
Crises and Dilemmas in Adolescence – Need for Stress Management

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Abstract: *Stress is an all-pervading phenomenon in life. It is the product of dynamic interaction of the individual with the environment and is 'triggered' by the perception of threat or challenge. It is necessary and useful for personality growth when in optimum quantity. This level, if exceeded, the costs are experienced in the form of health problems and illnesses. Adolescence has been described as a period of turmoil, anxiety, storm and stress. It is also a transition to independence from childhood to adulthood. It is a period when rapid physiological changes and demands for new social roles take place. The adolescents, due to these changes often face a number of crises and dilemmas. It is marked by adolescent growth spurt and the onset of puberty. The relatively sudden encountering of new ideas, changed concepts as well as the sudden responsibility for self-determination and self-sufficiency force a whole array of adjustments upon the comparatively inexperienced young person and generate stress and anxiety. Appropriate stress management techniques can play an important role in helping adolescents deal with day-today stress. The present study is an attempt to provide a practical and a positive approach for supporting adolescents experiencing academic and stress at home. It has been designed to evaluate the effectiveness of targeting individual lifestyle and adaptive coping strategies to reduce stress and improve health. The interventions would empower the adolescents to adopt coping patterns to combat stress.*

Key Words: *Adolescence, stress, coping, management, techniques.*

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical time to lay the foundation for healthy transitions into adulthood. It is a transitional stage of physical and mental human development that occurs between childhood and adulthood. This transition involves biological, social, and psychological changes, though the biological or physiological ones are the easiest to measure objectively.

The Psychologists are not in agreement as to the nature of adolescence. This period is presumed to be a psychologically stressful and a critical period. According to one viewpoint, essentially children are not given gradually graded opportunities for maturing experiences compatible with intellectual development and thus they experience a sudden widening of their world during their teens. This relatively sudden encountering of new ideas, new concepts, new values, new types of people as well as the relatively sudden responsibility for self-determination and self-sufficiency force a whole array of adjustments upon the comparatively inexperienced young person and generate much apprehensiveness and anxiety. It is the period when the child moves from dependency to autonomy. It is a period demanding significant adjustment to the physical and social changes which distinguish childhood behaviour from adult behaviour. The stage of puberty brings in a number of physical and physiological changes. The period of Adolescence is filled with intellectual and emotional changes in addition to other major biological and physical changes. It is a time of discovery of self and one's relationship to the world around.

Characteristics of Adolescence:

- ❖ Accelerated physical growth and development of reproductive organs.
- ❖ Changes in the functioning of neuro-endocrine system.
- ❖ Frequent changes in mood and emotional turbulence due to the increased production of hormones.
- ❖ Development of moral reasoning regardless of their culture and religious background.

The onset of puberty varies from person to person. The genetic factors interact with socio-economic status, health, nutrition and emotional level to shape the pattern of growth and development during adolescence. On an average a girl reaches her puberty at the age of 13 and boys in approximately one year later that is 14 years of age. The period of adolescence not only brings physical change but psychological changes that make the child a qualitatively different person. These changes affect the personality and adjustment in later life.

Psychosocial Development

Adolescence is similar to a prism with its many facets. Some see the adolescent as a perpetual melancholic, the sentimental, the rebellious, the despotic and the dreamer. A famous Psychologist once referred to the personality of the adolescent as a rendezvous of many different personalities from which it is difficult to pick out the common factor. The scientists from the field of Psychology have often wondered whether early or late puberty has any psychological consequences. The adolescent is exposed to new social situations, patterns of behaviour and societal expectations which bring a sense of insecurity. It has been found that there is increase in the incidence of depression. The adolescents show the tendency of impulsive urge to take immediate action which often leads to risk taking behaviour. In general, early maturing boys tend to be more confident and popular. Their increase in the body size and strength can be an advantage in boy's peer groups where sports and physical prowess is often a mark of status. Early maturing girls on the other hand, might feel awkward.

These issues bring about such changes in youth as spending more time with their friends than with their family, keeping a diary, locking up their rooms, become involved in multiple hobbies, become more argumentative, would not want to be seen with their parents in public etc. As a result of these changes which the teen is undergoing, they become vulnerable to many forms of trouble. As adolescents try new behaviors, they become vulnerable to injury, legal consequences, and sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, traumatic injuries, particularly from car and motorcycle accidents, etc.

The three important social groups for an adolescent are his family, peer group and the school environment. In the early adolescence, he starts initiating independence from the family and has a wish for privacy. There may be a clash between the wish for their autonomy and parental authority. By and large, parent child relationships do seem to get a bit more distant and tense during adolescence. Indeed, it has been called a period of 'storm and stress'. It is characterized by mood swings and emotional outbursts due to re-eruption of sexual urges. But, often adolescents have good rapport with their parents and disagreements may be over minor matters such as time of coming home at night or clothes worn rather than major issues. As a result of these changes which the teen is undergoing, they become vulnerable to many forms of trouble. As adolescents try new behaviors, they become vulnerable to injury, legal consequences, and sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, traumatic injuries particularly from car and motorcycle accidents, etc.

Adolescence is a time for developing independence. Typically, adolescents exercise their independence by questioning their parents' rules, which at times leads to rule breaking. It is common for once loyal children to begin to grumble when asked to carry out some chores at home and to respond in harsh words when been rebuked by their parents. This is often a challenging time for most parents. Some parents and their adolescents clash over almost everything. The adolescents want to feel in control of their lives and parents want adolescents to know they still make the rules. Children occasionally engage in physical confrontation. However, during adolescence, the frequency and severity of violent interactions increase. Although episodes of violence at school are highly publicized, adolescents are much more likely to be involved with violence at home and outside school. Many factors, including developmental issues, gang membership, access to weapons, substance use, and poverty, contribute to an increased risk of violence for adolescents. Since the adolescents are much more independent and mobile than they were as children, they are often out of the direct physical control of adults. In these circumstances, adolescents' behavior is determined by their own moral and behavioral code. The parents guide rather than directly control the adolescents' actions. Adolescents who feel warmth and support from their parents are less likely to engage in risky behaviors. Authoritative parenting, as opposed to harsh or permissive parenting, is most likely to promote mature behaviors.

There are changes in self-image and a need to establish a separate identity. In middle adolescence, in the age group of 13-16 years, the school and the peer group attain more importance. Due to rapid physiological changes taking place in an adolescent, a consciousness and increased interest about one's own body develops. The body image can bring a sense of fun, pride, shyness or even unhappiness. Girls develop interpersonal skills more quickly, are loyal and committed to their friends. Physical maturation can influence school performance and aspirations for better achievement because the physical effects of pubertal development become incorporated into the self image. Since the peer group is thought to play a larger role in adolescence than in the early childhood, this might increase conflict with the parents. Adolescents often associate in large gangs or 'crowds'. The conformity of dress and interests is an important mark of belonging to a particular group. In some instances, peer pressure or the desire to belong to a particular group may lead to conflicts with parents over such matters as academic work, dress, style or sexual behaviour. The more serious problems include drug addiction, alcoholism, smoking, truancy, sexual obsessions, etc. Some reasons for addiction are frustration, depression, feeling of independence, false beliefs of enhanced physical, mental or intellectual performance. They may not appear in everybody. There are variations in the experience of these problems across people.

Substance abuse is a common trigger of behavioral problems and often requires specific therapy. Behavioral problems may be the first sign of depression or other mental health disorders. Such disorders typically require treatment with drugs as well as counseling. Stress and depression are serious problems for many teenagers. Stress is characterized by feelings of tension, frustration, worry, sadness and withdrawal that commonly last from a few hours to a few days. Depression is both more severe and longer lasting. It is characterized by more extreme feelings of hopelessness, sadness, isolation, worry, withdrawal and worthlessness that last for two weeks or more. Young people become stressed for many reasons. The most common of these are Break up with boy/girl friend, increased arguments with parents, trouble with brother or sister, increased arguments between parents, change in parents' financial status, serious illness or injury of family member and trouble with classmates. In addition, children from single parents or broken homes are subjected to a near harrowing experience which brings about stress and depression. Ultimately, most young people will develop and assume the responsibility for their own protection and peace of mind. But during the years of learning and practice, parents, teachers and helping adults need to be aware of the signs and patterns that signal danger. Awareness of adolescent stress and depression opens the door for adults to begin constructive interventions and stimulate emotional development.

The school constitutes a large part of an adolescent's existence. Difficulties in almost any area of life are often seen as school problems. The school problems during the adolescent years may be the result of rebellion and a need for independence. Less commonly, they may be caused by mental health disorders, such as anxiety or depression. Substance use, abuse, and family conflict also are common contributors to school problems. Sometimes, inappropriate academic placement, particularly in adolescents with a learning disability or mild mental retardation that was not recognized early in life causes school problems.

Particular school problems include fear of going to school, truancy, dropping out, and academic underachievement. Problems that developed earlier in childhood, such as Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disorders, may continue to cause school problems for adolescents. The adolescent may develop physical symptoms, such as abdominal pain, or may simply refuse to go to school. School personnel and family members should identify the reason, if any, for the fear and encourage the adolescent to attend school.

Peer pressure is a term describing the pressure exerted by a peer group in encouraging a person to change their attitude, behavior or morals, to conform to the group's actions, fashion sense, taste in music and television, or outlook on life. Peer pressure can also cause people to do things they wouldn't normally do, e.g. take drugs, smoke etc.

Peers influence each others' lives life, even if we do not realize it, just by spending time with each other. It is only human nature to listen to and learn from other people in their age group. While peers can be of positive influence in many ways, they could also be very negative and in fact are responsible for a great deal of the problems teens experience. Some adolescents give in to peer pressure because they want to be liked, to fit in,

or because they worry that other kids may make fun of them if they don't go along with the group. Others may go along because they are curious to try something new that others are doing. The time to become watchful is when emotional upsets come frequently, shake the adolescents severely and fail to wear off after a while. The adults in the family could guide them in using effective coping and stress management techniques like:

-) **Talk it out:** They can confide their worries to some level-headed person whom they can trust. Talking things out helps to relieve strain and to see the worry in a clearer light and see what one can do about it.
-) **Understanding:** One of most important ways to connect with the adolescents is to try and understand that they are undergoing physical, psychological and social changes.
-) **Escape for a while:** The adolescent should be advised to escape from a painful problem for a while like to lose herself in a movie or a book or a game. Making oneself 'stand and suffer' is a form of punishment, not a way to solve a problem. But one has to be prepared to come back and deal with their difficulty when they are more composed, in a better condition emotionally and intellectually.
-) **Work off anger:** If the adolescents find themselves using anger as a general pattern of behaviour, they must remember that anger will generally make them feeling foolish and sorry in the end. Throwing the anger out of their system will leave them feeling much better and making them mentally prepared to handle their problems intelligently.
-) **Give in occasionally:** They must stand on their ground on what they believe is right, but do it calmly and make allowance for the fact that they could turn out to be wrong. Do give in once in a while. If they do this, they will usually find that others will yield, too. The result will be relief from tension, the achievement of a practical solution, together with a feeling of satisfaction.
-) **Do something for others:** If they worry about themselves all the time, they should try doing something for others. This will take the steam out of their worries and even better; give them a warm feeling of having done well.
-) **Shun the Superman urge:** Some adolescents get into a state of anxiety because they think they are not achieving as much as they should. They try for perfection in everything. This ideal is an invitation to failure. They must decide which things they do well, and then put their major effort into them. They are likely to be things that will give them most satisfaction.
-) **Go easy with criticism:** Some of the teenagers expect too much of others, then feel let down, disappointed, frustrated when another person does not measure up. Instead of being critical of another person's behaviour, search out his/her good points and help in their development.
-) **Leisure:** Leisure is neither laziness nor waste of time. It may be fruitfully utilized in the company of the family members, in reading, listening to music, indulging in one's hobbies or being involved in fun filled activities.
-) **Exercise:** Regular exercise increases energy levels and reduces stress. One must do exercise at least thrice a week. A nice brisk walk can keep one fit and mind fresh to deal with any situation. Yoga can be a great stress reliever. It helps relax the mind and calm the muscles, toning them at the same time.
-) **Be an optimist:** Most of the worries are based on future prospects. They revolve around things which never happen. The adolescents should be counseled to think positive.
-) **Eat a diet which will decrease stress:** Foods rich in vitamins and minerals like fruits, green vegetables, milk & milk products act as stress busters. Avoid oily, fried and spicy foods.
-) **Be realistic:** The adolescents must keep the expectations of the family members reasonable. Everybody has strengths and weaknesses. One cannot be perfect in everything and there are limitations. They should take up as much work as they can do and firmly turn down all other requests.
-) **Increased Socialising:** It is a well-known fact that sharing with near and dear ones in whom one can confide and share helps in reducing stress. Expanding one's social support network, such as friends, family

members and a conscious effort to increase sharing with them helps in reducing stress. Most of the adolescents these days have a good network of friends.

-) They should take deep breaths, accompanied by thinking or saying aloud, 'I can handle this'.
-) To set small goals and break tasks into smaller, manageable chunks
-) Get proper sleep for at least 7-8 hours.

There is basic philosophy fundamental to good emotional health which is the philosophy of faith: faith in the ability of themselves and others to improve and grow; faith in the desire and capacity of human beings to work out problems co-operatively; faith in spiritual and moral values. This faith will carry one through stress that might otherwise shatter them.

How to stand up under Stress

All the disturbed feelings like anger, hostility, fear, anxiety, insecurity are caused by their own responses, not by any external stimuli. If the adolescents learn to control these responses, they will be building their own 'psychic screen'. But sometimes, that is not possible and one starts to cry. In fact, it is good to have a cry once in a while. Crying depressurizes us emotionally and thus relieves stresses that may affect even our bodies. Civilized living requires that on many occasions the adolescents exercise strong control on themselves. Social support has been the most frequently studied psychosocial resource. It usually refers to the functions performed for the individual by significant others such as family members, friends and teachers. This will have a positive effect on the wellbeing of the teenagers. Recent studies have shown that among the chemical changes triggered by relaxation, there is an increase in the body's manufacture of certain mood altering chemicals known as neurotransmitters, which provide calmness to the body.

Practicing Good Management

At the school or college, poor self management, misplaced priorities and poor vision of the objectives bring down many adolescents. It is important for them to understand and utilize time-management techniques to help to cope with demanding and stressful situations. Some of the basic principles of time management are:

-) To prepare the daily list of activities/tasks to be performed.
-) To prioritize activities/tasks as per relative importance and time frame.
-) To have the knowledge of one's daily tasks and scheduling the most demanding tasks during that part of the day, when one is most productive and alert.
-) To keep some time for visualizing plans for implementation of the present system and to lessen the impact of such irritants which create work impediments.

The Path Forward

Adolescence is a preparatory phase for the adult life. It is formative period of both physical and psychological health. A healthy adolescence is very essential for a healthy adulthood. During this period the individual moves out of the family. He or she begins to identify and defines his or her position in relation to the outer world. He undergoes physiological and behavioral transformation and acquires higher levels of moral standing. Not all stress is detrimental, as it makes us more alert, energizes us and provides motivation to do better. Social support may act as a buffer against psychological stress and enhance immunity against diseases. Learning right coping techniques, planning short and long-term goals can go a long way in managing stress. This will help them in leading a happy life looking forward to a bright future.

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