



Stress in The Elderly

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Abstract

In Nigeria, and across the globe, human activities and relationships are becoming more complex by the day. These complexities could be attributed to several factors like advancement and innovations in technology, role expectations, economic deprivations, social conformity, occupational issues, unpleasant experiences, health concerns, interpersonal issues and so on. Indeed, the world is fast changing and in essence, any experience that induces change in a person's life has the potential to cause stress. Stress is basically a part of human experience, which must be accosted on a daily basis. Everybody, both the young and the elderly are exposed to factors and problems of living that can be stressful. Based on the above premise, this paper examined stress in the elderly, its causes and possible management strategies.

Key Words: *Stress; Coping; Stress response; Elderly*

Introduction

Within the confines of the academic circle and other less academically inclined environments, a lot has been said and written about stress. This burning issue has prompted researchers and scholars to engage in studies on stress across different populations. It is now common knowledge that life and its complexities are stressful and stress-inducing. It is also obvious that stress affect every group including the elderly, who are inevitably a part of this complex system of stress-inducing human environment. Indeed, the elderly face stress from various situations of the environment, which are different from those faced by other adults. Old age connotes change in a human life cycle. It is a period of transition from middle age. Essentially, old age could be adduced to be a change from better to worse, from highs to lows, from good health to poor health, and so on. The elderly, may face extended and critical health problem, may lose a spouse and feel lonely and alone, may have retired from active income generating employment and social involvement, hence is forced to reduce activity. All these could be stress-inducing. Further, the world is fast changing and any experience that necessitates meaningful change in a person's life has the potential to induce stress. However, change is part of human existence, so also is stress, which is ubiquitous. And as members of human race if may be well said that it is vital

component of the ecosystem. Based on the foregoing, this paper examines the issue of stress among the elderly, with the view to analyzing its causes and possible psychosocial management strategies..

The Concept of Stress

The concept of stress has been viewed and defined by scholars in various ways. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology (2006) stress refers to a physiological and physical strain or tension generated by physical, emotional, social, economic, or occupational circumstances, events or experiences that are difficult to manage or endure. Essentially, the above definition emphasized the fact that stress is a product of physical, social, economic or occupational circumstances, events or experiences. Accordingly, Selye (1979) construes stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it. In order to buttress his definition further, all demands on the body evoke generalized responses that prepare the body to fight some kind of problem. In essence, Selye's concept of stress is broader and subsumes any experience that brings about change in a person's life. Another scholar McEwen (2000) saw stress as an event or events that are interpreted as threatening to an individual and which elicit physiological and behavioural responses. A critical review of this definition shows that the definition highlights what an individual perceives as threatening. It indeed recognizes that some events might be stressful to one person and not to another. Lazarus (1977) also emphasized the fact that a given event has different meanings for different people depending on how they interpret the event and what they can do about it.

In the views of Taylor (1995) stress is the negative emotional and physiological process that occurs as individuals try to adjust to or deal with environmental circumstances that disrupt or threaten to disrupt, their daily functioning. In order words, stress involves a transaction between people and their environments. Essentially, environmental circumstances that bring about adjustments could be stressful and are called stressors.

Sources of Stress

Most stressors include both physical and psychological components, but for the purpose of this paper, we are going to focus on psychological stressors. Any event that forces one to change or adapt can be a psychological stressor. According to Brown and McGill (1989), even pleasant events, might qualify as stressful. This fact was also given impetus by Kanner, Coyne, Scafer and Lazarus (1981) when they observed that the effects of stress depend not only on the unpleasant events that one has to deal with but also the pleasant events that brighten the day and help to cancel out the unpleasant events. This view notwithstanding, it is usually



unpleasant circumstances that produce the most adverse psychological and physical effects (Bernstein and Nash, 1999). These circumstances may include but not limited to catastrophic events, life changes, and strains, chronic stressors and daily hassles (Gatchel, Baum & Krantz, 1989). Catastrophic events include sudden, unexpected, potentially life-threatening experiences or traumas, physical or sexual assault, military combat, natural disasters, explosions, plane crashes, and accidents. Life changes and strains involve issues like, divorce, illness in the family, difficulties at work, moving to a new place, including other circumstances, that create demands to which people must adjust (Price, 1992). Chronic stressors (that is, stressors that continue over a long period of time), include such circumstances as living near a noisy airport, being unable to earn a decent living because of adverse economic conditions, living in a high crime area, being a victim of discrimination, and even enduring years of academic pressure (Staples, 1996). Again, daily hassles, according to Sleek (1996) involve irritations, pressures and annoyances that may not constitute major stressors by themselves, but whose effect add up to become significant.

Causes of Stress Among The Elderly

Stress as has been learnt is the wear and tear on the body caused by constant adjustment to an individual's changing environment. As was explained earlier, anything that causes change in our life causes stress. Indeed, there are many changes going on in the lives of the elderly. This is because, psychological stress occur at every age.

Gerontology implies the study of aging (Coleman, 2006). It is derived from Greek word gerontos, meaning an old man and Logos meaning reason. Gerontologists opined that only 25 percent of the stresses of the elderly are medically induced. The remaining 75 percent is social, psychological and cultural. This view was supported by studies of intellectual capacities of aging individuals. It was observed that little overall decline takes place among the elderly. It is usually obvious that many fluid abilities (those requiring speed or rapid learning) may decline, crystallized abilities (such as vocabulary and stored-up knowledge) actually improve (Baltes and Schace, 1974). As a result many elderly persons are at least as mentally able as the average young adult.

However, many factors have been considered as potential sources of stress to the elderly. These factors are multifarious in dimension. Socially, the following factors have the potential to induce stress in the elderly. The inability to care for a sick spouse is a veritable source of stress for the elderly. At that stage, their strength and abilities must have waned tremendously. Further, fear of losing a spouse could also constitute a source of stress for the elderly. At old age, death is usually

part of their expectation and any of the elderly spouses could be a victim of death. Furthermore, death of other relatives and friends that one may have been close to has the tendency of inducing stress in the elderly. Another social factor that causes stress in the elderly is worry about finances and retirement. This fear of dwindling finances as a result of retirement and reduced physical strength to engage in other economic endeavours causes considerable stress to the elderly.

Psychologically, the sources of stress to the elderly are also various. First, control over their lives and environment is one of the psychological factors that are stress-inducing in the elderly, loss of personal control over situations like family decisions and personal matters is not always a pleasant experience for the elderly. Second, loss of physical strength and coordination is also a cause of stress for the elderly. The process of aging wears of the brain in some way and the response to stressful situations may become inadequate. Third, dwindling memory and other thinking process causes a lot of stress to the elderly. Many of them may not appreciate the reality that their cognitive capacity is becoming less effective by the day.

Loneliness as a result of loss of friends and relatives through death or social isolation also causes stress to the elderly. Diminished interpersonal contact could induce loneliness. Loneliness in this sense is more than the simple absence of other people. It is an unfulfilled need for certain types of social relationship. According to Weiss (1973) Loneliness is not simply a desire for company; rather, it yields only to very specific forms of relationship. Indeed, two types of loneliness were categorized: emotional loneliness and social loneliness. In the experience of emotional loneliness, the elderly may feel that there is lack of close-caring relationship. That he or she has been abandoned and no one really cares about him or her. Emotional loneliness may persist even when one have the opportunities to interact with others whom one have much in common. On the contrary, social loneliness is caused by the absence of an "engaging social network" it is important for people to maintain contact with old friends and acquaintances with which we share common interests and concerns. The fear of losing this friends and acquaintances has potential to cause stress among the elderly. Indeed, extreme loneliness could be stressful. Again, the elderly may experience a feeling of dejection at being dependent on other people. The total loss of independence in several aspects of everyday endeavour could be stressful for the elderly particularly for those who have been independent and lived a respectable life.

Cultural factors that cause stress in the elderly include diminished ability to keep up with sociocultural roles and expectations. As people get old in the community,



particularly in Africa, they are usually excluded from certain societal and cultural role expectations. However some of them are usually very reluctant to accept this position and could only accept out of pressure from significant others. The mere thought of not being able to do things that he finds pleasure doing could make the elderly nervous and stress-prone. Another important cultural-oriented cause of stress in the elderly is fear of succession. In this part of our world particularly, among the Igbos of Nigeria, we are usually anxious concerning who will take over from us when we depart from earth. It is a very disturbing for the elderly particularly those of them that live a careless and unfulfilled life. These experiences usually expose the elderly to undue stress.

Another possible source of stress for the elderly could be fear of getting a befitting burial after death. Burial rite is a necessary cultural expectation when one is dies. Those that are fulfilled and self-actualized may feel less nervous and stressful at this stage of life. But, for others who are not so accomplished, the thought of death could be a nightmare experience. Generally, humans are afraid to die and this apprehension could get worst with old age and therefore very stressful. The prospect of diminished authority in the cultural and political hierarchy of the community could induce stress in the elderly. Many, particularly, those who are very active in the cultural and political affairs of the community, will not fancy the idea that they are losing grip of control over community affairs and decision making hierarchy.

Responses to Stress

People often react to stress physically, psychologically, and behaviourally. Also, one form of stress response can set off another dimension of stress response. For instance, a physical stress response such as mild stomach upset may trigger the psychological stress response of worrying about stomach ulcer. Major categories of stress response includes:

Physical Stress Response

Physical responses to stress may include rapid breathing, increased heartbeat, sweating and possibly shakiness. These reactions also include a general pattern or syndrome, referred to as the "fight or flight syndrome". This all important syndrome prepare the body to either face or flee from an immediate threat. This fight or flight syndrome usually wanes immediately the danger subsides. Nevertheless, when the experience of stress is prolonged, these responses are only the beginning of a sequence of responses. According to Selye (1956, 1976) the sequence of physical responses to stress occurs in a consistence pattern that is triggered by the effort to this as the general adaptation syndrome (GAS). The GAS has three stages: alarm, resistance and exhaustion.

Emotional Stress Response

Emotional stress responses usually accompany physical stress responses. If somebody brandishes a gun and demands your phone, you will definitely experience the GAS alarm reaction. You will also experience some emotions, maybe fear or anger. In most instances, emotional stress responses diminish immediately the stressors are gone, even severe emotional stress responses. However, if stressors continue for a very long time or if many occur in a short time, emotional stress reaction may endure. According to Bernstein and Nash (1999) when people do not have a chance to recover their emotional equilibrium, they feel tense, irritable, short-tempered, or anxious, and they may experience increasingly intense feelings of fatigue, depression and hopelessness. These reactions, according to them, can become severe enough to be diagnosed as major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, or any other stress related mental disorders.

Cognitive Stress Response

Cognitive stress responses may include reductions in the ability to concentrate, to think clearly or to remember accurately. This problem could be attributed to the effect of ruminative thinking, which implies the recurring intrusion of thoughts about stressful events (Lyubomirsky & Nolem-Hocksema, 1995). Another related phenomenon is catastrophising, which implies dwelling on and over emphasizing the possible negative consequences of events (Sarason, Sarason, Keefe, Hayes & Shearin, 1986). As catastrophising and ruminative thinking impairs cognitive functioning, resulting feelings of anxiety and other emotional arousal add to the total stress response, further hampering performance (Darke, 1988).

Furthermore, over arousal resulting from exposure to stressors also tends to narrow the scope of attention, making it harder to scan the full range of possible solutions to complex problems (Keinan, Friedlan & Ben-Porath, 1987). Additionally, stress-narrowed attention may increase problem solving errors on thought and language. People under stress are more likely to cling to mental sets, which are well-learned but not always efficient approaches to problems. Stress may also intensify functional fixedness. This refers to the tendency to use objects for only one purpose. Stressors may also impair or affect the ability to make decision. Under stress, people who normally consider all aspects of a situation before making a decision may act impulsively and at times foolishly (Keinan, Friedland & Ben-Porath, 1987).

Behavioural Stress Response

Behaviourally, signs about people's physical and emotional stress reactions come from changes in how they look, act or talk. This may include strained facial



expression, a shaky voice, tremors, and jumpiness. Postures can also signal the presence of stress, a fact observed by skilled interviewers. Even more obvious behavioural stress responses appear as people attempt to escape or avoid stressors. Some people may quit their jobs, drop out of school, turn to alcohol or even attempt suicide (Bernstein and Nash, 1999). Aggression is another often employed behavioural response to stressors (Polusny & Follette, 1995).

Coping with and Managing Stress

Adequate coping resources usually serve as effective palliative for stress reduction. These resources which may, among others include the money and time to deal with stressful events are varied. It is very evident that the impact of stress can be reduced by effective coping methods (Sutker, Davis, Uddo & Ditta, 1995). Various types of coping resources are classified under two-broad categories of problem- focused and emotional- focused categories. Problem-focused method refers to efforts made by the person to change or eliminate a source of stress. Gaining any sense of control over a situation makes it less stressful. For example, many have come to discover that religious faith helps them cope with stress by giving them some sense of control over matters that are otherwise uncontrollable (Kalat, 2008). Thinking that you have control is calming, even if you really don't. (Glass, Singer & Pennebaker, 1977). Indeed, elderly people benefit from the company offered by religious groups, they should tap into this and increase their participation, which also makes many feel wanted and important-a psychological satisfaction that helps reduce stress. People can gain a sense of control over a future problem by rehearsing it in their imagination. For example, you might imagine what a person might do and then how you might respond (Sanna, 2000). The better one can predict his situation, the more easily he or she can rehearse his or her reaction or responses.

A stressful experience usually appears less disturbing if you know what to expect, but it is difficult to know what to expect if you have not been through the experience before. Getting a good preview of a stressor that you will later experience or face serves as a good way to inoculate or immunize yourself against stressful experiences. One way to do this is by exposing yourself to a small amount of such events beforehand (Meicherbaum, 1985, Kalat, 2000). On the other hand, emotion-focused techniques attempt to regulate the negative emotional consequences of stressors (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen & DeLongis, 1980a). Emotion-focused strategies do not attempt to solve the underlying problems, but help us in managing our reactions to them. The most common strategies are relaxation, exercise and distraction (Kalat, 1998)

Relaxation has been found to be one good way of reducing unnecessary anxiety. Benson (1985) proffered the following suggestion

- Find a quiet place
- Adopt a comfortable position, relaxing your muscles.
- Reduce sources of stimulation, including your own thoughts
- Don't worry about anything, not even about relaxing

This practice is referred to by some people as meditation. People who have practiced this strategy reported that they felt less stress. Many of them experiences improvement on their overall health (Benson, 1985).

Exercise is another good strategy for reducing stress. Indeed, exercise help people relax, because it is a good stress (eustress). When the sympathetic nervous system becomes highly aroused, it is beneficial to put your energy to use through exercise and relaxing afterward.

Furthermore, people in good physical condition react less strongly than other people do to stressful events (Crews and Landers, 1987). An event that would increase the heart rate enormously in other people elevates it only moderately in a person who exercises regularly. Exercise also has the potential to provide distraction from the sources of anxiety.

Distraction itself is another powerful emotional-focused coping strategy Cioffi, 1991). Majority of people report that they distract themselves from stressful events by going shopping, (Hana, 2001) watch a view or pleasant music (Fauerbach, Lawrence, Haythornthwaits, & Richter, 2002).

Management Of Stress Among The Elderly

Even though the events and situations that cause stress may be different for the elderly, the techniques of managing this stress are similar.

Nevertheless, here are some stress management procedures for the elderly.

1. The elderly can form a group where they can share their feelings about their life and the problems they face with other elderly people.
2. They should involve themselves in some activity that brings them in contact with other people like them who can share similar experiences. This is because opening out about emotions can help relieve stress to a large extent.
3. Those of the elderly persons who can should be allowed to lead an active social life where they may draw out activities for the day for themselves in order to ensure that they are busy all the time. They could join a volunteer group and help the needy.



4. Trying to create a passion for you after retirement can surely help one to keep himself busy. You could join a club and play golf or go to the gym for regular exercise. The thing that they may decide to take on may not need a lot of money but should definitely be interesting enough to keep them involved.
5. They should ensure that they entertain only positive thoughts and avoid any kind of self-pity.
6. Avoid resorting to smoking and drinking since they are not solutions in themselves but only avoidance techniques that are harmful in the long run.
7. Try meditation or breathing exercise when you feel you are stressed out and need to relax.
8. Finally, nutrition plays a very crucial role in managing stress. Therefore, make sure you follow balanced and well-prepared diets.

Stress, particularly those that are culturally induced like fear of a befitting burial after death could be managed and overcome by planning. People should start preparing for their burial when they are still able and strong by making adequate investment for twilight-days experience. In order to get over the cultural challenges of fear of befitting burial, there is need for one to invest in his offspring and train them adequately to become successful in their endeavours. This is with particular reference to those who are not very accomplished. But, for the accomplished and wealthy ones, it is advised that they put aside a substantial sum in a dedicated savings account that will be utilized for burial at the end of their existence. This approach is suggested particularly for the Igbos of Nigeria, where premium is placed on befitting burial after the demise of any elder, particularly, the accomplished ones. Again, the elderly is advised to always make their succession plan known to their relatives and kinsmen in order to avoid the unnecessary squabbles that may arise after their demise, for those that are educated, it may be necessary to put up a will to that effect.

In conclusion, it has been generally agreed among scholars that stress is a killer and it is ubiquitous. As functional members of the environment, we cannot do without stress. Stress indeed is in every sphere of our lives. It abounds both in physical, emotional occupational, social, economic circumstances, events or experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant, that confronts people and requires their ability to manage and endure effectively. It is obvious that its sources and causes are various and humans can not evade its presence and consequences if neglected. It is therefore pertinent that we learn to cope with and manage stress using the essentially approved resources for doing so in order to avoid the health hazards that usually emanates from stressors.

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