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Stress and its Management

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the paper is to know the stress and learn to avoid and managing ways of it. Stress is our body's response to certain situations. Stress is subjective. Something that may be stressful for one person -- speaking in public, for instance -- may not be stressful for someone else. Not all stresses are "bad" either. Graduating from college, for example, may be considered a "good" stress.

Stress can affect our physical health, our mental health, and our behavior. In response to stressful stimuli, our body turns on its biological response: chemicals and hormones are released that are meant to help our body rise to the challenge. Our heart rate increases, our brain works faster and becomes razor sharp, we have a sudden burst of energy. This response is natural and basic; it's what kept our ancestors from falling victim to hungry predators. Stress overload, however, can have harmful effects. We cannot eliminate bad stress from our lives, but we can learn to avoid and manage it.

We've all been there – the referee makes an unfavorable call; our opponent is faster than us, our pitching is off; the ground is wet, but what separates elite athletes from mediocre athletes is the ability to perform at a higher level despite the obstacles and adversity they may face. There are a million excuses for not performing your best during a competition, but professional athletes make no excuses. Simply put, if we want to become a professional, we'll need to learn how to deal with stress and pressure effectively.

The fit athlete should be able to withstand stress better than the ordinary person because he or she is trained to perform well under pressure. However, if the athlete is training too hard or competing too much, a slight increase in the total stress can push them over the top. It is a sad fact that fitness is not the same as health; the highly tuned athlete may be less healthy than the club athlete who maintains a high degree of fitness without going over his physical limits.

“All of us get knocked down, but it is resiliency that really matters. All of us do well when things are going well, but the thing that distinguishes athletes is the ability to do well in times of great stress, urgency and pressure.”— Roger Staubach

INTRODUCTION

Actors, athletes and students all have something in common. They all perform their tasks with varying stress levels. Stress can be defined as a physical, mental or emotional demand, which tends to disturb the homeostasis of the body. Used rather loosely, the term may relate to any kind of pressure, be it due to one's job, schoolwork, marriage, illness or death of a loved one. The common denominator in all of these is change. Loss of familiarity breeds this anxiety with any change being viewed as a "threat".

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Being aware of the 'total stress load' concept enables the individual to maintain equilibrium and avoid succumbing to the effects of over-stress. Remembering that a moderate amount of stress is good for us, we must balance an increase of stress in one area with a decrease in another. Top-class athletes must bear in mind that they need a stable emotional and economic background if they are going to train and compete at the highest level.

The issue of anxiety is an important aspect of performance. Whether it is during the tense moments of a championship game or amidst that dreaded History exam, anxiety affects our performance via changes in the body, which can be identified by certain indicators. One misconception though with performing under pressure is that stress always has a negative connotation. Many times, "the stress of competition may cause a negative anxiety in one performer but positive excitement in another".

When the body is placed under any kind of stress it alters its hormone balance. Not only adrenaline, but substances like testosterone, human growth hormone, the glucocorticoids and mineral corticoids show an increased output, while the production of others falls. It doesn't matter what the stress is - it may be problems of moving house, working for exams, playing too many games of football, or simply worrying about something. Up to a certain point stress is beneficial. We perform with greater energy and increased awareness. However, if the stress increases still further, the output of anti-stress hormones will eventually start to fall. This has an effect on the entire *metabolism*, including the rate at which our cells grow and are repaired as well as the production of the cells in the immune system.

We've all been there – the referee makes an unfavorable call; our opponent is faster than us, our pitching is off; the ground is wet, but what separates elite athletes from mediocre athletes is the ability to perform at a higher level despite the obstacles and adversity they may face. There are a million excuses for not performing your best during a competition, but professional athletes make no excuses. Simply put, if we want to become a professional, we'll need to learn how to deal with stress and pressure effectively.

TYPES OF STRESS

1. Acute Stress

Acute stress is our body's immediate reaction to a new challenge, event, or demand -- the fight or flight response. As the pressures of a near-miss automobile accident, an argument with a family member or a costly mistake at work sink in, our body turns on this biological response. Acute stress isn't always caused by negative stress; it's also the experience you have when riding a roller coaster or having a person jump out at you in a haunted house. Isolated episodes of acute stress should not have any lingering health effects. In fact,

they might actually be healthy for us -- as these stressful situations give our body and brain practice in developing the best response to future stressful situations.

Severe acute stress such as stress suffered as the victim of a crime or life-threatening situation can lead to mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder or acute stress disorder.

2. *Chronic Stress*

If acute stress isn't resolved and begins to increase or lasts for long periods of time, it becomes chronic stress. Chronic stress can be detrimental to your health, as it can contribute to several serious diseases or health risks, such as heart disease, cancer, lung disease, accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide.

THE TOTAL STRESS LOAD

The concept we have to bear in mind is the Total Stress Load. For the athlete the formula is: Lifestyle Stress + Emotional Stress + Training Stress + Competition Stress = Total Stress Load.

Lifestyle stress

The sportsman needs an economically stable base. He should not be adding to his stress by worrying about mounting debts. Thus a part-time job which pays enough for basic living but allows time for training is better than a well-paid but demanding job - and better than having no job at all and growing financial worries. Other factors such as where you live and how much travelling you have to do must also be considered.

Emotional stress

This is something we can rarely *control*, but we can adjust other aspects of our lives so as to diminish the total stress load. During times of great stress, one should use training as a form of therapy. One should avoid serious competition when under great stress, though non-serious competition is fine.



Training stress

Training must be progressive, and very gradually progressive at that. The increase in volume and the introduction of new training methods must all be done gradually, with one phase merging into the next. There must be regular pauses to make sure that the body can adapt to the extra load before increasing it further. Each hard session must be followed with *recovery* time before the next one is attempted. It is a mistake to try to improve quality and quantity at the same time. Train first for the distance, and then improve the quality.

Competition stress

Since competition is at the heart of sport, one would never say 'avoid competition', but I would say 'select competition', and the selection must take into account the other stresses in your life. One can train to cope with competition stress and the thinking athlete - or the thinking coach - will plan out a competitive series in which the challenge gradually increases. As each challenge is successfully met, the athlete's confidence grows, until he is ready for the highest level. One must realize that going into this level carries with it the strong possibility of failure - something which the up-and-coming young athlete may never have met. Being able to handle failure and come back again is the most valuable lesson sport can teach you.

Everyday stress

On a more ordinary level, one can use the concept of 'total stress load' to control one's day-to-day health and fitness. There are a few simple guidelines.

1. When lifestyle stress or emotional stress increase, competition stress should be avoided, and training should take the form of therapy - hard or easy, according to how we feel.
2. However great the pressures on us, some time should be set aside every day for physical exercise. Thirty minutes a day, five days a week, is the minimum.
3. Even when not taking part in sport, we should monitor our self as though we were an athlete in training. our eating and sleeping should be as regular as possible. A daily check on our resting pulse and a weekly check on our weight will tell us if anything is going wrong.
4. It is good to be an athlete when you are 30, but when you are 50 it is essential.

MANY WAYS TO MANAGE STRESS

Easy ways to reduce the stress in our life

Stress is a normal part of life and usually comes from everyday occurrences. Here are some ways you can deal with everyday sources of stress.

- 1. Eliminate as many sources of stress as you can.** For example, if crowds bother you, go to the supermarket when you know the lines won't be too long. Try renting videotapes rather than going to crowded movie theaters. Clear up the clutter in your life by giving away or throwing away the things that get in your way. A garage sale is one effective way to do this.
- 2. If you are always running late, sit down with a pencil and paper and see how you are actually allotting your time.** Say it takes you 40 minutes to get to work. Are you leaving your house on time? You may be able to solve your problem (and de-stress your life a bit) just by being realistic. If you can't find the time for all the activities that are important to you, maybe you are trying to do too much. Again, make a list of what you do during the day and how much each activity takes. Then cut back.
- 3. Avoid predictably stressful situations.** If a certain sport or game makes you tense (whether it's tennis or bridge), decline the invitation to play. After all, the point of these activities is to have a good time. If you know you won't, there's no reason to play.
- 4. If you can't remove the stress, remove yourself.** Slip away once in a while for some private time. These quiet moments may give you a fresh perspective on your problems. Avoid stressful people. For example, if you don't get along with your father-in-law but you don't want to make an issue of it, invite other in-laws at the same time you invite him. Having other people around will absorb some of the pressure you would normally feel.
- 5. Competing with others, whether in accomplishments, appearance, or possessions, is an avoidable source of stress.** You might know people who do all they can to provoke envy in others. While it may seem easy to say you should be satisfied with what you have, it's the truth. Stress from this kind of jealousy is self-inflicted.
- 6. Laborsaving devices, such as cellular phones or computer hookups, often encourage us to cram too many activities into each day.** Before you buy new equipment, be sure that it will really improve your life. Be aware that taking care of equipment and getting it repaired can be stressful.
- 7. Try doing only one thing at a time.** For example, when you're riding your exercise bike, you don't have to listen to the radio or watch television.
- 8. Remember, sometimes it's okay to do nothing.**

9. If you suffer from insomnia, headaches, recurring colds, or stomach upsets, consider whether stress is part of the problem. Being chronically angry, frustrated, or apprehensive can deplete your physical resources.

10. If you feel stress (or anything else) is getting the better of you, seek professional help — a doctor or therapist. Early signs of excess stress are loss of a sense of well-being and reluctance to get up in the morning to face another day.

11) Sleep: It seems obvious that a good night of rest can do wonders for your body, but you'd be surprised how many teenagers sleep just four or five hours a night.

It's difficult to manage work, school, sports and a social life, so many student-athletes compensate by losing out on key hours of sleep. Teenagers, especially active student-athletes, should get at least nine hours of sleep each night.

12) Don't Sweat The Small Stuff: Remember that the sport you are playing is "just a game."

It's easy to get caught up in sports and sweat the small stuff in an effort to impress parents or to gain a scholarship, but stress will only work to decrease your overall performance on the field. Have fun out there, remember it's just a game and your game won't suffer because of it.

13) Stay Open to Positive Feedback: Remember that your coaches and parents are on your side. When they criticize your performance, they are likely just trying to help you perform better on the field and provide some positive feedback.

14) Play Fewer Sports: Some student-athletes can handle the year-round grind of playing three sports, but they are a rare breed. Playing a sport in the fall, spring and winter means committing to practices and games five to six days a week for the entire school year.

That schedule can be extremely difficult to manage, and sometimes can lead to burnout. Sticking to one or two of your favorite sports, rather than the full work load of three, may be the best option.

15) Start A Stress Journal: If you're starting to feel burnt out on sports, you should start a journal that can help you identify the major stressors in the game and how you are dealing with them. A stress journal is kind of like a personal counseling session, and will help you avoid "burnout" from sports.

CONCLUSION

A certain level of stress is needed for optimal performance. Too little stress expresses itself in feelings of boredom and not being challenged. "What is becoming increasingly clear... that competitive stress does not necessarily impair performance and can in certain circumstances enhance it". At an optimum level of stress one gets the benefits of alertness and activation that improves performance. Even while making such statements; it is important to realize that there is currently no conclusive evidence except for the fact that stress and anxiety do have an influence in performance.

The fit athlete should be able to withstand stress better than the ordinary person because he or she is trained to perform well under pressure. However, if the athlete is training too hard or competing too much, a slight increase in the total stress can push them over the top. It is a sad fact that fitness is not the same as health; the highly tuned athlete may be less healthy than the club athlete who maintains a high degree of fitness without going over his physical limits.

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