Chapter 3: Meeting Life Challenges

Review Questions — Review Questions

Q1 Explain the concept of stress. Give examples from daily life.

Stress is the pattern of responses an organism makes to a stimulus event that disturbs its equilibrium and exceeds its ability to cope. The word comes from the Latin 'strictus' (tight or narrow) and 'stringere' (to tighten), reflecting the tightness in muscles and breathing people report under stress. Stressors are the events that trigger the stress response, such as noise, crowding, a bad relationship or the daily commute; the reaction to them is called strain. Hans Selye saw stress as the body's non-specific response to any demand, but later researchers stress that it is a transaction between the person and the environment, shaped by cognitive appraisal of the event and of one's coping resources. Hence the same event may stress one person and challenge another: a number 11 batsman may dread a fast bowler, while an opening batsman welcomes the challenge. Not all stress is harmful: eustress is the good level that helps peak performance, while too much turns into distress. Daily examples: examination pressure (like Raj's sleepless night before his paper), a traffic jam on the way to school, or a quarrel with a friend.

Q2 State the symptoms and sources of stress.

Symptoms: Each person has their own pattern, but signs of stress can be physical, emotional and behavioural. Examples are lack of concentration, memory loss, poor decision-making, low self-esteem, extreme mood swings, emotional outbursts, worry, anxiety, fear, depression, difficulty with sleep or eating, misuse of drugs, and physical illness such as stomach upset, headache or backache. Left unresolved, these can have serious implications.

Sources: (1) Major life events, such as the death of a loved one, personal injury, or even planned changes like moving house; several of these in a short time make coping difficult. (2) Daily hassles, such as noise, commuting, quarrelsome neighbours, traffic snarls and electricity or water shortages. (3) Traumatic events, such as fire, accidents, robbery, earthquake or tsunami, whose effects (anxiety, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts) may appear after a delay. By type, stress is also physical and environmental, psychological (frustration, conflict, internal and social pressures) or social (illness or death in the family, strained relationships).

Q3 Describe the GAS model and illustrate the relevance of this model with the help of an example.

Hans Selye studied what happens when stress is prolonged by exposing animals to stressors like high temperature, X-rays and insulin injections, and by observing hospital patients. He found a similar bodily response pattern in all, which he called the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), with three stages.

1. Alarm reaction: a stressor activates the adrenal-pituitary-cortex system and hormones are released; the individual is ready for fight or flight.
2. Resistance: if stress continues, the parasympathetic nervous system calls for more cautious use of body resources, and the organism tries to cope with the threat, for instance by confronting it.
3. Exhaustion: continued or additional stressors drain the body's resources; the systems of alarm and resistance become ineffective, and stress-related diseases such as high blood pressure become likely.

Example: a student facing board examinations feels tense and alert on hearing the schedule (alarm). Through weeks of preparation they keep working despite strain (resistance). If the pressure continues without rest or support, they may fall ill or feel fatigued and helpless (exhaustion). The model has been criticised for giving too little role to psychological factors such as appraisal and personality.

Q4 Enumerate the different ways of coping with stress.

Coping is a set of concrete, situation-specific responses meant to resolve the problem and reduce stress.

Strategies (Endler and Parker): task-oriented (gather information, set priorities, act directly on the situation, e.g. schedule time better); emotion-oriented (maintain hope, control or vent emotions, or conclude nothing can be done); avoidance-oriented (deny or minimise the situation, suppress stressful thoughts, distract oneself by watching TV or meeting people).

Types (Lazarus and Folkman): problem-focused coping attacks the problem itself by gaining information or altering the event; emotion-focused coping limits emotional disruption with little effort to change the event. People generally use the former more often.

Stress management techniques: relaxation with deep breathing; meditation; biofeedback; creative visualisation; cognitive behavioural techniques such as Meichenbaum's stress inoculation training (assessment, stress reduction, application and follow-through); and regular exercise, at least four times a week for 30 minutes.

Q5 Explain the effect of stress on psychological functioning.

The chapter describes four major effects of stress on functioning.

Emotional: mood swings, erratic behaviour that may alienate family and friends, anxiety, depression and increased tension, sometimes starting a vicious circle of falling confidence. Examination anxiety is a common example, where high test anxiety impairs preparation, concentration and performance.

Physiological: more adrenaline and cortisol, causing changes in heart rate, blood pressure and metabolism; the digestive system slows, air passages expand and blood vessels constrict. Helpful briefly, but damaging in the long term.

Cognitive: sustained pressure causes mental overload, loss of ability to take sound decisions, poor concentration and reduced short-term memory.

Behavioural: eating less nutritious food, more caffeine, cigarettes, alcohol or tranquillisers, disrupted sleep, absenteeism and reduced work performance.

Prolonged stress can also cause burnout, a state of physical, emotional and psychological exhaustion, and may produce panic attacks, obsessive behaviour, phobias and irrational fears.

Q6 Describe how life skills can help meet life's challenges.

Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that help people deal effectively with everyday demands and challenges and keep their equilibrium. They can be learned and improved.

- Assertiveness: communicating feelings, needs and thoughts clearly and confidently, including saying no; it builds self-esteem.
- Time management: spending time on what one values, planning and delegating, being realistic; this reduces time stress.
- Rational thinking: challenging distorted thinking and irrational beliefs, driving out anxiety-provoking thoughts and making positive statements.
- Improving relationships: good communication means listening, expressing feelings and accepting others' opinions, and avoiding misplaced jealousy and sulking.
- Self-care: staying healthy, fit and relaxed, with slow stomach-centred breathing, and attention to environmental stressors like noise and pollution.
- Overcoming unhelpful habits: perfectionism, avoidance and procrastination help short term but increase vulnerability to stress; overcoming them reduces it.

Together these skills prepare a person to counterbalance daily demands.

Q7 Discuss the factors that lead to positive health and well-being.

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being, not merely absence of disease. Positive health includes a healthy body, good personal relationships, a sense of purpose, self-regard, mastery of life's tasks and resilience to stress, trauma and change. The factors that act as stress buffers and promote it are:

- Diet: three main meals and a varied, balanced diet lift mood, give energy and strengthen immunity; stressed people tend to seek comfort foods high in fat, salt and sugar.
- Exercise: improves fitness, helps manage weight and stress, and reduces tension, anxiety and depression. Stretching (yoga asanas) calms, while aerobic exercise raises arousal.
- Positive attitude: accurate perception of reality, purpose and responsibility, tolerance of others' views, taking credit for success and blame for failure, openness and humour.
- Positive thinking: optimists use more problem-focused coping and seek help.
- Social support: tangible, informational and emotional support from family and friends protects against stress and benefits both giver and receiver.

Q8 How does stress affect the immune system?

The immune system guards the body against attackers from within and outside. Its white blood cells (leucocytes) destroy foreign bodies (antigens) such as viruses and produce antibodies. T cells destroy invaders, T-helper cells increase immune activity, B cells produce antibodies, and natural killer cells fight viruses and tumours. Psychoneuroimmunology studies the links between mind, brain and immune system.

Stress impairs this functioning. It lowers natural killer cell cytotoxicity, which is important in defence against infections and cancer; reduced levels have been found in highly stressed people, including students before important examinations, bereaved persons and the severely depressed. Negative emotions and stress hormones weaken the immune system, which affects mental and physical health and raises the chance of illness. The effect is greater in people whose immune systems are already weakened, and immune functioning is better in people who receive social support.

Q9 Give an example of a life event which is likely to be stressful. Suggest reasons why it is likely to cause different degrees of stress to the person experiencing it.

Example: the death of a close family member, which the chapter's life-event scale rates as highly stressful (mean stress score 66).

The degree of stress differs between people because stress depends on appraisal, not the event alone:
- Primary and secondary appraisal: whether the person sees the event as harm, threat or challenge, and whether they judge their coping resources sufficient.
- Past experience of handling similar situations.
- Perceived controllability and sense of self-efficacy.
- Characteristics of the stress: intensity, duration, complexity and predictability; an unexpected, prolonged death in the family is harder than an expected one.
- Age at which it is first experienced and frequency of such events.
- Physical health and constitution, and psychological traits such as temperament and self-concept.
- Cultural context, which defines the meaning of the event and expected response.
- Resources, such as money, coping style and above all social support.

So the impact of the same event varies from person to person.

Q10 Given what you know about coping strategies, what suggestions would you give to your friends to avoid stress in their everyday lives.

Model suggestions, based on the chapter:
- Use task-oriented, problem-focused coping: gather information, set priorities, plan a revision timetable, and act on the problem directly instead of avoiding it.
- Practise time management and stop procrastinating ("I will do it later"); avoid perfectionism and unrealistic standards.
- Think rationally: challenge distorted thoughts and replace them with positive, realistic ones.
- Be assertive and communicate openly; discuss worries with friends, family and teachers, since social support protects against stress.
- Exercise regularly (about 30 minutes, at least four times a week) and use deep breathing, relaxation, meditation or yoga.
- Eat a balanced diet, sleep enough, and avoid smoking, alcohol, caffeine excess and drugs as escape routes.
- Keep a positive attitude and sense of humour, and build resilience by seeking trusted people and solving problems.
- Avoid denial or suppression, which only postpone the stress.

Q11 Reflect on the environmental factors that have (a) a positive impact on the being, and (b) a negative effect.

(a) Positive impact: the chapter notes that environmental factors such as noise, pollution, space, light and colour influence our mood and our ability to cope with stress. Favourable surroundings therefore help well-being: quiet, clean air, adequate space, pleasant light and colour, and a supportive social environment of family and friends. Healthy surroundings that allow exercise and relaxation also support positive health and keep us better prepared to handle everyday stresses.

(b) Negative impact: environmental stresses are aspects of our surroundings that are often unavoidable, such as air pollution, crowding, noise, summer heat and winter cold. Catastrophic events or disasters such as fire, earthquake and floods are another group. Daily hassles such as traffic snarls, commuting, and electricity and water shortages also add stress. These raise tension, affect mood and weaken our ability to cope, and traumatic events may cause lasting anxiety, flashbacks and intrusive thoughts.

Q12 We know that certain lifestyle factors can cause stress and may lead to diseases like cancer and coronary heart disease, yet we are unable to change our behaviour. Explain why?

Lifestyle is the overall pattern of decisions and behaviours that determine health and quality of life. The chapter gives several reasons why people fail to change harmful behaviour despite knowing the risks:
- Health-damaging behaviours such as smoking, alcohol use, poor diet and little sleep develop gradually and are accompanied by temporarily pleasant experiences, so they are rewarding in the short term.
- We tend to ignore their long-term damaging effects and underestimate the risk they pose to our lives.
- Stress itself pushes people towards unhealthy habits: stressed people eat poorly, sleep less and seek comfort foods high in fat, salt and sugar.
- Unhelpful habits such as avoidance and procrastination help in the short term while increasing vulnerability.
- Coping often rests on rigid, deep-seated beliefs based on experience, which must be reassessed and relearned.
- The modern fast-paced lifestyle of excesses in eating and drinking violates basic principles of health.

Change therefore needs awareness, new coping strategies, life skills and social support.