concepts presented in this article are extracted from the following two books:

1. Thrive on Stress- How to make it work to your advantage- by Dr Robert Sharpe and David Lewis
2. Treating Type A Behaviour and your Heart- Meyer Friedman and Diane Ulmer



Life is Good - Eat Cake.. "Baking A Cake"

A young man is telling his Grandma how everything is going wrong. School problems, friend problems, family problems, financial problems, severe health problems, etc.. Meanwhile, Grandma is baking a cake. She asks her grandson if he would like a snack, which, of course, he does.

"Here, have some cooking oil." "Yuck" says the young man. "How about a couple raw eggs?" "Gross, Grandma!" "Would you like some flour then? Or maybe baking soda?" "Grandma, those are all yucky!"

To which Grandma replies: "Yes, all those things seem bad

all by themselves. But when they are put together in the right way, they make a wonderfully delicious cake! God works the same way. Many times we wonder why he would let us go through such bad and difficult times. But God knows that when He puts these things all in His order, they always work for good. We just have to trust Him and, eventually, they will all make something wonderful!" God is Crazy About You. He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning. Whenever you want to talk, He'll listen. He can live anywhere in the world, and He chose your heart.

Share this with the people you care about I did.
Hope your day is a "piece of cake!"