



STRESS: SYMPTOMS, TYPES, RESPONSES.

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WHAT IS STRESS?

- Hans Selye (1936) defined stress as **adaptive** response to **real** or **perceived** (psychological) **threats** or **changes** (“stressors”).
- Stress is a normal reaction to a threatening / new / challenging situation (NRC, 2008). Stress is a survival mechanism.
- Usually stress goes away once the situation is resolved. And body systems can return to normal and balanced functioning.



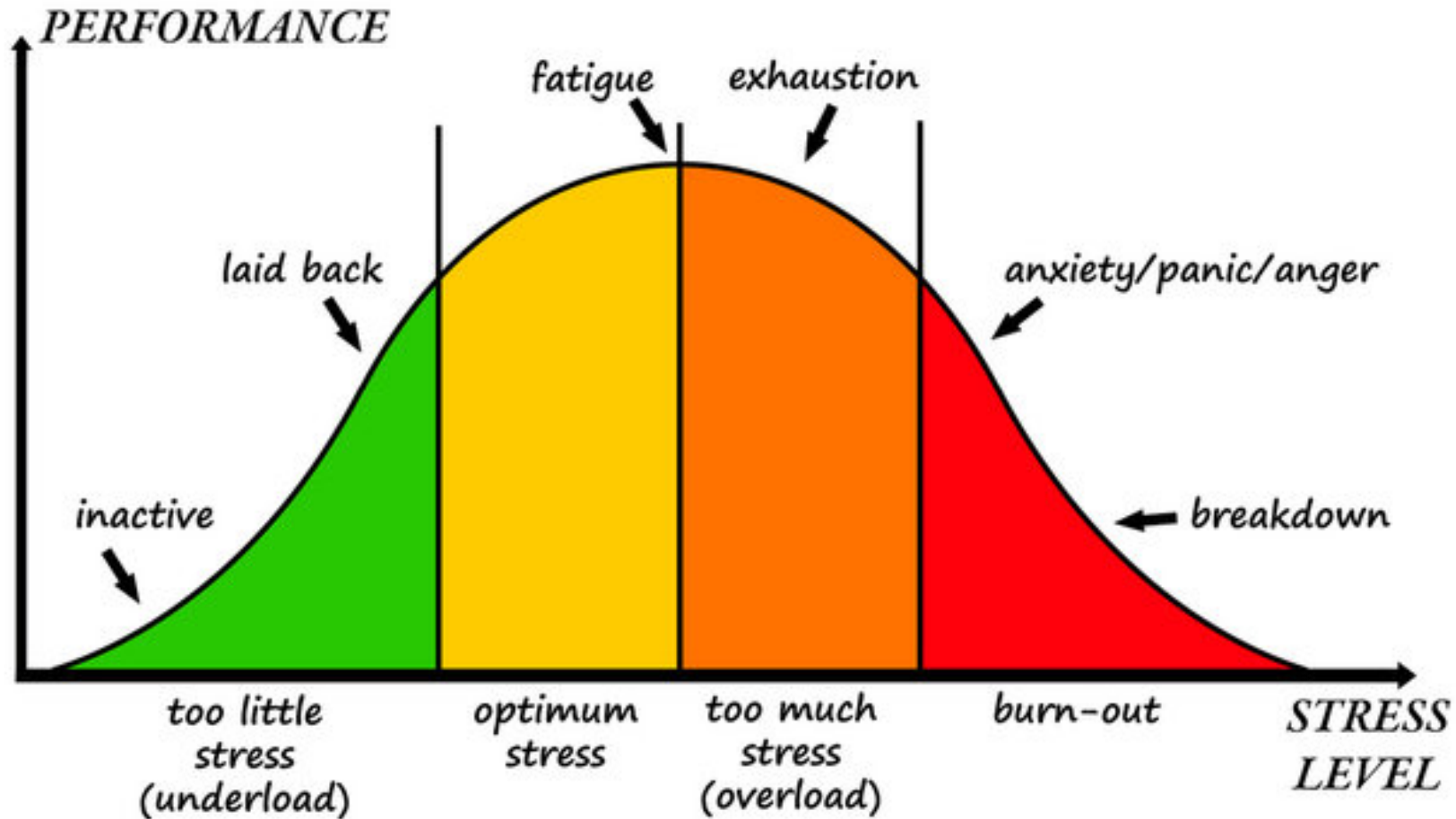
STRESS RESPONSE

- A stressor triggers the release of stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol in the body.
- Our sympathetic nervous system, also called the “fight-or-flight” response, kicks into action.
- The fight-or-flight system prepares us for facing dangerous situations by mobilising our senses, and our psychological and physiological mechanisms. Our heartbeat gets faster, our pulse rate increases, our muscles tense, our blood pressure goes up, we feel more energy, decreased sense of pain, increased muscular performance.

FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT (SYMPATHETIC) RESPONSE TO STRESS: AUTOMATIC, QUICK, IRRATIONAL

- **Fight:** we may become agitated and aggressive towards others and prepare to fight the threat. Fighting can be a helpful reaction to ward off predators.
- **Flight:** Running away from stressors, removing ourselves from the situation. A surge of hormones, like adrenaline, give our body the stamina to run from danger longer and faster than we typically could.
- **Freeze:** Freeze is our inability to move or act against a threat. This stress response causes us to feel stuck in place. Examples: freezing, fainting, tonic immobility, holding our breath or shallow breathing.
- **Purpose:** survival, protecting our lives in dangerous circumstances.
- However, in modern life, this automatic reaction can prolong our stress and lead to negative consequences that harm our physical and mental wellbeing. We need to realize that the stressor isn't going away, we need to be able to calm down, face the challenging situation and restore our capacity to think rationally and critically.

STRESS CURVE



CALMING OF PARASYMPATHETIC RESPONSE

- Parasympathetic system is a network of nerves that **relaxes our body** after periods of stress or danger. It also helps run life-sustaining processes, like digestion, resting heart rate, our metabolism, and other functions during times when we feel safe and calm (the "rest and digest" state).
- Once the stress is over, parasympathetic nervous system **tells our brain that we are in a safe situation.**
- **We can learn to trigger our parasympathetic / calming response** to reduce our sense of anxiety and stress. This also helps us restore capacity to think rationally and critically, improve our mood, strengthen our immune system, and reduce our blood pressure.
- There are many ways to activate our parasympathetic / calming response, including: mild exercise, meditation, yoga, deep abdominal breathing, spending time in nature, a bath or massage, reading a book, or playing music. Anything that does not stress you out.



TYPES OF STRESS

- **Acute stress:** sudden, one-time or short-term. When the stress passes, our parasympathetic system is activated to terminate the stress response and bring the body back to a state of homeostasis (balance). **Examples:** Traffic jams, when a phone broke, loud noises, being late, argument with loved one, losing a wallet.
- **Chronic stress:** when the stressor happens repeatedly or lasts long time. When it exceeds our ability to cope, it becomes harmful and often requires lifestyle changes and professional support. **Examples:** Family changes, significant relationship problems, losing a job or ongoing difficulties at work, ongoing financial problems, serious illness in oneself or a loved one.

TYPES OF STRESS



- **Positive stress** (Eustress): Stressors can be beneficial or pleasurable, as defined by person's willingness to obtain the stressor. Behaviors that are rewarding (such as exercise), or entertaining (jumping with parachute or performing on stage), or motivating to accomplish a desirable goal (for example, it may inspire you to meet a deadline and get a better job). Stress can be helpful in increasing our energy, motivation and focus needed to confront or solve the problem, improve our performance.
- **Negative stress** (Distress): an aversive, negative state in which coping and adaptation processes are overwhelmed and fail to return an organism to physiological or psychological homeostasis (NRC, 2008).
- Distress can follow both acute and chronic stress, when we don't have the physiological and psychological capacities to cope with this situation.



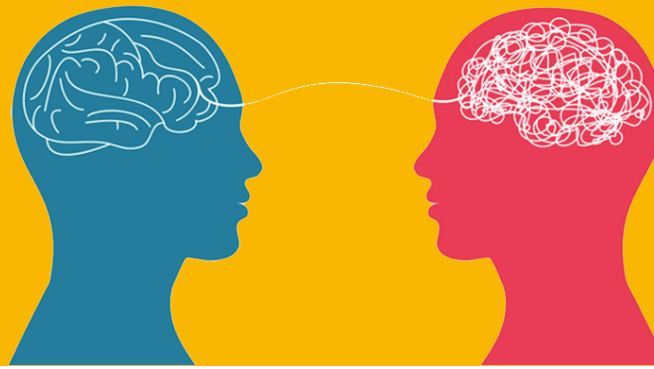
POSITIVE STRESS VS. DISTRESS

- Whether a person experiences distress or positive stress in a situation depends on their **perceptions of themselves** and **the stressor**, their **resources and coping capacities** (Shafir, 2020).
- When a person feels **confident** in their ability to overcome the stressor, they are more likely to experience positive stress. This **positive assessment of the stressor** helps them channel the energy provided by the fight or flight response in ways that help them work towards a solution.
- Distress is caused when a person assumes the **stressors are not within their control or ability to fix or change**. People who experience distress tend to feel overwhelmed and helpless and because they haven't found an actionable solution, tend to revert to worrying and other unproductive responses.

POSITIVE STRESS VS. DISTRESS

Eustress signs	Distress signs
Provides productive energy	Provides restless energy
Helps increase focus	Decreases focus
Increases motivation	Increases procrastination/avoidance
Is often experienced as excitement	Is often experienced as fear/concern
Feels manageable	Feels overwhelming
Improves performance	Impairs performance
Associated with confidence	Associated with insecurity
Expectation of a positive outcome	Fear of a negative outcome

TRAUMA



- Trauma is **a response to a terrifying / overwhelming event**. Traumatic events are marked by **a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death, and feel beyond person's control** (APA, 2023; CDC, 2023). Traumatic events undermine a person's sense of safety in the world and create a sense that catastrophe could strike at any time. **Individuals must have been exposed to actual or threatened traumatic event, and the distressing symptoms must last more than 4 weeks.**
- Examples of traumatic events: War, military combat experiences, natural disaster, accident, violent attack, unexpected loss of a loved one, abuse, bullying, or seeing someone else get hurt.
- **How a person is affected by trauma is not related to how strong he/she is. Trauma is a normal reaction to abnormal situation.** Our reaction can depend on our previous traumatic experiences, other stresses and how much support we have afterwards.

RISKS AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF STRESS (SAMSHA, 2023)



Stress affects all
systems of the
body.



Prolonged exposure to
stressful situation can
have negative
consequences for our
physical health, and
psychological, emotional,
behavioral, and social
well-being.



Stress targets the
most vulnerable part
of our physiology or
psychological
wellbeing.

DISCUSSION IN LARGE GROUP

- 1. How many tools/exercises to reduce stress did you count in your group?
- 2. Briefly name 2-3 tools/exercises that help to relax and feel better. Did you have any tool in common with others in your group? Was there any idea that was new to you?

RISKS AND NEGATIVE SIGNS OF STRESS (SAMSHA, 2023)

Physical signs include:

- high blood pressure and heart diseases,
- a weakened immune system, frequent colds or flu, skin problems,
- unexplained body aches and pains, headaches and muscular tension,
- sexual dysfunction,
- indigestion and stomach problems,
- a lack of energy, change in appetite, weight gain or weight loss.

RISKS AND NEGATIVE SIGNS OF STRESS (SAMSHA, 2023)

Psychological symptoms:

- insomnia or sleeping too much,
- poor judgment, indecision, self-doubt, intrusive negative thinking,
- decreased concentration or ability to remember, forgetfulness,
- lack of energy and motivation, feelings of hopelessness / helplessness,
- anxiety disorder, depression, burnout, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

RISKS AND NEGATIVE SIGNS OF STRESS (SAMSHA, 2023)

Behavioral signs:

- increased consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine, antidepressants and other substances;
- loss of sense of humor;
- biting nails, pulling hair;
- eating poorly or overeating,
- driving recklessly and being accident prone.

RISKS AND NEGATIVE SIGNS OF STRESS (SAMSHA, 2023)

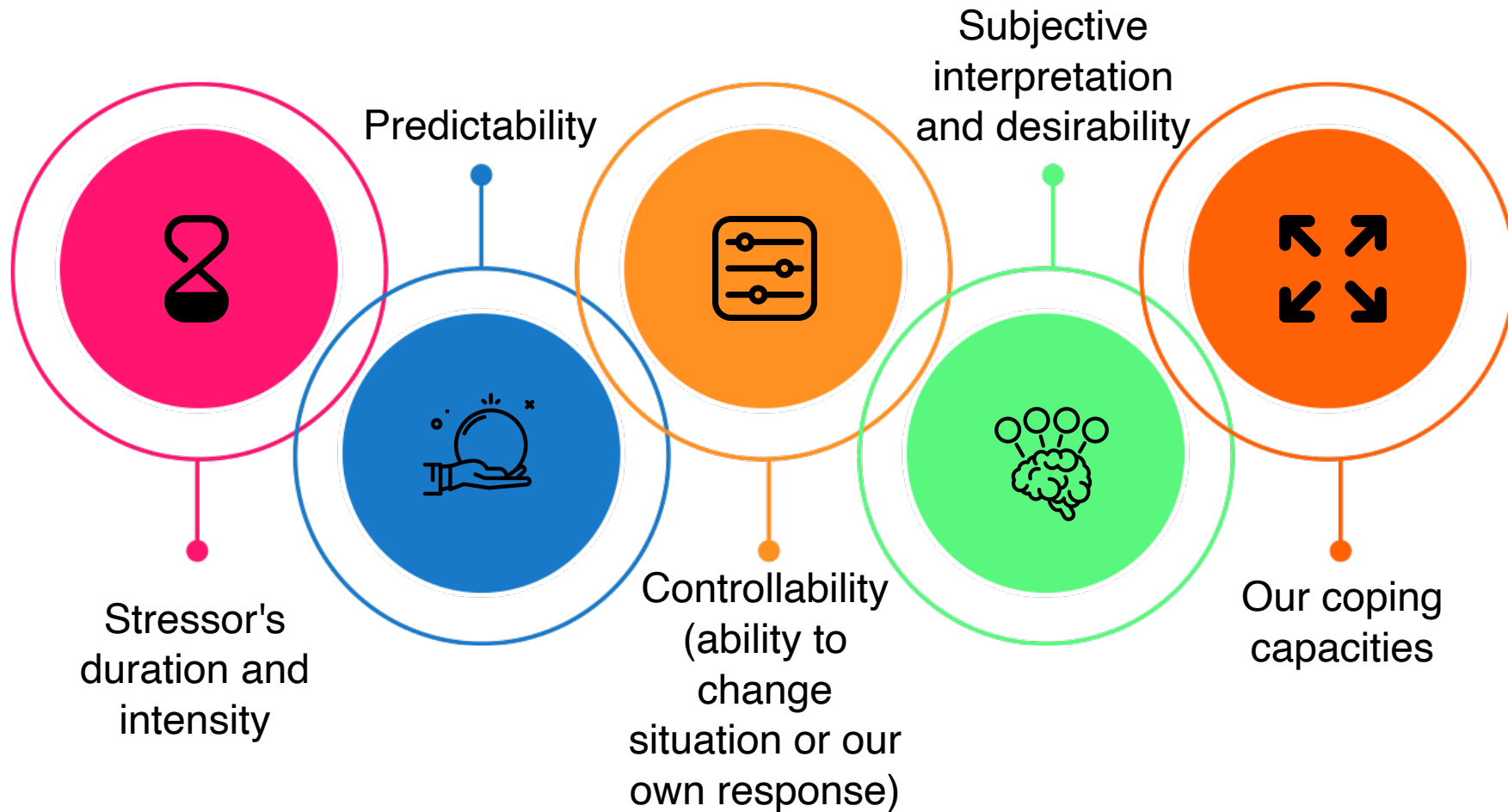
Emotional:

- moodiness,
- irritability, heightened worry and anxiety,
- feeling overwhelmed / tense / exhausted / emotionally drained / restlessness,
- inability to relax

Social wellbeing:

- conflicts with other people, isolation, loneliness, detrimental effects on family and career.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE OUR CAPACITY TO COPE (NRC, 2008)





PURPOSE OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress can't be avoided. But it can be managed. We can use stress management strategies to:

- Increase predictability (early identify stress, its sources and its impact on our health, plan ways to relax and manage it);
- Increase controllability (increase our choices in terms of improving the situation or increase our choices regarding how we can respond);
- Positively modify our interpretation and maintain hope;
- Improve our coping capacities and behaviors (expand our repertoire of skills and tools to better cope with stress and prevent serious negative consequences).

Two dark brown pencils stand upright on a light-colored surface. Their shadows are cast onto a textured, light-colored wall behind them. The shadows of the two pencils and the space between them form the rungs of a ladder, creating a visual metaphor for climbing or ascending.

SOME STRATEGIES TO MANAGE STRESS

- Psychoeducation
- Cognitive behavioral therapy and other tools to address negative thinking
- Mindfulness
- Relaxation exercises
- Healthy lifestyle and self-care
- Social support
- Individual counselling
- Professional medical treatment in severe cases

KEY MESSAGES

- Stress is not a sign of person's moral weakness or poor character. It is not about who I am, it is what happened to me.
- All reactions to stress are normal. It's the situation that is difficult/challenging.
- Know your symptoms. Learn to identify them sooner.
- People do their best in any situation and have coping skills already. They need help to become aware and utilize these skills, and acquire additional tools and resources.
- Stress is unavoidable, but it can be managed to increase healthier outcomes.

HOMEWORK

- 1. Translate 3-4 meditations from handouts and share.
- 2. We need 2 volunteers to lead meditation in the beginning of next session. Who would like to volunteer? Please let us know in chat or in Telegram.
- 3. Make a list: what helps you reduce stress and feel better. List as many things as you can. Share your list with us.
- 4. Find some poem or song (in English or your native language) or citation about resilience and hope for bright future and peace of mind. Please share with us!

USEFUL QUOTES

- “I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become”. Carl Jung
- “The problem is not the problem. Our coping is the problem”. Virginia Satir

TOMORROW WILL BE
BETTER



AND IF IT'S NOT, I WILL
SAY IT AGAIN