



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### MANAGING STRESS IN NURSING PROFESSION

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#### ABSTRACT

Nursing is a stressful profession with long working hours, ethical dilemmas, and pressure of having responsibility for patients' life support care. Stress causes significant physical, mental, cognitive, behavioral, professional, social and economic impact on person's under stress for long time. Current review focuses on stress in nursing profession and strategies that are found effective in coping against the stress. Awareness regarding stress and its management is important for nurses so that they can take preventive corrective measure as stress in nursing profession is inevitable. Nurses must recognize the sign and symptoms of stress to aid personal coping, as well as to design stress management interventions for their clients and families.

##### Key words:

Stress,  
Nursing,  
Coping.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nursing is an inherently stressful profession with long working hours, ethical dilemmas, difficult patients and conflicting demands (McGowan, 2001). The current turbulent environment in the health care field requires nurses and organizations to reexamine their practices. Professionally, in true sense the nurses are on 24-hour duty. It is reported that over one-third of full-time nurses worked 60 or more hours a week in 2004 (Salmond, 1996). The physical and psychological demands of the profession often make nurses more vulnerable to high levels of stress (Salmond, 1996). This stress can result in increased errors while at work such as in prescription, medication error, limited team spirit, dissatisfaction of patient, administration and nurses themselves, increasing complaints, sickness absence etc (Niaz, 2003). Stress causes significant changes in body and also affects emotions. Common physical symptoms of stress include fast heartbeat, headache, stiff neck, back pain, sweating, sweaty palms, upset stomach, nausea and diarrhea. Emotional symptoms in response to stress include feelings of anger, frustration, lack of concentration, worrying, easily getting irritated and yelling at others without any significant reason.

Data reports that 75-90% of adults visit to primary care physicians are for stress related problems. Studies show that stress at work results sleep problems and mental health impairment (Benoliel et al., 1990). National Health Interview survey has reported that 75% of the general population experiences at least "some stress (<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/management/introduction-to-stress-management.php?vref=1>)". Women who work full-time and have children under the age of 13 report the greatest stress worldwide (<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/management/introduction-to-stress-management.php?vref=1>). Nurses experiencing the highest stress related to the pressure of having responsibility for patients' life support care (Fagin et al., 1996).

**Stressors:** Any thing that irritates and makes uncomfortable is a stressor which could be a stimulus, thought or event. Broadly, stressors are classified in to the following categories:

- **Internal stressor:** Internal stressor could be physiological, psychological and developmental changes.
- **External stressor:** It could be pollution, traffic jam, disasters, life crises, life changes, and daily hassles or noise.

- **Hidden stressor:** Stressors that are unable to identify by self or other are called hidden stressor.
- **Obvious stressor:** these are not hidden but obvious such experiencing a stress before examination.
- **Automatic stressor:** These are the stressor against body itself reacts to. A person might be aware or not about them.

### Seven major stressor/events

**Stress Cycle:** Chronic presence of stressors may result in various physical, psychological, behavioral cognitive and psychomotor adverse effects. At this point stress cycle begins and if person adapt effectively to the environmental stressors wellness cycle starts and if person fails to cope effectively with exiting stressors it will begin the distress cycle.

### Positive and negative effects of stress

**Positive effects of stress: It is also known as eustress (Selye, 1950).** It is positive stress which is valuable under certain circumstances, e.g. sports, making speeches and taking examinations. The stress response puts people on their mettle, increase alertness, improves sight, strengthens muscles and reduces reaction times (Bower, 2004).

**Negative effects of stress:** It is also known as **Distress** (Selye). The negative effects of stress show particularly when a person allows stress to remain in the body, usually when there is no chance to take the necessary steps to release a stress response that is too strong or lasts too long.

### Early manifestation of stress (warning signs)

- |                          |                            |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| • Menstrual problems     | • Tired but can't sleep    |
| • Headaches, Nail biting | • difficulties             |
| • Grinding teeth         | • Sudden weight loss       |
| • Low /High blood sugar  | • Low /High blood pressure |
| • Forgetfulness          | • Lack of coordination     |
| • Lower back pain        | • Muscle aches             |
| • Loss of appetite       | • Hair loss                |
| • Need more sleep        | • Chest pain               |

### Other and late manifestation of stress

#### Models of stress

**General Adaptation Syndrome:** Hans Selye (1936) termed the body's response to stressors as general adaptation syndrome (GAS). Selye researched the effects of stress on rats and other animals by exposing them to unpleasant or harmful stimuli and found that all animals display a similar sequence of reactions, manifesting in three distinct stages.

- **Alarm stage:** When body identifies the threat from stressors, it enters in alarm stage in which adrenaline is produced to causes fight-or-flight response.
- **Resistance stage:** body tries to adapt with persistent stressor and its resources are gradually depleted..
- **Exhaustion stage:** All the body's resources are eventually depleted and Autonomic nervous system symptoms responses such as sweating, raised heart rate etc may be manifested. If this stage is remained for longer durations, negative effect of stress can be seen on various dimensions of health and wellness.

**Stress Vulnerability Model (Zubin, 1977):** Zubin and Spring (1977) proposed that an individual has unique strengths and vulnerabilities for dealing with stress.

In the diagram above, person "a" has a very low vulnerability and consequently can withstand a huge amount of stress. Person "b" in the diagram has a higher vulnerability, for example due to genetic predisposition. Person "c" also has genetic loading but also suffered the loss of mother before the age of 11 and was traumatically abused. Therefore persons "a" and "b" take more stress to become "ill".

**Transactional model:** Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested that interpretation of stress is based on transaction between people and their external environment and stress can occur when "pressure (demands) exceeds one's perceived ability to cope"

**Health realization/innate health model** (Sedgeman, 2005). This model is based on the idea that person thoughts process (insecurity and negativity) rather than presence of stressor determines occurrence of stress and recognizing the nature of thoughts may help the person in reducing stress.

**Nursing theory and role of stress:** There are theories related to stress response, proposed by nurses as stress plays a central role in vulnerability to disease, symptoms of stress often require nursing interventions.

**Neuman's system model (Neuman, 1995):** Neuman system model is based on the concepts of stress and reaction to stress that views nursing as being responsible for developing interventions to prevent or reduce stressor on the client or to make them more bearable for the client. As Neuman model is a system model, it is applied to not only to understand client's individual responses to stressors but families and communities responses as well. This model has three types of stressors; intra, inter and extra personal. Neuman's model of nursing views the person, family and community as constantly changing in response to the environment and stressors.

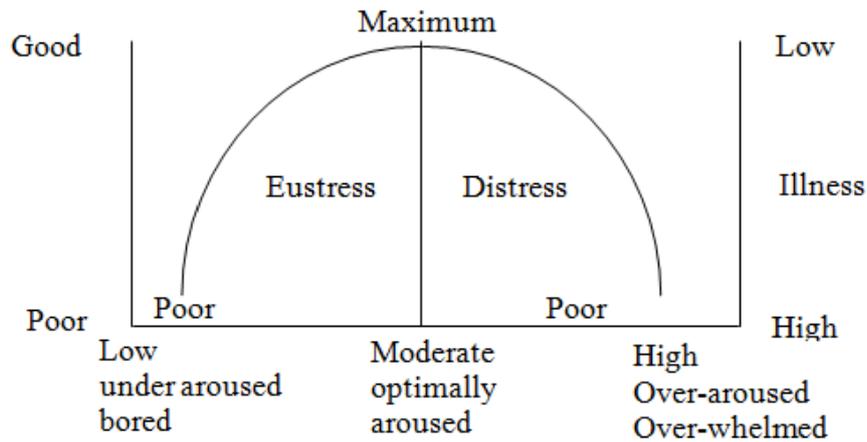
**Pender's health promotion model (Pender, 2002):** This model proposes that health promotion is directed towards increasing the level of well-being of an individual or group. Pender consider stress reduction strategies important to reduce threats to well being, to help people to fulfill their potential and to shape and maintain health behaviors.

**Stress and Coping:** Coping is the person's efforts to manage psychological stress (Niaz, 2003). Effectiveness of coping strategies depends on the individual needs. For this reason, no single coping strategy works for every one and for every stress. In stressful situations, people may use a combination of various coping strategies (mechanism) and coping resources. Lazarus suggest that not only does the type of stress make a difference, but that people's goals, their belief about themselves and the world, and personal resources determine how they cope with stress.

**Coping Resources:** These are options that help determine what can be done, as well as what is at stake. Coping resources include intelligence, economic assets, abilities and skills, defensive technique, social support, motivation, health and energy, spiritual support, positive belief, problem solving skills, physical well being.

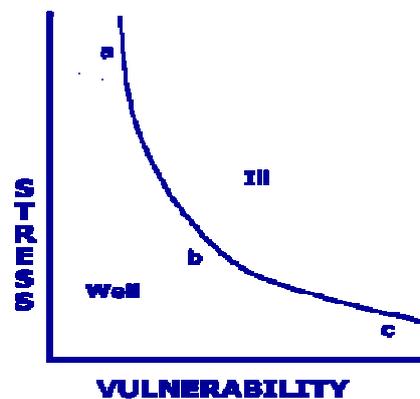
**Seven Major Stressor/Events**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>In Nursing (Cox et al., 1996)</b></li> <li>• Dealing with death and dying</li> <li>• Criticism by physicians</li> <li>• Dealing with emotional needs of patients and their families</li> <li>• Lack of staff support</li> <li>• Workload</li> <li>• Uncertainty of treatment plans</li> <li>• Conflict with colleagues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>In General (Townsend, 2003)</b></li> <li>• Death of a close family member- 100 points</li> <li>• Jail term- 80 points</li> <li>• Final year or first year in college- 63 points</li> <li>• Pregnancy (to you or caused by you)-60 points</li> <li>• Severe personal illness or injury- 53 points</li> <li>• Marriage- 50 points</li> <li>• Any interpersonal problems - 45 points</li> </ul>
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**Other and late manifestation of stress**

Behavioral	Sensation	Emotional
Substance dependence	Heart beat rate	Anxiety
Sleep problems	Headaches	Guilt
Increased smoking	Nausea	Embarrassment
Restlessness	Aches and pain	Depression
Eating problems	Tremors	Hurt
Irritation	Fainting	Jealousy
Speech problems	Numbness	Feel like dying
Accident prone	Dry mouth	Crying frequently
Eat, talk, walk faster	Stomach cramps	Moody
Unkempt and untidy	Sweaty	Emptiness
Low productivity	Indigestion	Aggression
Bad time management	Frequent micturition	Worthlessness
Cognitive	Biological	Interpersonal
I must do well	Digestion problems	Cannot keep relationships
Life should not be like this	Blood pressure	Suspicious
I must have what I want	Heart problems	Gossip
This is terrible	Tiredness	Competitive
I cannot take this any longer	Allergies	Fearful and unassertive
Everyone should like me	Low immunity	Aggressive
I have been betrayed	Decreased sexual activity	Withdrawn



These are:

**Coping Mechanism (Stuart, 2005):** These are the psychological adaptive behavior against stress. These can be constructive or destructive if not used properly.

- **Problem focused coping mechanism-** Involves tasks and direct efforts to cope with the threat itself.

Examples include negotiation, confrontation and seeking advice.

- **Cognitively focused coping mechanism-** cognitive mechanisms such as positive comparison, selective ignorance and devaluation of the desired objects etc are used control the meaning of the problem and thus neutralize its effect.
- **Emotion focused coping mechanism (ego defense mechanism) -** Ego defense mechanism, first described by Sigmund Freud, are unconscious behaviors that offers psychological protection from stressful event. They are used by everyone and help protect against feeling of worthlessness and anxiety. Examples include use of ego defense mechanism such as denial, suppression, compensation, displacement and projection etc.

**Interventions:** Stress management strategies can be done at health promotion level, acute care level and restorative and continuing care level.

#### Health promotion level

- **Avoid unnecessary stress-** You can avoid unnecessary stress form life by:
    - **Learn how to say “no”-** Know your limits and stick to them. In either personal or professional life, refuse to accept additional responsibilities if cause stress to you.
    - **Avoid people or situation that stress you out –** If some person consistently causes stress in your life limit the time you spend with that person or end the relationship entirely. If some patient who annoys you or causes emotional burnout to you , talk to your supervisor if it is possible some other staff can take care for that patient for some time.
    - **Take control of your environment –** If accident news or some social media messages makes you anxious, turn the TV off and delete some useless messages without reading them. Even you can choose not to be member of the social media sites that are not necessary to you. If waiting in the long lines stresses you, try to take help of technology for online payments of bills etc.
    - **Handle the issue at hand first-** analyze your daily task sand make a list of task according to “should” or “must, and urgent.” You can delay or completely drop tasks that aren’t necessary at the movement as per your needs so that incomplete urgent task can’t add further stress.
    - **Anger management-** Practice basic techniques when you have a problem in controlling your anger Talk to someone about what makes you angry. Think of the different ways the irritating issue can be seen. Do some physical exercise daily, it will relax your mind. If you find yourself getting angry, stop and take a few deep breathes to calm yourself.
  - **Alter the situation-** If you can’t avoid a stressful situation or person, try to alter it. You can alter the situation by:
    - **Express your feelings-** don’t suppress your feelings and communicate your concerns in an open and respectful way so that resentment doesn’t build up.
  - **Be more assertive-** be assertive not passive in communicating and don’t accept anything that will further cause you stress.
  - **Time management-** plan ahead for the thing and manage time because pressure of deadline makes it had to focus and concentrate if you rush to finish your work at eleventh hour.
  - **Adapt to the stressor-** every time it’s not possible to avoid or change the situation or event that causes stress and it is specifically true with nursing profession. So try to adapt by changing your expectations and attitude.
    - **Look at the positive side-** stressor are not always negative many times it our attitude and overreaction that make them have negative impact on us. Try to view stressful situations from a positive angle. Rather than thinking about burden of additional work, take it as an opportunity to learn, excel and prove yourself. Also look at the issues and decide is it really worth getting upset over? If it’s not worth of upsetting, than focus your attention to other more important aspects of life.
    - **Adjust your standards-** Perfectionism is a major source of avoidable stress. So be happy only with reasonable standards for yourself and others. Every activity of life doesn’t need perfection and its okay to be “good enough” in most of activities that are not critical.
    - **Accept the things that can’t be changed-** Some stressor are not under our control such as death, miscarries, divorce, any serious illness so try to cope by accept things as they are.
    - **Don’t try to control other-** we can’t control behaviour of other people but we can try to focus on our reaction to their behaviour and thus can cope with resulting stress.
    - **Look for the upside-** try to learn from past mistakes as it’s a popular saying that “What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.” Take the challenges as opportunity for personal and professional growth.
    - **Learn to forgive-** no one is perfect and human being makes mistake. Learn to forgive self as well as others and move on it make us free from negative energy and resentment.
  - **Make time for fun and relaxation-** nurturing yourself will give the strength to cope up with inevitable stressors. following are some of the known ways to relax
 

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Go for a walk.</li> <li>• Spend time in nature.</li> <li>• Call a good friend.</li> <li>• Sweat out tension with a good workout.</li> <li>• Take a long bath.</li> <li>• Light scented candles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play with a pet.</li> <li>• Work in your garden.</li> <li>• Get a massage.</li> <li>• Curl up with a good book.</li> <li>• Listen to music.</li> <li>• Watch a comedy</li> </ul>
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- Nurture yourself; it’s not privilege but the necessity. Don’t forget to take care of your own health and needs.
- **Make time for leisure:** make a routine for activities that are enjoyable, such as listening music, dancing, biking, swimming etc.
  - **Keep your sense of humor (Laughter therapy)-** laughter a great medicine. Have the ability to laugh at yourself. It will relax muscles and relieve the stress. It also increases our ability to fight with future stressors.

- **Massage-** one study has reported that psychological stress levels of the nurses got reduced after the 15 minute weekly massage.
- **Toe tensing-** First you have to lie on your back and close your eyes. Then, you have to sense your toes and pull ten of them towards your face. Then you count to ten slowly. Now release ten toes by counting to ten slowly. You have to continue this cycle for ten or more than ten times. This gives you relaxation from tensions.
- **Deep Breathing and progressive muscle relaxation:** - These are the relaxation techniques on e can easily practice at anywhere. Deep breathing is simple, effective and requires only few minutes.
- **Yoga and Meditation- Yoga-** Yoga is the cessation of movements in consciousness. Yoga offers gentle *asanas*, relaxation, *pranayama*, *meditation*, *shat kriyas* and hand *mudras*. Meditation helps calm mind, teach relax at will and giving a quick mental vacation whenever one need. Daily practice of three or four yoga poses help ease knotted muscles. It also keeps interest high and to strengthen different parts of body.
- **Adopt a healthy lifestyle- healthy** and well organized life style provides us physical and mental strength to fight against the stressful events across life. Healthy life style includes:
- **Exercise regularly-** Physical activity at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week is recommended for physical health and it is also effective to combat stress.
- **Eat a healthy diet-** make your body strong to fight with stress take regular and well balanced diet. Never skip breakfast though how tight your schedule is. Also decrease junk foods, coffee, soft drinks, chocolate, and sugar snacks in diet.
- **Avoid substance use-** Don't try to escape from stress it will follow you. Self-medicating with alcohol or drugs may provide temporary relief only but in long run it will only cause you harm. Rather explore other measure to such as taking help from those who are willing.
- **Take adequate sleep-** Lack of good sleep may results in stress or make you susceptible for stress. Practice basic technique of sleep and sleep hygiene when you have a problem in falling asleep at night.

#### Other stress management techniques (Russler, 1991)

#### Other stress management techniques are following:

- |                        |                                  |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Autogenic training  | 8. Reflexology- facial and foot  |
| 2. Cognitive therapy   | 9. Kinesiology                   |
| 3. Conflict resolution | 10. Hydrotherapy                 |
| 4. Naturopathy         | 11. Osteopathy                   |
| 5. Aromatherapy        | 12. Bach Flower Remedies         |
| 6. Music Therapy       | 13. Biofeedback                  |
| 7. Imagery             | 14. Co-Counseling and Debriefing |

#### Conclusion

Knowledge about stress is important as health care professionals are affected by stressful events that occur in the course of clinical practice. By awareness regarding stress and its management, nurses will be able to take preventive corrective measure as stress in nursing profession is inevitable. Nurses must recognize the sign and symptoms of stress and be knowledgeable about stress management techniques to aid

personal coping, as well as to design stress management interventions for their clients and families.

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