Volume 18 Issue 22
Originally issued as A3



Global Journal of human-social science: A
Arts & Humanities - Psychology
Volume 18 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2018
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Coping Strategies of Stress Tolerance in Relation to Military Training

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Abstract- No one can escape stress, but we can learn to cope with it. The 'work stress' is found in all professions. Military professionals are very stressed because they are highly target driven and highly pressured on results. Military education and training is a process which intends to establish and improve the capabilities of military personnel in their respective roles. Military profession by virtue of its inherent nature is full of stress where anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty always prevail. Military personnel are experiencing numerous type of stress based on situations like war time, peace time and UN mission time. Irrespective of officers and soldiers start their professional life through training in the academy where stresses are more intense. So our writing will be focusing on those issues and try to draw a comprehensive guideline to enhance the performance of the military personnel by coping up with stress in adverse situations.

GJHSS-A Classification: *FOR Code: 170199*



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Coping Strategies of Stress Tolerance in Relation to Military Training

Md Jahangir Alam[α] & Marzia Dulal[σ]

Abstract- No one can escape stress, but we can learn to cope with it. The 'work stress' is found in all professions. Military professionals are very stressed because they are highly target driven and highly pressured on results. Military education and training is a process which intends to establish and improve the capabilities of military personnel in their respective roles. Military profession by virtue of its inherent nature is full of stress where anxiety, insecurity and uncertainty always prevail. Military personnel are experiencing numerous type of stress based on situations like war time, peace time and UN mission time. Irrespective of officers and soldiers start their professional life through training in the academy where stresses are more intense. So our writing will be focusing on those issues and try to draw a comprehensive guideline to enhance the performance of the military personnel by coping up with stress in adverse situations.

I. Introduction

Bangladesh Army is a unique and traditional profession where troops are trained with rigorous hardship both physical and mental to become the future soldiers of the armed forces. It is observed that recruits are facing lot of problems out of stress and sometimes cannot cope up with the existing new environment of Bangladesh military training institutions and thereby their performance is decreasing and a good number of cadets/recruits are drooped out every year. Re-socialization is an important aspect of inducting a civilian into a military. Re-socialization as a sociological concept deals with the process of mentally and emotionally "re-training" a person so they can operate in an environment other than what they are accustomed. Successful re-socialization into a total institution involves changes to an individual's personality. In the transition from civilian to military, the cadets/recruits are trained to solely follow the command of his superiors. In some cases commands would go against certain natural aversions of the individual based on one's moral and ethical principles but they need to cope up with the prevailing situations.

Officer Cadets of Bangladesh Military academy and recruits of the centers undergo an exhaustive training in the military academy/centers. They are joining to military academy from a varied background and different emotional and mental status. The emotional climate in the family at times builds the foundation of stress tolerance within an individual. Even the ordinal position in the family has a significant role in shaping the personality pattern of an individual. But the most significant role in the context of Bangladesh in molding the stress tolerance ability comes from the difference of socio-economic status (SES) and parenting style. Because cadets/recruits of the good SES receive the relatively stable family and social environment which may foster better stress tolerance ability. However, the lower SES adolescents might have a habit of frequent stress tolerance ability which may excel his performance in the stressful situations. In many cases Particular styles of parenting might have been associated with signs of more adaptive behavior and fewer mental health difficulties, and some research has found that these may vary across cultures. So if the officer cadets, recruits and the all members (officers and soldiers) as a whole are taught about the coping strategy of stress, it will immensely help to enhance their performance both in physical and professional.

If we can motivate ourselves to follow the strategies that will be discussed in this article, research studies suggest that we are likely to achieve some of the following:

a. Reduce level of anxiety, frustration and insecurity feelings.
b. Reduction in the level of blood pressure.
c. Reduction in the intensity and frequency of headaches and better quality of sleep.
d. Reduction in the risk of having heart attacks.
e. Better relationship with people at work.
f. Improved general health for greater enjoyment of life.
g. Better personal and family relationships.
h. Improved in the level of physical energy.
i. Improved concentration at work.
j. Improvement in mental well-being and better social life.
k. Better performance of cadets/recruits in physical and academic work.
l. Less number of dropped out rate of cadets/recruits from the military academy/centers.

a) Stress

Stress is difficult to define precisely and more difficult to measure. Stress is caused not only by external factors, which are called "Stressors", but is also

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generated internally by our hopes and aspirations, beliefs and attitudes, as well as by our personality attributes and by our unrealistic expectations of ourselves. Stress occurs at work, at home in our social life. Even though we like to think that we live autonomous lives, we are affected by a wide variety of national and international, economic, political and ecological factors. Although we may have little control over our environment, how we respond to our environment, or how we allow it to affect us, is entirely our own responsibility. "A certain amount of stress occurs all the time there is no life without stress; not all stress is bad for us. Some stress is essential for our very existence as well as for our continued personal growth. A completely unstressed person might as well be dead. A certain amount of stress gives us a zest for life and releases our creativity. Having too few challenges makes our lives boring and frustration. Finding the right balance is like adjusting the strings of a musical instrument; too loose and the tuned will be ruined, too high and the string will break. So, a right balancing is a precondition for happiness.

i. *Types of Stress*

Considering the intensity the stress may be of following nature:

a. *Too Little Stress.* Where there is insufficient challenge to achieve a sense of personal accomplishment, skills are underutilized. Lack of stimulation leads to boredom. There is a lack of purpose or meaning in life.

b. *Optimum Stress.* Where there is optimum stress - life is balanced and despite ups and downs perfectly manageable. Job satisfaction and a sense of achievement enable the person to cruise through daily work without many difficulties and to be tired at the end of the day.

c. *Too Much Stress.* There is a constant feeling of having too much to do everyday. Despite emotional and physical exhaustion the person is unable to take time off to rest and play. He is permanent overdrive but not achieving results as expected.

d. *Breakdown:* If the efforts are continued the person may develop chronic neurotic tendencies or one of several psychosomatic illnesses. In this stage of stress tolerance level individuals are likely to get perturbed and broken down.

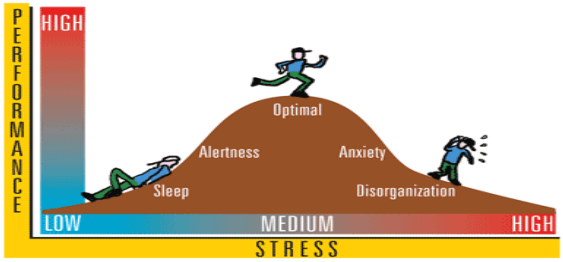

Figure 1: Stress Performance Connection (Adopted from the complete guide of stress management)

The Signs and Symptoms of Stress

a) Physical

1. Increased heart rate
2. High blood pressure
3. Hyperventilation
4. Dizziness
5. Tingling, sensations, sweats, numbness
6. Muscle contraction-(aches, pains, headaches, shakes)
7. Migraine
8. Stomach ulcers, nausea
9. Frequent urination, diarrhea
10. Physical illness - asthma, skin rashes, cancer, etc.

b) Mental.

1. Difficulty in concentrating
2. Difficulty in making decisions
3. Impaired memory - forgetfulness
4. Increased negative self-critical thoughts - (Depressive thinking)
5. Distorted, irrational idea-catastrophic thinking - (worrying)

c) Behavioural

1. Avoidance of anxiety provokingsituations
2. Social withdrawal
3. Excessive drinking/smoking/drug taking
4. Difficulty in sleeping
5. Early waking
6. Increased aggression
7. Accident proneness
8. Manic increase in activity level
9. Increase in obsession tendencies
10. Loss of sexual interest
11. Alteration in food intake

ii. *Causes of Stress*

The most frequent reasons for “stressing out” fall into three main categories:

a. The unsettling effects of change.
b. The feeling that an outside force is challenging or threatening us.
c. The feeling that we have lost personal control.

The National Institute of Mental Health of USA (NIMH) notes some of the more common stressors for college students which can be applied for the

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cadets/recruits in our Bangladesh military academy/centers also:

a. Increased academic demands.
b. Being on your own in a new environment.
c. Changes in family relations.
d. Financial responsibilities.
e. Changes in your social life.
f. Exposure to new people, ideas, and temptations.
g. Awareness of your sexual identity and orientation.
h. Preparing for life after graduation.

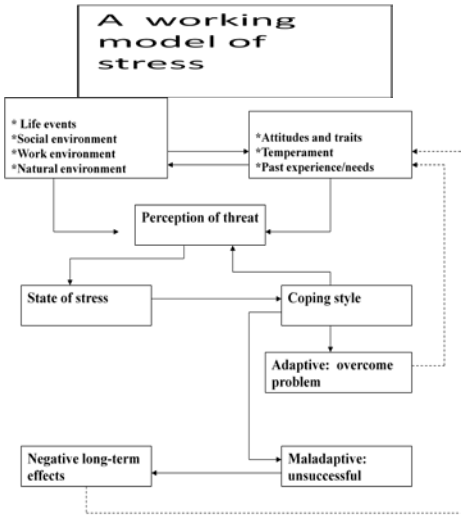

Figure 2: A working model of stress (Adapted from Cooper,1981)

iii. *Different stressors*

Events or situation in our environment that causes stress is called stressors. Following are some of stressors:

a. Occupational stressors (Physical or psychological).
b. Domestic stressors.
c. Economic, political & social stressors.
d. "Should" & "Must" - as a stressors.
e. Symptoms - which you are under stress.

iv. *Where and when does Stress Occur*

A crisis occurs in life when stress is understandable and inevitable. Most stress is not related to life crisis. Predominantly, the energy we expend on trivial or relentless daily annoyances cumulatively makes a major impact on our health and functioning. Following are some of those:

a. Getting late in the class, PT, Games or office.
b. When any one is waiting for any unsettling disposal.
c. Being repeatedly interrupted by telephone call when one is busy with an important deadline.
d. Noisy roadwork when job requires concentration.
e. Car not starting when you are late for work.
f. Being stuck in traffic jam.
g. Being involved in a minor accident but having to spend hours making a report to the police.
h. Having demanding time schedule etc.

v. *Hardy Personality*

There are people who are extremely resilient, there are people who are excessively prone to stress, psychologist called this as "hardy personality". This is found in people who are likely to be resistant to stress because they have a disposition composed of the 3 "Cs" *Commitment, Control and Challenge*. They are committed to what they do. They find a purpose and meaningfulness in their work, family and social institutions. They know that values and priorities, which gives them a sense of perspective and an ability to make accurate judgments and to resolve problems. They take responsibility for what they do and for what happens in their life. These people have a tendency to believe that they can control or influence the course of events. They are flexible enough to be able to deal with whatever comes along. The hardy person is more confident and less anxious.

vi. *Influencing Factors of stress tolerance level*

Followings are the factors which influence the stress tolerance level of the individual:

Support network- A strong network of supportive friends and family members is an enormous buffer against stress. When we have people we know we can count on, life's pressures don't seem as overwhelming. On the flip side, the more lonely and isolated we are, the greater our risk of succumbing to stress.

a. *Sense of control*- If we have confidence in ourselves and our ability to influence events and persevere through challenges, it's easier to take stress in stride. On the other hand, if we believe that we have little control over our life that we are at the mercy of our environment and circumstances, with limited ability to make changes, stress is more likely to paralyze us and knock us off course.
b. *Attitude and outlook* - The way we look at life and its inevitable challenges makes a huge difference in our ability to handle stress. If we are generally hopeful and optimistic, we will be less vulnerable. Stress-hardy people tend to embrace challenges, have a stronger sense of humor, believe in a higher purpose, and accept change as an inevitable part of life.
c. *Ability to deal with emotions* - If we don't know how to calm and soothe ourselves when we are feeling sad, angry, or afraid, we are highly likely to become stressed and agitated. Having the ability to identify and deal appropriately with our emotions can increase our tolerance to stress and help us bounce back from adversity.
d. *Knowledge and preparation*- The more we know about a stressful situation including how long it will last and what to expect, the easier it is to cope. For example, if we go into surgery with a realistic picture of what to expect post-op, a painful recovery will be

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less stressful than if we were expecting to bounce back immediately.

II. Military Training and Stress

There is no distrust that military training is composed with different level of stresses which includes physiological and psychological components. A soldier needs to attain certain standard in different facets of training to be competent to defend the motherland. Thereby a huge transformation takes place during the process of making a civilian in to a military man. The process however, creates an opportunity to the individual to adapt in various stresses at peace and war. As we all know that human personality greatly varied from person to person which in turn affect in absorbing the training. As a result all trainees may not be efficient while absorbing different stresses during training. However, knowledge of managing stress and adaptation technique can help to a great extent to capitalize our human resource to yield better performance and lead a meaningful life. People are likely to suffer from stress due to their body's response to physical (cold, injury, disease) and / or mental (fear, conflict, pressure) demands placed on it. Stress also can occur when soldiers think they cannot meet the demands they expected to meet. Sometimes they overestimate the difficulty of a task or mission and sometimes they underestimate their abilities.

a) How Does Stress Affect the Performance of the Military Personnel?

Stress can affect both soldier's body and mind. Trainees under large amounts of stress can become tired, sick, and unable to concentrate or think clearly to their study and military training. Sometimes, they even suffer mental breakdowns. Because of the widespread damage stress can cause, it's important to know our own limit. But just how much stress is "too much" differs from person to person. Some persons seem to be able to roll with life's punches, while others tend to crumble in the face of small obstacles or frustrations [1]. Some military persons even thrive on the excitement of a high-stress lifestyle. When any soldier faces too much stress for any single incident or reason, he may gets perturbed or breakdown and subsequently it affects his other day to day activities for which he cannot concentrate to his routing activities. In the race of training at the academies/units/centers he falls behind and cannot compete with others and fails to keep pace or momentum of the training. In the process of time he found himself aloof and helpless to continue training with main stream [2] . Thereby their performance both in military and academy is going to be declined and sometime they want to discontinue the training by flying away or committing some unexpected incidents like even suicidal attempts. In this situation he is provided with full hearted support, guidance and counseling by the respective instructors or trainers. Beside this if they are taught about the strategies of coping style of the stress tolerance certainly they will be immensely benefited and competent enough to stand against the stress. So considering all these aspects and the consequences of the stress on performance, military personnel should know about the coping strategies of stress.

III. Coping Strategies of Stress

Stress is a fact of life. It's all around us; at work, in our environment and in our personal lives. Since stress arises from so many factors and conditions, it's probably impossible to eliminate it completely. But we can apply technique to lessen its potential harmful effects [3]. Evidence suggests that it's best to have a variety of technique available. Let us see some of the coping strategies that can help us deal more effectively with stressors. Following are coping strategies:

a. Breathing.
b. Developing Communication skills.
c. Nutrition & healthy life style.
d. Physical relaxation.
e. Mental relaxation.
f. Other strategies.
g. Improving physical fitness.
h. Taking help from outside.
i. Biofeedback.

IV. Methods for Coping Strategies

Our individual training and our expectations of ourselves or others contribute to the way we cope. One person may be inclined to conform to the demand of the society [4], another may rebel against all rules and regulations and another may try to reform society if necessary, single handedly. Methods for coping strategies are discussed below:

a) Defense Mechanism: Defense Mechanisms are unconscious strategies people use to reduce anxiety by concealing its source from themselves and others. According to Freud people develop a range of defense mechanisms to deal with it [5]. All of us employ defense mechanisms to some degree, and at times they can serve a useful purpose by protecting us from unpleasant information. Defense mechanism is a kind of technique which reduces stress by distracting internal feelings and / or perceptions of external reality. Some of the techniques are as follow:

1. Denial – " It is not really stressful at all"
2. Intellectualization – "This is all very interesting, let me face it"
3. Reaction formation – "This is not stressful, and, in fact, it's a great learning experience"
4. Rationalization- For example, a fox being unable to reach hanging grapes and decided they were sour.

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b) *Reappraising of the situation*: Perception that threatens the important needs or motives can be modified and thus the stress can be reduced. It is effective because

1. Focusing on positive aspects of life crisis distracts the person from dwelling on threatening negative aspects.
2. Positive appraisal generates positive emotional states which block negative emotions.
3. It increases the person's sense of control in a threatening situation.

c) *Tension Reduction:* Tension reduction is a voluntary method of directly inhibiting stress induced physiological arousal & its associated symptoms. Some of the methods are:

Physical Exercise: Both exercise and stress produce almost identical pattern of physiological arousal. Stress induced arousal is involuntary while exercise induced arousal is voluntary. Persons undergoing exercise controls arousal level by actively deciding when to do vigorous and when to relax. Voluntary nature of exercise provides sense of mastery & self control that is lacking in stress induced arousal.

Regular vigorous exercise is also followed by a state of relaxation- *the rebound relaxation* which may last for several hours during which time it blocks any stress induced arousal. Physical exercise places the person in following:

a) Control of his/her physiological activity.
b) Promotes a sense of mastery over stress reaction.
c) Also produces a post exercise state of relaxation.

Relaxation Training

Hypnosis: Deep relaxation is achieved by direct suggestion and by use of relaxing mental images.

Meditation: In addition to teaching relaxation, is designed to achieve subjective goals such as contemplation, wisdom, and altered states of consciousness. Both progressive muscle relaxation and meditation reliably reduce stress-related arousal. They have been used successfully to treat a range of stress-related disorders, including hypertension, migraine and tension headaches, and chronic pain.

Progressive relaxation: It is learned by alternately tensing & relaxing each of major muscles of the body. Progressive muscular relaxation involves systematically tensing and then relaxing different groups of skeletal (voluntary) muscles, while directing one's attention toward the contrasting sensations produced by the two procedures. After practicing progressive muscular relaxation, individuals become increasingly sensitive to rising tension levels and can produce the relaxation response during everyday activities.

Biofeedback: Biofeedback is a technique in which people learn voluntary control of stress-related physiological responses, such as skin temperature, muscle tension, blood pressure, and heart rate. Normally, people cannot control these responses voluntarily. In biofeedback training, people are connected to an instrument or machine that measures a particular physiological response, such as heart rate, and feeds that measurement back to them in an understandable way.

Use of Medicine: Medicine to be taken under supervision of a competent doctor if

1. other methods of stress reduction fail
2. the reaction to stress is severe

Anticipatory Coping: Stress reactions are in part due to an imbalance between stressor demand and coping abilities. So stress reaction can be lessened by increasing people's ability to cope with particular stressors. Anticipatory coping involves developing and practicing skills that can be applied in future stressful situations important skills are:

1. Gaining information
2. Developing a plan of action
3. Self monitoring

V. Learning Healthier Ways to Manage Stress

Avoid unnecessary stress: Not all stress can be avoided, and it's not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed. You may be surprised, however, by the number of stressors in your life that you can eliminate.

1. Learn how to say "no"
2. Avoid people who stress you out
3. Take control of your environment
4. Avoid hot-button topics
5. Pare down your to-do list

Alter the situation: If you can't avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Figure out what you can do to change things so the problem doesn't present itself in the future. Often, this involves changing the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.

1. Express your feelings instead of bottling them up.
2. Be willing to compromise.
3. Be more assertive.
4. Manage your time better
5. Adapt to the stressor

If you can't change the stressor, change yourself. You can adapt to stressful situations and regain your sense of control by changing your expectations and attitude.

- Reframe problems.
- Look at the big picture.
- Adjust your standards.
- Focus on the positive.
- Adjusting Your Attitude

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Accept the things you can't change: Some sources of stress are unavoidable. You can't prevent or change stressors such as the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession. In such cases, the best way to cope with stress is to accept things as they are. Acceptance may be difficult, but in the long run, it's easier than railing against a situation you can't change.

1. Don't try to control the uncontrollable.
2. Look for the upside.
3. Share your feelings.
4. Learn to forgive.
5. Make time for fun and relaxation

Beyond a take-charge approach and a positive attitude, you can reduce stress in your life by nurturing yourself. If you regularly make time for fun and relaxation, you'll be in a better place to handle life's stressors when they inevitably come.

a) Healthy ways to relax and recharge

- Go for a walk.
- Spend time in nature.
- Call a good friend.
- Sweat out tension with a good workout.
- Write in your journal.
- Take a long bath.
- Light scented candles
- Savor a warm cup of coffee or tea.
- Play with a pet.
- Work in your garden.
- Get a massage.
- Curl up with a good book.
- Listen to music.
- Watch a comedy

Don't get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of life that you forget to take care of your own needs. Nurturing yourself is a necessity, not a luxury.

- Set aside relaxation time.
- Connect with others
- Do something you enjoy every day.
- Keep your sense of humor.
- Learn the relaxation response

You can control your stress levels with relaxation techniques that evoke the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the stress response. Regularly practicing these techniques will build your physical and emotional resilience, heal your body, and boost your overall feelings of joy and equanimity [6], [7].

Adopt a healthy lifestyle: You can increase your resistance to stress by strengthening your physical health.

- Exercise regularly.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Reduce caffeine and sugar.
- Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs.

Get enough sleep: Adequate sleep fuels your mind, as well as your body. Feeling tired will increase your stress because it may cause you to think irrationally

b) Suggestions for Coping Skills to Assist Recovery

DOs

- Expect the incident to bother you
- Remind yourself that your reactions are normal
- Spend time with friends and co-workers
- Maintain a balanced diet with minimum caffeine and sugar
- Exercise on a daily, moderate basis
- Take time for leisure activities
- Talk to trusted friends, counselor
- Minimize use of alcohol and drugs
- Treat yourself especially well - you deserve it!
- DON'Ts:
- Think you are going "crazy"
- Try to resist recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks
- Withdraw from family, friends, co-workers
- Think you are the only one who has been affected
- Drink alcohol excessively
- Abuse medication
- Have unrealistic expectations for recovery - it takes time !

c) Suggestions for instructors, platoon mates or close associates

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the affected person
- Offer your assistance and listening ear
- Reassure them that they are safe and normal
- Help them with routine tasks
- Allow them some private time
- Don't take their anger (or other feelings) personally
- Tell them you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them
- Call for help or support as soon as you feel you need it

VI. Stress Management Guidelines

- ❑ Learn your major distress
- ❑ Become assertive, not aggressive
- ❑ Manage your time well
- ❑ Get the sleep you require
- ❑ Exercise for endurance and strength at least three times per week
- ❑ Eat a well-balanced diet
- ❑ Avoid excessive use of alcohol, caffeine and nicotine
- ❑ Know and practice your philosophical approach to life
- ❑ Accept creative challenges
- ❑ Plan your free time constructively and productively
- ❑ The more healthy, fit and well you are, the more resilient, you will be against all types of distress!

VII. An Amazing Solution for Pain and Stress

Whenever you feel stressed or have pain I invite you to try the barefoot test. Go outside and plant your

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bare feet on sand, grass or even concrete, preferably a bit moist for added conductivity [8]. Read, listen to music, or just watch the birds or passing parade, but stay there in direct physical contact with the ground-the skin of the body touching the skin of the Earth for at least a half an hour or 40 minutes. At the end of that time you will notice the difference in your pain or stress level compared to when you started. You will be very surprised.

Some Suggestions for Staying Healthy

S - Sensible eating
T - Take time to enjoy life
R - Rest and relaxation
E - Exercise and education (about CIS)
S - Social support (family, friends)
S - Satisfying expressions of spirituality and sexuality

VIII. Conclusion

Everyone's perception of threat is different. These perceptions have a lot to do with how much or how well or badly we react to situations. We all have a different tolerance level. What one person finds extremely stressful and succumbs to, another may find tolerable, and yet another may positively thrive on. For our own health, it is our duty to consider whether our reactions are likely to be beneficial or harmful, dangerous to ourselves or other, and what the outcome will be in the short or long run. If a harmful outcome is predicted we should take appropriate steps and do all within our power to prevent damage. A completely unstressed person might as well be dead. So, stress has to be there, which stems from many different sources. Stress can influence our physical and psychological well-being. Also influence our performance on many tasks and even the ultimate course of our career. By adopting some of the coping techniques which have been discussed in this article, we can certainly avoid some and cope with others.

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