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Innovative Stress Management Approaches Followed By College Students to Manage Stress

Abstract

The word “Stress” entered popular vernacular of Indians in 1990s. Today it is one of the most used words among people. This article discusses the entry of the word into the Indian society and subsequent impact of stress in college students. There has been an increase in stress related incidents in the Indian society. The National Crime Records Bureau (2015) revealed that in India, one student commits suicide every hour. Students not being able to cope with stress end up lives and statistically South India has recorded higher suicide rates in the past two decades. There are various reasons for stress among Indian students like parental pressure, societal pressure, peer pressure etc. Some students take these stressors as threats and

respond in negative ways while many take these stressors as challenges and find ways to come out of it. This article sees the positive side of the problem and sheds light on the various approaches students follow to come out of stressful situations. In simple terms “stress management” in college students is different from adults. Adults do not easily accept that they are stressed. They ignore symptoms related to stress and rely on over the counter drugs. Whereas students identify stress and use customised approaches to relieve from stress. These simple approaches are inexpensive, easily accessible and reliable.

Keywords

Stressors, pressure, stress management, approach

Introduction

The word ‘stress’ entered popular vernacular in the 1970s but had been in scientific literature since 1930s. The word was coined by Hans Selye in 1936. The term stress is used to describe a variety of unpleasant feeling states. One says he/she is stressed when he/she feels angry, frustrated, over whelmed, conflicted or fatigued. The Indian population used the interchangeable term ‘tension’ for ‘stress’. The term ‘tension’ has been in popular usage since the 1990s in India among adults. Over the years, the term has become a popular vocabulary among young children. Reasons for this could be the expectation of the parents from the children that is surmounting and a myriad of reasons like expectation of the society, beauty standards, competition among peers to accumulate things like mobile phones, dresses, accessories, bikes, gadgets etc.

According to a study by Khanetal¹, youth in the age group 15–29 years accounted for the largest proportion of suicides in India (34.5%). This is an alarming number and a matter of concern for parents and academicians. The figure gives clear evidence that students in high

school and college are facing a lot of stress that leads them to extreme steps like suicide. According to National Crime Records Bureau², 54% of suicide attempters had received high school education or higher. The suicide rate is generally reported to be higher in urban areas because of a variety of stressors related to living in cities including overcrowding and social isolation. These figures indicate that education in a premier institution or a sophisticated lifestyle cannot prevent students from attempting suicide. Though the figures are alarming, students in the same age group are aware of the stressors and many institutions have started providing counselling sessions to students which is helping the students to tackle the issue. Students are finding new approaches to manage stress.

Stress in college students

There are many reasons for stress in college students. Parental pressure, societal pressure, peer pressure are the major reasons for stress in college students.

Parental pressure

Parents exert a lot of pressure on teenage students. Indian education system is designed to test the skills of students from a very young age. When students pass their stressful schooling, university education is another phase for the students to cross, satisfying the expectation of parents. Students are expected to bag an 'A' grade in all subjects. They are expected to be campus placed in a reputed firm with a six digit salary. They are expected to fulfil the dreams of their parents. If the student is not able to achieve the targets set by the parents, it leads to stress for the student. It is not just academics where the parents set targets but also in other extra curricular activities like sports and arts. They expect their child to be a Jack of all trades.

Academic stress

- **Choosing a course or university**

Choosing a course for graduation or higher studies could be very stressful. The student might not get correct guidance and end up in the wrong course that might cause him/her stress. This might lead to everyday problems like frequent absence to class, not being friendly with classmates, not being attentive in class etc.

- **Difficulty in coping with studies**

Choosing the wrong course may lead to difficulty in coping with studies. Parental or societal pressure may result in choosing the wrong course. After landing up, the student might want to quit. But considering the money paid for the course, the time spent for the course and other factors, the student ends up in psychological stress.

- **Failure in studies**

Failure in studies could be due to difficulty in coping with the subject, not being able to understand the teaching, missing classes frequently, poor time management etc. Because of academic stress and failure in examination, every day 6.23 Indian students commit suicide³

Societal pressure

Society has never failed to disappoint students in stressing them. Beauty standards, status in society, achievements in personal life and in various areas are the areas of expectation from a young individual.

The umpteen number of TV commercials has set a beauty standard in the society. Fair, slim, and cheerful girls are considered beautiful. Dark skinned and chubby girls are considered not very appealing. Female students who fall under this category develop stress and try to lighten their skin tones, reduce weight and join the bandwagon. On the other hand, boys who are fragile, effeminate are not considered 'real men.' This leads many college boys to enrol in gyms even though they are not passionate about it. These unwritten standards set by the society has burdened students and this pressurises them at an age they are supposed to enjoy things around them. 'Failures' are never accepted since people who are 'successful' are celebrated. This has indirectly led the students to not being able to accept failures and leading to extreme steps like suicide.

Peer pressure

Peer pressure is also a reason for stress. The transition between schools to college brings in a lot of expectation from peer group. Entering college with brand new phone, bike, clothing and other gadgets will gain popularity among peer group and students strive for them. Whereas students who do not possess these are considered outdated and would not be invited to be part of the larger group. Consequences of not being accepted leads to stress. Students tend to look for ways to procure things by hook or by crook.

Everyday hassles

Students who opt for colleges and schools far away from home, travel a minimum of 2 hours to reach destination. This causes a lot of physiological stress in them. Crowded buses and trains, the transit time, traffic jams and unexpected havocs tend to extend their travel time. It leads to both physiological and psychological stress.

Gender identity

Students during their teen and college years may have questions about their own gender. For teens that identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual or pan sexual, the teen years can be difficult. A lot of stigma, prejudice and discrimination create a hostile and stressful environment for individuals with gender identity issues. Indian society lacks understanding and acceptance regarding gender identity and sexual orientation which makes this phase more stressful.

Loss of a loved one

Loss of a dear one causes stress and disorientation. The student may lose a loved one at home or a friend and this causes a lot of psychological stress in them. "When we experience a loss, a very ancient reaction is triggered in our brains– the fight or flight response. There is a question of survival after the death of the dear one. The brain had stimulated us to take action but since we cannot undo the loss, there is no action we can take. We are struck in time and the body is under enormous stress. The student in such a situation ends up feeling lonely, is anxious, is in a state of trauma and lives in an imaginative world.

Interpersonal relationships

Indian society is socio centric and lays importance to interpersonal relationships. Problems in interpersonal relationships are on the rise due to various reasons. This could be between siblings, between friends, father and child, mother and child, between parents or between partners. Problems in interpersonal relationships could be very stressful psychologically.

The fact that stress is, to some degree, in the eye of the beholder makes it clearly a psychological process. That is, events are stressful when they are regarded as stressful, and not otherwise.

Stress management in college students

In spite of the various factors that cause stress in students, they have evolved to cope with it in the most creative ways. Students identify stressors and accept the fact that it is causing them stress unlike adults who do not accept it. They find inexpensive and reliable approaches to deal with stressors and are successful in battling them. Few of the approaches followed by students based on observation are listed below:

Music therapy

Listening to music was considered a leisure activity but now it has emerged as a therapy. Music can heal one from stress and anxiety in a passive way. Music therapy is when music is used as a tool for non-music purpose like relieving stress and depression. For a very long time, we have been enjoying the benefits of music therapy without knowing its effects.

After a stressful day, listening to music on the way back home can be relaxing. Turning on relaxing music before bedtime can induce sleep. Students have been using therapy consciously for relieving stress. Blandetal⁴ in one of their studies stated that the top rated coping mechanism for college students' stress was listening to music. Music therapy for them not just involves playing music on an instrument. It also involves singing the lyrics along, drumming the music on a piece of furniture, whistling the music etc.

Students during break hours, involve in jamming sessions and create music on classroom desk. Self-expression is an important part of music therapy. Some creative students pen their

own lyrics, compose music and sing the song to keep them occupied and vent out stress. The use of music as a therapy by students is fun, economical, and very effective.

Binge watching

Binge watching is a stress management approach followed by the current generation. Unlike the previous decade, internet access is easy and economical and in some instances free. Smart phones are handy with almost every student. A simple Google search would land them into sites to download their favourite series. Moreover video streaming websites like Amazon video and Netflix have changed the idea of viewership. One can have control over time and content and multiple episodes and seasons could be watched at a stretch. College students engage in binge watching because of the various gratifications it promises. These series are often engaging and addictive which is a very good approach to divert from stress. In addition to managing stress, these internet/TV series help students to learn a new language, improve a language, learn a new culture and etiquettes followed in another country etc.

Memes

According to the Oxford dictionary, meme is an idea, image, video, piece of text, etc. Typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations. Even though the word originated in the 1970s, it has been in the limelight in the last few years. All credits to students who have taken meme to another level. Meme creation has gained a lot of popularity among students that it has become part of cultural events and competitions. Meme creation and enjoying memes relaxes one's mind. To understand a meme, prior knowledge of the movie, comedy clip, political scenario and current affairs is important. Students possess prior knowledge and when they do not understand the meme, they involve in all kinds of research to understand the meaning. This is very engaging and diverts them from their stress and depression. Most of the memes are

aimed at making the reader laugh and it serves the purpose of relieving the viewer from stress.

Physical activities

Physical activities include sports activities, exercise in gyms or at home, jogging, etc. College students when in stress engage in rigorous physical activities. They make use of the grounds and facilities available free on campus. Physical activity improves resistance, so individuals are less susceptible to stress⁵. Such activities also increase their focus and divert them from stressors. Thome and Espelage in a study found that exercise is associated significantly with lower levels of depression⁶. Several college students get involved in physical activities available on campus and these activities are positive coping mechanisms for stress. Taliaferro et al⁷ found empirical evidence that the use of physical activity is positively related to reduced suicidal thoughts. It also reduced risks of hopelessness and depression in young adults.

Students after college hours form their teams and take part in physical activities in campuses. This relieves them of psychological stress.

Long rides, drives, walks and vacations

It is a proven fact that nature can alleviate one's mood in a positive way. This is the reason for many health care centres to have incorporated nature landscape in their premises. This elates the mood of the patients and along with proper medication could bring the patient out of the medical condition⁸. Activities like vacationing, rides and walks may serve as 'breathers' that provide a chance to take a break, engage in a pleasurable diversionary activity, and consequently induce positive emotions and reduce stress⁹. Students take long walks or go on long rides and drives to escape the stressors. Rides are not necessarily speedy

or rash. It is taking a route that is not their usual commute route that has natural landscapes like greenery, beach or green vegetation. A scenic route or place is a great stress buster. The seashore or roads which have fewer vehicles are the most opted for slow walks and jogging. This is at times combined with another approach that is talking to a loved one. The combination of relaxing walks and talking to a loved one could be a great stress buster. Vacationing in serene places are also stress busters. Since students do not have the money to go to exotic locations, they end up exploring local places that have fewer tourists and at the same time inexpensive. Exploring new locations, talking about the visit to some friend could also keep them engaged and eventually forget the stressors.

Hobbies

Gardening, explore photography, knitting, engaging in a puzzle, drawing, and writing are some of the hobbies that students resort to when in stress. Hobbies relax one's mind and are very engaging. Any hobby involves focus and concentration and the outcome of the hobby is often a wonderful piece of work. This output gives a feeling of achievement. They act as 'restorers' that restores the mood in a positive way. When a hobby is pursued, likeminded people tend to form social gatherings which gives new experiences. Meeting new people, learning something new from scratch, achieving in the newly pursued hobby can be very rewarding to the mind. This eventually helps one to shift focus from the stressors and to come out of stress.

Sleeping

Stress and sleep are closely related. Many studies have shown that stress leads to difficulty in falling asleep, fragmented sleep and recurrent and frequent nightmares. Adults who are stressed take the help of sleeping pills. Contrastingly, students associate sleep and stress in a different way. Students cope extreme stress by sleeping. A large number of

students during exam stress sleep and cope with stress. This is one of the inexpensive coping approaches followed by them. Sleeping relieves physiological and psychological stress. The body and mind shuts down for a while when one sleeps and goes to a relaxed state which relieves depression and anxiety.

Window shopping

Retail therapy or shopping therapy is an approach followed by adults to divert from the stressors. Treating oneself with something elates one's mood. But, at times, retail shopping could itself be a stressful experience for monetary reasons. The approach followed by students is a little different. They practice window shopping. Window shopping does not require a customer to buy a product. So, students to lift their moods visit malls and practice window shopping. The ambiance of the malls is mood lifting and there is no restriction on the time duration spent in a mall. There is no money involved to walk around or sit in the malls. The presence of colossal malls in small towns has made the access for students easy.

These approaches followed by students vary from person to person, from region to region and the combinations used also vary. Students customise it according to their needs once they recognise the stressors.

Conclusion

Thus students' approach in managing stress is entirely different from that of adults. Students understand the reasons for stress and approach it in a positive way. They find new strategies to come out of the stressful situation. This is the positive side of the problem. As academicians, a keen observation over the students in a class is very important. Observations could be useful in two ways- the approaches followed by students could be helpful to us in coping with stress and secondly it could be useful for students awaiting help. There could be

certain students who are not able to identify stressors, or have identified it but are not able to cope with it and some would have decided to deal with it in a negative way. Once such students are identified, counselling could be a remedy. Every institution should provide such counselling service to its students and make the student aware that stress is a biological phenomenon. Such awareness could save students from taking extreme steps like suicide.

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