



Stress the Lifestyle Killer

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On a certain Monday this summer, Mumbai Police personnel underwent an exercise quite different from what they normally do. Around 250 members of the force, led by Commissioner Rakesh Maria, sat down and attempted questions seeking answers to their stress-related queries. Stress, like their uniforms, is an indispensable part of their job profile. Wrapped in eerie silence, the team of officers devoted hours to 68 objective questions that probed every dimension of their existence relating to stress. From questions like if they spent happy times with their family to queries about their relationship with their colleagues, the khaki-clad personnel, like obedient students attending their final exams, promptly ticked the replies they thought correct. But their affair with decoding stress did not end just at merely acknowledging what the test demanded. They were even provided counselling, when required. Mumbai Police's first and huge step to fight stress is just the beginning of the battle against this almost untameable demon.

DR SAMEER MALHOTRA

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“When stress leads to disturbed biological functions, when its level crosses the capability of an individual to cope with it, when it leads to distress and dysfunction, it becomes morbid.”



On May 13, Odisha's District Voluntary Force (DVF) constable Narendra Khandapan shot his father-in-law,

mother-in-law, brother-in-law and two others with his service weapon before killing himself. He had a family dispute that caused him the

added stress and was in a state of depression.

The DVF is an Odisha Police outfit that fights the Maoists along with paramilitary and counter-extremism groups in the state. But this is not just a single incident. Such stress-related killings have been reported in the past too. Director General of Police Binoy Kumar Behera, who heads the Biju Patnaik State Police Academy (BPSP), says stress often leads to psychological disorder which even the policemen fail to realise and acknowledge. “According to a study, over 50 per cent policemen suffer stress which leads to change in behaviour. And it is primarily because of the nature of work and absence of an outlet,” says Behera.

The Big Threat : Stress is defined as the body's reaction to dangerous or harmful situations, be it real or perceived. When an individual feels threatened, it leads to a chemical reaction in the body that allows him or her to act in certain ways to prevent injury >>[More](#)

But stress is not restricted to men in khaki alone. Like an epidemic, it affects all. The much-anticipated list of top 10 most stressful jobs of 2015 compiled by Forbes includes fire-fighters, enlisted military personnel, military generals, airline pilots, police officers, actors, broadcasters, event coordinators, photo journalists and news reporters. This was arranged based on data collected in the US. But stress is a gracious task master who doesn't discriminate its subjects based on geographical differences. If this holds true for the US, it applies to people working or at homes in India as well. It can happen just at the most unexpected time when you are sitting comfortably in your uptown dream office, working on the project that will lead you to the doorsteps of success. You have given up the much-planned 10 days and nine nights Europe tour, breaking your teenage daughter's dream of the perfect Facebook display picture standing in front of the Eiffel Tower and robbing your wife's opportunity to buy that bottle of Channel No.5 from the duty free shop. At the eleventh hour, after spending 18 hours at your desk, you are informed the project has been scrapped off. Dejected and stressed, all you can do to calm your nerves is by going to the nearest pub and then head home to face an angry wife and a rebellious daughter.

Stress is rather a difficult word to define, and the difficulty gets a notch higher if we are to describe it in context of a situation. We might have heard many complaining, “I can't take this stress anymore.” So what exactly does this mean? “In today's world of growing consumerism and

globalisation, fast pace and growing competition, shrinking support networks, expectations from self and others are on the rise. There is less time for recreation, relaxation, or family. All this adds to stress levels. Not all stress is bad. However, when it leads to disturbed biological functions viz. sleep and appetite disturbances, when stress level crosses the capability of a particular individual to effectively cope with it, when stress leads to distress and dysfunction, it becomes morbid,” says Dr Sameer Malhotra, Head, Department of Mental Health and Behavioural Sciences, Max Healthcare, Delhi. Chronic stress, if not managed effectively, can in the long run have major detrimental impacts on the person’s physical as well as psychological well-being, as it could increase their vulnerability to not just mental illnesses like depression or anxiety, but also physical health. To name a few, stress leads to increased risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, menstrual problems, acne and other skin problems, headaches and body aches, indigestion, eating disorders, ulcers, as well as sexual dysfunctions.

Hair Triggers :
While triggers vary from person to person, surveys have it that work stress tops the list. In the US, 40 per cent of the workers admit to going through office stress, and one-quarter consider work as their biggest stressor >>More

According to a study by industry body Assocham study, 66 per cent CEOs in India are stressed out and 11 per cent find it too much to handle. “While CEOs of big companies certainly face a lot of stress, the pressure is no less on leaders of start-ups. In fact, sometimes, things prove more daunting for us, than anybody else,” says LearnSocial.com Founder and CEO Raju Vanapala, adding, “While starting out the venture, I had accumulated a lot of stress, acquiring the right kind of resources, making people trust my vision, convincing customers to trust my product, getting funded for the venture, and staying focused. These caused sleepless nights. Additionally, ours is a bootstrapped company and I didn’t have any investor. This aspect leads to a lot of pressure, as there is nothing more stressful for me than managing finances.”

For Hero Electric CEO Sohinder Gill, stress comes from unexpected factors. “We are operating in five time zones across the globe. The calls and urgent

mails from offices abroad sometimes throw the normal routine out of gear. If a customer approaches me directly to redress his issue, it is taken as the failure of our system and I sometimes pass a bit of my stress on to my colleagues. I try not to blow my top at the colleagues repeating the same mistake twice, but some part of my controlled outburst remains within,” says Gill.

Sudden change of weather was a cause of great stress for Firefox Bikes Managing Director Shiv Inder Singh, while organising their annual event called Firestorm. To their surprise, this year, there was a sudden change in weather on the day of the event, and it started to rain heavily. Singh got

extremely worried; after all, there was so much at stake—money, reputation, time etc. Amidst heavy rain, winds and cold, they still decided to go ahead with the event. “Of course, that had me completely stressed out, because managing something at that scare with a downpour of that kind was proving to be impossible. I lost my appetite completely. I didn’t talk much, except when it was absolutely necessary, and there was a little irritation in my tone. The venue, the rugged terrain of the Mangar forest, Gurgaon, was in a mess. Somehow, I got the entire team to work on the field, and make the event possible. I, being the leader, had to encourage the team, but I have to say, I haven’t been more mentally and physical strained,” says Singh.

BINOY KUMAR BEHERA

Head, Biju Patnaik State Police Academy, Odisha

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Stress does not spare students either. With the admission season going on now, it does not help to know that the cut-off percentage for admission to many colleges has seen a meteoric rise. According to a study, 72 per cent of students in India are unaware of how to deal with stress and its ill-effects. A NIMHANS study has

found that 11 per cent of college students and 7-8 per cent of high school students have attempted suicide because of exam stress. And, 27.6 per cent of IT professionals in the country are addicted to narcotic drugs, says the study. The survey shows that Indian employers rank stress at number one as a lifestyle risk factor. On-the-job stressors range from fuzzy job expectations and deadline pressures to noisy work areas. The bane of open offices is compounded by off-the-job stresses such as the need to take care of children, increasingly fraying marriages and familial relationships as well as the daunting tasks of addressing medical issues and other concerns of aged parents.

Fearsome Factors : Stress doesn’t always come from outside, it is generated inside too. Constant worrying leads you to stress
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“Stress is seen across all age groups. In my practice, I see young children, adolescents, youths, adults and geriatrics. The nature of stress varies across these age groups. Children may be more focused on not getting a new iPad or getting poor grades or parents not giving them enough time. For adolescents, there can be a feeling of not being understood and relationship concerns. Others come with concerns regarding career and inability to find a job, partner, extra-marital relationships, strained relationships at home, too much of work-load, alienation, loneliness,

physical stamina declining,” says Dr Prachi, Clinical Psychologist, Artemis Hospitals in Gurgaon.

Like an unexpected visitor, stress could stem from the pressure related to anything as keeping up with the next-door neighbour, with unhappiness over one’s work and even over use of gadgets.

“Stress impacts the adrenal gland adversely causing adrenal fatigue to some. There are no tests to determine if a person is suffering from stress, although the cortisol level in the blood is a good indicator,” says Dr Manu Pradeesh, naturopathic physician and lifestyle medicine expert.

A recent survey showed 87 per cent of Indian women claim feeling stressed most of the time, with an additional 82 per cent asserting they had insufficient time to relax. “It is a myth that housewives have no stress since they don’t go out and work. Housewives often feel unacknowledged for all the efforts that they put in and this can be stressful. The multitasking done by women is often overlooked. It can be a great source of annoyance. In my practice, I have seen women, who gave up their glamorous careers (one was a radiologist, other a CEO) to raise children and look after ailing in-laws/parents. The caretaking is not as exhausting as lack of acknowledgement as they often have to encounter questions like what do you do throughout the day?” says Dr Prachi.

Dr Vijaylakshmi Ravindranath, director of Centre for Neuroscience at Indian Institute of Science,

Bengaluru, says, “Men and women respond to stress differently. We don’t have joint families anymore and not many people to share our problems with. Hence, the burden of family stress is mostly on women.”

In a disturbing trend, which is emerging in Hyderabad, young women are more prone to cardiovascular diseases than before. Earlier, women post-menopause were at greater risk of suffering from cardiovascular diseases compared to men, who would get the disease at a much younger age. However, experts feel that with a large percentage of women in the urban youth working in stressful jobs, particularly in the IT sector, both men and young women are prone to heart diseases at a much younger age. “Compared to last year, 10-15 per cent of cardiovascular diseases have increased among females residing in Hyderabad due to lack of estrogen. Also stressful environment and working conditions among young women have made them more prone to heart diseases,” says **Amol Naikawadi, preventive healthcare specialist, Indus Health Plus** in Hyderabad.

A recent study reveals that close to 70 per cent of people working in the IT sector are prone to cardiovascular diseases. Explaining why youngsters today are at a greater risk, Dr Nirmal Kumar, Senior Interventional Cardiologist at Care Hospital, Hyderabad, says, “Most youngsters (not just those in the IT industry) have extremely stressful jobs. Some of them work in different night shifts and sleep during the day. As a result, their biological clock gets disturbed. All these combined factors make both men and women more prone to cardiovascular diseases.”



Doctors maintain that the pressure which comes with demanding working lifestyle in the IT sector is a huge factor in affecting their fertility. “The biggest reason for infertility is stress, which comes as a result of their professional lives. Men, for instance, work for long hours on the laptop even at home. Due to the heat it produces for a prolonged period of time, the radiation it generates adversely affects the production of sperms,” explains Dr Rooma Sinha, Gynecologist at Apollo Hospitals in Hyderabad. “Majority of women have desk jobs and lead a sedentary lifestyle with lack of physical activity. This affects their fertility,” she says. Apart from this, working in different shifts, long hours and demanding schedules also affect the fertility levels of working couples. “Since a lot of couples work on different shifts most of the times, they don’t spend much time with each other because of demanding, stressful professional lives, which takes a toll on their ability to reproduce,” Dr Sinha points out.

It is but obvious that people fall ill when they are stressed and further stress

leads to mental and physical problems. “Stress causes diabetes, blood pressure, anxiety and depression, obesity and acidity in children and adults. Infertility can occur too,” says Dr Diwakar Gautham, Consultant Neuro Psychiatrist at Narayana Health City in Bengaluru.

Stress has a direct impact on the heart, as it leads to the release of substances such as catecholamines and cortisol, which are not good for the functioning heart. Stress also leads to changes in the blood constitution, and makes it more prone to clotting. “Chronic stress can lead to Acute Coronary Syndromes, Unstable Angina, and Myocardial Infarction, that could lead to catastrophic events. As mentioned above, blood pressure, high cholesterol levels and diabetes lead to depositing of fat in coronary arteries. If a stress-induced heart attack is severe, it can lead to sudden death because of Malignant Rhythm Disorders,” says Executive Director and Dean of Fortis Escorts Heart Institute and Research Centre, and Fortis Hospital in Vasant Kunj Dr Upender Kaul.

See the Signs : Chronic stress, if not managed, can have major detrimental impacts on the person’s physical and psychological well-being

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DR NIRMAL KUMAR
Senior Interventional Cardiologist, Care Hospital, Hyderabad

“Most youngsters have extremely stressful jobs. Various factors like loss of sleep, disturbed biological clock, etc. make both men and women more prone to cardiovascular diseases.”



But not all stress is bad. Good stress is called ‘Eustress’ and bad stress is referred to as ‘Distress’. “Eustress fuels creativity, motivates people to perform optimally and in some cases can be life saving as well. For example, if there is a fire in a house and I do not feel stressed, I may continue to sit

there. But when I see the situation as alarming, I would want to do something and that's what prompts me to move out of the house and save myself. Similarly, athletes work hard and it's positive stress which helps them to set bigger goals for themselves. Some other examples of positive stress are a promotion, birth of a baby," explains Dr Prachi.

Seven Ways to Destress :
Director of Department of
Mental Health and
Behavioral Sciences at
Fortis Healthcare in
Gurgaon Dr Samir Parikh's
advice to tackle stress
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"Stress is not necessarily a hindrance in our daily activities. In fact, an optimum amount of stress can actually give a positive push helping in the accomplishment of our goals. On the other hand, an excessive amount of stress can lead to limitations in the individual's personal, social and occupational functioning. Therefore, the deciding factors are the adequacy of the individual's coping mechanism to deal with the stressors in their life, and the significance of the interference and impact of this stress on their day-to-day functioning," says the Director of Department of Mental Health and Behavioral Sciences at Fortis Healthcare in Gurgaon Dr Samir Parikh.

Experts feel that the only way to battle stress is for people to take time out for themselves, exercise and follow a healthy diet. "The simplest and most

effective way to combat stress in our lives is to lead a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Effective time management is the key to staying mentally healthy. This is important to ensure a stress-free life, both at home as well as at work. Therefore, adopting healthy lifestyle choices, maintaining regular sleep and dietary habits, and regulating your routine appropriately can go a long way in helping you combat the stress in your life. Furthermore, anything and everything that you can choose to help focus on your physical or psychological well-being can be beneficial for you, including any form of physical exercise, relaxation, meditation, yoga, music, dancing, etc," says Dr Parikh.

These days, winning the battle against stress is made easy with people becoming aware of it and taking measures to fight back. "We organise weekend bike rides for our staff. Apart from cycling, there are other engaging activities like cricket, carom etc. It builds better rapport, and helps in

reducing tension," says Firefox Bikes' Singh.

At Hero Electric, attempts are being made to fight stress by organising moments for employees to enjoy. "I have a young Heros' club that plans and executes many activities, some of them directed at creating an enjoyable workplace. These are offsite retreats, Saturdays movies in cafeteria and half-day celebrations on Diwali and Holi," says Hero Electric's Gill.

Stress, like an evil mistress, will lure us in every corner. But the power to tame it rests on us. So distress and be happy.

with Sunita Raghu, Ayesha Singh, Siba Mohanty, Papiya Bhattacharya, Suhas Yellapantula, Shalet Jimmy