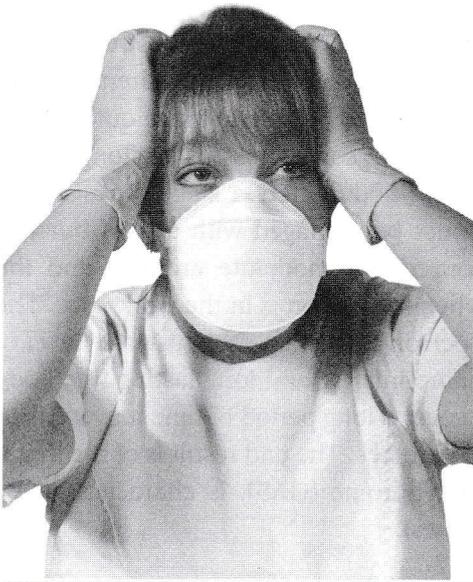


11

Stress, Conflict, and Coping Mechanisms



EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this chapter, you are expected to be able to:

- identify the stressors that are common among nurses and their nature
- describe the stages that the body goes through in response to stress
- discuss the effects of stress
- utilize the coping strategies when feeling stressed
- demonstrate some relaxation techniques for relieving distress

INTRODUCTION

Nurses are subjected to stress every day, even while they were student nurses. Some nurses can attribute their success in coping with the stress in their job by simply acknowledging their own weaknesses and strengths.

Stress is a multifaceted process that occurs in reaction to events or situations in life which are termed as stressors. Stress, as defined by Hans Selye (1979), is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. Every demand on the body evokes specific responses as well; for example, the body responds in one way to the loss of fluid, and in another way to the lack of sleep. But all demands on the body evoke generalized, or nonspecific, responses.

According to Selye, the body goes through three stages in its response to stressors (**Figure 11.2**).

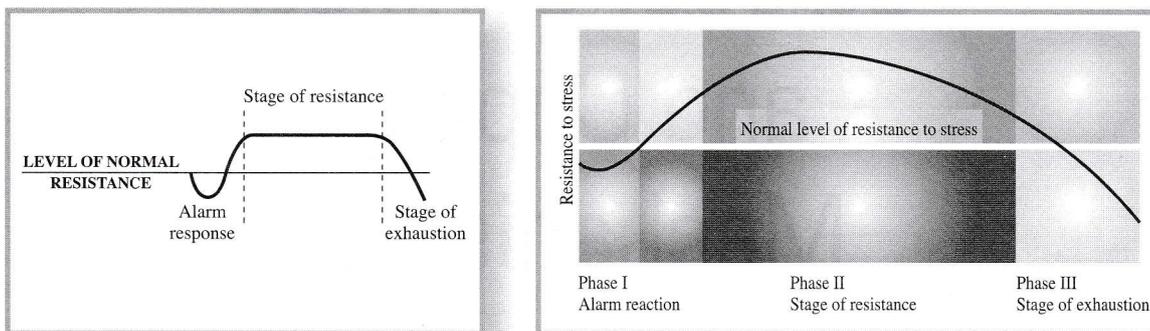


Figure 11.2 Selye's general adaptation syndrome

The first stage is *alarm*, a brief period of high arousal of the sympathetic nervous system that prepares the body for rigorous activity. For instance, during a fire (an environmental stressor), the nervous system reacts by releasing epinephrine, or “emergency hormone”, from the adrenal glands (physiological activity), which makes the person incredibly strong to be able to move quickly and carry heavy objects away from the fire (rigorous activity). However, some stressors last longer than the ability of the body to maintain this state of arousal. The body enters a stage of *resistance*. A highly stressful job, for example, is a stressor that cannot be managed with a brief burst of intense activity. Instead, the body is exposed to prolonged but moderate arousal, and the epinephrine level remains high day after day, especially when the person is in the workplace. The body responds by secreting hormones which enable the person to sustain a high steady level of activity to endure prolonged stress. If the stress is even more intense and long-lasting, the body enters into the third stage, called *exhaustion*. Severe stress over a long period of time may weaken the immune system and leave the individual vulnerable to illnesses. The end result is of the three-stage reaction, which Selye calls the general adaptation syndrome (GAS), is characterized by weakness, fatigue, loss of appetite, and a general lack of interest.

STRESS AMONG NURSES

Nursing by its very nature is a profession that faces high levels of emotion that could sometimes be overwhelming and stressful to the individual. Every day, nurses put up with the pressure of the profession with the aim of making a difference. They offer endless care and hospitality to their clients and the clients' families, concentrating all their energy on their duty to serve the needs of and promote wellness among their clients. In the process of caring, they tend to forget basic health-promotion principles essential for their own well-being, stressing themselves out, some more than others, until they finally reach the breaking point and fall out of love with the job they once thought the whole world of.

In order to understand the issue of stress in nursing, first we must gain an understanding of stress in general. There are numerous definitions of stress in the literature, such as "a condition in which the human system responds to changes in its normal balanced state" (Taylor, Lillis & LeMone, 2005), "an imbalance between a perceived demand and the perceived ability of the individual to respond to it" (McGarth, 1970, cited in Walker, Payne, Smith & Jarrett, 2004), and the "condition that occurs when a challenge or a threat forces a person to adjust or adapt to the environment" (Coon, 2004). All these various definitions do agree that stress is a condition that results when there is an imbalance in an individual's physical and emotional states.

A life without stress is rather impossible, especially when every life event can create some amount of stress to the individual. Some amount of stress is necessary to a fulfilling life. There are two types of stress (Tomey, 2000):

- 1 Eustress**, the positive force that spices up life by adding excitement and challenge to life, providing a sense of well-being to the individual.
- 2 Distress**, the negative force that threatens effectiveness and is driven by prolonged unrelieved tension.

For example, the force that motivates a person to show good performance at work can be taken as eustress, while the stress of the job that prevents the person from performing well can be regarded as distress. According to Tomey (2000), whether a person will perceive the stress of the situation as eustress or distress is greatly influenced by factors such as the person's perceptions and mentality, level of physical activity, nutritional status, and state of relationships.

WORKPLACE STRESS AND NURSING

Workplace stress has been described as "physical and emotional response that occurs when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the employee" (DiMartino, 2003) or the "physical and emotional outcomes that occur when there is disparity between the demands of the job and the amount of control the individual has in meeting those demands" (Seaward, 2002). Thus, when there is stress in the workplace, it means that the

challenges and demands of the job have exceeded the person's ability to handle them, which turns job satisfaction into frustration. When an individual experiences prolonged stress, especially in the workplace, burnout occurs, which is the complete physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion of the worker (Arnold & Boggs, 2003).

It is evident from many literary sources that hospitals are among the most stressful working environments and the caring professionals, especially nurses, are more prone to stress (Tomey, 2000; Riley, 2004; Ewles & Simnett, 1999; Arnold & Boggs, 2003; Maville & Huerta, 2001). These two facts suggest the large amount of stress associated with this profession. Providing care to patients, especially those who are terminally ill, obnoxious, or cognitively impaired, does place a severe strain on the dedicated staff caring for them. Yet, nurses tend to ignore the call for attention to their own stress level or that of their co-workers. This in turn takes nurses down the road of burnout, which is an insidious process.

To make the picture clearer, identifying the main stressors associated with the nursing profession is essential. Many researchers have attempted to identify the hidden stressors of the profession that might have an impact on nurses. The following are some of the main stressors identified (McVicar, 2003; Tomey, 2000; Kozier et al., 2004; Kozier et al., 2003; Silen, Tang, Wadensten & Ahlstrom, 2008; Maville & Huerta, 2001):

- 1** Heavy workload. Too much work, limited time, manpower shortage, lack of support from colleagues, patients, and their relatives, and unplanned sick leave all contribute to a heavy workload that nurses experience in their job.
- 2** Dealing with death and terminally ill patients.
- 3** Conflict with physicians. Both nurses and doctors are working for the benefit of patients, but their approaches to the achievement of this goal may be different, which can give rise to conflict. This can be stressful to both parties.
- 4** Problems with peers and colleagues. Nurses work in collaboration with other nursing staff within the department and from other departments, physicians, and other allied health-care workers. Differences in opinions, views, and beliefs, personality clashes, inappropriate use of power and authority, and so on, create emotional turmoil and give rise to stress.
- 5** Pressure due to the conflicting demands of work and home. Nurses often face the dilemma of balancing between their job as a nurse and their role as friend, mother, sister, daughter, and so on. Sometimes, they find their family life conflicting with their work life.
- 6** Problems with supervisors. Junior nurses and new nurses work under supervisors, who may have high expectations of the new staff.
- 7** Bullying or sexual harassment at work.
- 8** Office politics and peer competition.
- 9** Uncertainty concerning treatments for patients.
- 10** Pressure from patients and their families. Nurses are there to serve patients and their families, who may place high demands on the nurses.

- 11 Pressure from caregiver role. Stress can result from unfulfilled role expectations due to the lack of control over the work situation, shortage of resources, concern over the quality of nursing, and lack of cooperation among patients, their families, and staff members.
- 12 Shift work. Nursing is a round-the-clock service. Nurses in wards work around the clock, changing duties between shifts. Hence, they rarely have a fixed duty time.
- 13 Constant organizational changes, including changing responsibilities, policies, as well as organizational rules and regulations.
- 14 Technological developments in the health-care industry.

Symptoms of Workplace Stress

Stress affects the whole body, but not all stressors affect everyone physiologically in the same way (Wade & Tavis, 2008). A situation that one person perceives as very stressful may not be that stressful to another person. It varies from person to person and from situation to situation. Hence, it is important to recognize symptoms indicating that stress is becoming distress before it overwhelms you. As stress is unique to the person, its signs and symptoms also vary between individuals. Although the list is for stress in general, most of the symptoms apply to workplace stress as well:

- I **Cognitive symptoms**, which include forgetfulness, indecisiveness, poor concentration and loss of focus, clouded thinking giving rise to poor judgment, pessimism, anxiety, racing thoughts, constant worrying, and fearful anticipation that something will happen
- II **Physical symptoms**, which include headaches, backaches, muscle tension, diarrhea or constipation, nausea, dizziness, insomnia, rapid pulse and palpitations, perspiration, weight gain or loss, skin breakouts, loss of sex drive, frequent colds, and indigestion
- III **Emotional symptoms**, such as moodiness, agitation, restlessness, short temper, irritability, impatience, inability to relax and feeling tense, feeling overwhelmed, feelings of loneliness or isolation, and depression
- IV **Behavioral symptoms**, such as eating more or less, sleeping too much or too little, isolating yourself from others, neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax, nervous habits (e.g., nail biting, pacing), teeth grinding or jaw clenching, overdoing activities like exercise and shopping, overreacting to unexpected problems, and picking fights with others

Prolonged stress can have a devastating effect on the individual. Apart from burnout, research shows that stress, especially if it is job related, is harmful to health and dangerous to the individual (Madison, 2000). Hence, it is important to manage stress well to keep it at bay for one's survival.

TYPES OF STRESSORS

Conflict

Conflict happens when one is made to choose between two opposing or competing goals. Conflict comes in four types: the approach–approach, avoidance–avoidance, approach–avoidance, and multiple approach–avoidance conflicts.

In an *approach–approach conflict*, the individual is torn between two attractive goals. The problem, of course, is that by choosing one goal the individual will sacrifice the satisfaction provided by the other. An example is choosing between two favorite shows to watch on a holiday or deciding on the restaurant to dine in. Among the three types of conflict, approach–approach is said to be the least stressful.

The *avoidance–avoidance conflict* involves choosing between two unattractive goals. In this type of conflict, the person is torn between two repelling alternatives. For example, a patient may dread going for surgery but does not want to live in pain either. A worker may have to choose between unemployment and accepting an undesirable job.

Approach–avoidance conflict involves the pursuit of a single goal that has both attractive and unattractive aspects. For example, attending a late-night party may be pleasurable to a student, but it would mean not being sufficiently prepared for an important examination the next day. An employee finally gets a desired job promotion, but it requires frequent traveling and entertaining clients. Approach–avoidance conflict is common and may be very stressful, as you either have to take risks or sacrifice something valuable to you in order to attain a desired goal.

The last but regarded as the most stressful is the *multiple approach–avoidance conflict*. It occurs when one is confronted with making decisions between alternatives that come with multifaceted positive and negative potential outcomes. For instance, in making major decisions, we sometimes need to consider many factors, such as the conflicting demands of family, spouse, children, friends, and society, which may also conflict with our personal choice.

Change

Stress may also be due to life changes or shifting circumstances that require readjustment. Events may not necessarily be negative or aversive to cause stress to the individual. Even positive and welcome events such as getting married, having a baby, moving to a better house, or getting a promotion produce stress. This is because they all involve change or disruption to daily routines, as found below in the ten most stressful life's events:

- 1 Spouse's death
- 2 Divorce
- 3 Marriage separation
- 4 Imprisonment
- 5 Death of a close relative

- 6 Severe injury or illness
- 7 Marriage
- 8 Job loss
- 9 Marriage reconciliation
- 10 Retirement

Pressure

Pressure is the frustration that occurs when an event becomes so intense that we can no longer adapt to it. There are two common types of pressure. The first is known as overload, which is a problem particularly among employees and students. Individuals who experience this think that there are too many things to be done in too little time. The other type of pressure comes in the form of overexpectation. Individuals may set performance standards that are so high that work cannot be satisfactorily completed by a given time.

EFFECTS OF STRESS

Excessive stress threatens the well-being of individuals. Stress is a fact of life. Our reactions to stress can give us competencies that we need but that would not develop without being challenged to do so. Stress can be damaging, however, if demands are too high for our coping resources. The potential negative effects of stress include the following (Weiten & Lloyd, 2000):

- 1 **Impaired task performance.** Stress interferes with our ability to successfully perform the tasks and responsibilities expected of us. The demands of work may cause an experience of overload, which often leads to impaired or poor performance. Although the person is capable of delivering, performance may be adversely affected by the fear of not being able to meet others' expectations.
- 2 **Disruption of cognitive functioning.** People who are under stress are likely to experience loss of concentration, disorientation, and forgetfulness. A perception of threat or fear of failure makes it difficult for the person to see the situation objectively or to perceive the range of alternatives available. For instance, conflict at home may cause a loss of concentration in one's studies or erratic performance at work.
- 3 **Unhealthy lifestyle.** People who experience stress are likely to engage in unhealthy activities as a way of coping with stress. Smoking, drinking, overeating (or loss of appetite or skipping meals), and neglecting exercise are some of the unhealthy escape behaviors of people who are less tolerant of stress and are inadequate in managing stress.
- 4 **Psychological problems and disorders.** Stress may lead to some psychological problems and may interfere with intrapersonal and interpersonal behaviors. People who experience

prolonged stressful events may suffer from feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, which consequently undermine their self-esteem. Stress, particularly if the causes are highly aversive, is known to precipitate many psychological problems and disorders, such as anxiety neuroses, insomnia, depression, psychosomatic disorders, as well as sexual dysfunction and functional impotency. For instance, individuals may suppress anger and eventually develop migraine headaches.

- 5 **Burnout.** Burnout can be defined as the end result of stress that is not properly coped with, exhibited in symptoms of exhaustion, irritation, ineffectiveness, and discounting of self and others. Burnout is commonly associated with a negative experience at work.
- 6 **Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** PTSD is a condition in which prolonged and extreme stress results in feelings of anxiety and depression. Victims and survivors of catastrophes, wars, or heinous crimes are likely to suffer from PTSD. The disorder is characterized by frequent nightmares, outburst of anger, constant unhappiness, and guilt.
- 7 **Physical illness.** The onset or progression of health problems may be affected by stress. Emotional stress may also lead to physiological stress and the eventual breakdown of the affected organ system. The apparent link between stress and many diseases raises the possibility that stress may undermine the body's immune functioning, increasing the body's vulnerability to infections. The common cold, gastric ulcer, asthma, headaches, skin disorders, rheumatoid arthritis, chronic back pain, and even serious illnesses such as cancer, stroke, hypertension, and coronary diseases may be produced or aggravated by prolonged exposure to stressful events.

Beneficial Effects

People may also benefit from stressful experiences. These benefits, however, are subtle and are not readily seen or felt.

Firstly, stressful events help satisfy the need for stimulation and challenge. There are people who enjoy greater stimulation and challenges in life. At work, for instance, some people become less productive when they are not intellectually challenged. Secondly, stress can also promote personal growth or self-improvement. Stressful events sometimes force people to develop new skills, gain new insights, and acquire new strengths. In the process of adaptation, they may discover new potentials that contribute to their well-being. The ability to confront and overcome a stressful challenge may lead to improvement in specific coping skills and an enhanced self-concept. Thirdly, the present stressful events experienced by individuals can inoculate them so that they are less affected by future stressors. Studies reveal that exposure to stress can increase stress tolerance.

Other beneficial effects of stress include increased optimism, conscientiousness, self-control, and resistance.

COPING WITH STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Coping refers to efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the demands created by stress. Since individuals vary in their reactions to stressors, their coping mechanisms are unique to them. Moreover, coping strategies vary in their adaptive value. There are coping strategies that tend to be helpful and those that tend to be maladaptive. However, no coping technique can ensure a successful outcome, since the adaptive value of a coping strategy depends on the tendencies of the person and the exact context or nature of the situation.

Specifically for nurses and other health-care workers, there are other steps that you can take to cope with stress in your job (Aguilera, 1998; Potter & Perry, 2005; Steers, 1991):

- 1 Understand the downside of overstressing yourself. Look out for common stressors in the profession and work around them.
- 2 Recognize your scope of practice and work within that scope to avoid added stress that may result from professional conflicts.
- 3 Learn to work with colleagues and establish a friendly work environment so that there will not be excessive sick leave and grumpy co-workers to deal with.
- 4 Have a sense of humor and share light-hearted moments with colleagues, clients, and their families. This will definitely help you unwind.
- 5 Organize your work and time by planning.
- 6 Balance the time between work and family life, leaving aside time for yourself.
- 7 Prioritize your work and cut down the to-do list.
- 8 Be assertive and learn to delegate work rather than trying to do everything yourself.
- 9 Keep work life and home life separate to avoid stress for yourself as well as others.
- 10 Learn to get the best out of the situation. For example, get another task done while waiting for the delivery of medical supply that has been delayed rather than stressing out over it.
- 11 Seek medical help if experiencing excessive stress.
- 12 Adopt a healthy lifestyle by exercising regularly, taking a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, reducing caffeine intake, avoiding alcohol, drugs, and smoking, and setting aside time every day for relaxation and leisure to recharge your batteries.
- 13 Adopt for yourself the coping mechanisms that you teach your patients, such as guided imagery and visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, assertive training, journal writing, regular exercise, soothing music, and controlled breathing exercises.
- 14 Develop a positive attitude. Convert stress to positive stress, or eustress. Instead of harboring distress, try to enjoy life, forget your grudges, look at things positively, and count your blessings. Change your reaction patterns. Desensitize yourself to tension-producing situations. Imagine yourself handling the situation calmly, and repeat it until you can see the scene without feeling tense. Keep your cool.

- 15** Do relaxation exercise such as transcendental meditation. Learn autogenic training techniques. Relax your muscles, toes, legs, trunks, arms, and head until the entire body is relaxed. This can be done in 15 to 20 minutes. In relaxation technique, make yourself comfortable. Relax, close your eyes, and concentrate on your breathing. Say soothing word to yourself silently each time you exhale. Keep your mind blank in the mid-morning, mid-afternoon, or any time when you have a meditation break.
- 16** Develop self-awareness. Learn your own limits and recognize signs of potential troubles. Know when to withdraw from a situation and when to seek help from others on the job in an attempt to relieve the situation. Develop outside interests. If the stress is work related, leave the organization and find a personal or unique solution. Write down all the bad things about the person or the source of stress. Then throw away or rip off the piece of paper.
- 17** Adopt long-term stress management techniques such as helping others, helping parents, helping yourself, express feelings, and separating your past from your present. Do not recreate stressful scenarios again and again. They will not change in the reliving. Address the present. It is the present over which you can take control. Cultivate support networks. Understand anger. Use humor.
- 18** Talk it out. Talk things over with someone else. The listener can serve as a sounding board. Express your anger. Much stress is associated with unexpressed anger and unexpressed hostility. Look for acceptable ways to express your anger.

Health-care organizations should aim to minimize stressors found at the workplaces of nurses. After all, nurses who can manage their stress and help others deal with stress will benefit the profession as a whole. The following steps are suggested:

- 1** Implement continuing education and staff development programs, which will enhance the quality of care as well as reduce work-related anxiety and stress by updating staff with advances in health care as well as their skills.
- 2** Develop systems for effective two-way communication among staff, including nurses, doctors, and hospital management.
- 3** Give proper job descriptions and performance expectations of staff at the time of recruitment.
- 4** Promote prompt and constructive resolution of conflicts at the workplace.
- 5** Make psychological counseling and therapy easily accessible and available to any troubled staff members.
- 6** Provide compensation for shift work, such as night-duty allowance, to motivate nurses to do night duty rather than viewing it as a burden.
- 7** Establish a safe working environment for staff.
- 8** Motivate staff through positive reinforcement.
- 9** Increase the workforce to avoid overwork and minimize sick leave.

- 10 During nursing training, highlight stress in the profession by teaching student nurses how to identify common stressors and what strategies to adopt to cope effectively with the stress of being a nurse.
- 11 During nursing training, emphasize the psychological aspect of disease conditions so that nurses will be better able to handle their patients when they are practicing.
- 12 Develop in-service health-promotion classes for nurses, for example, healthy weight plans and routine exercise classes.

Note

This chapter is written in cooperation with Fathimath Khumaira, a postgraduate nursing student from Maldives with many years of experience as a nurse practitioner.



KEY POINTS

- Stress is a psychological process that occurs in reaction to events or situations in life. As defined by Hans Selye, stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it. The sources of stress are called stressors.
- When stressed, the body goes through three stages starting with alarm, which is a brief period of high arousal of the sympathetic nervous system to prepare the body for rigorous activity. This is followed by resistance, when the body responds by secreting hormones which enable the person to sustain a high, steady level of activity to endure prolonged stress. If the stress is even more intense and long-lasting, the body enters into the third stage, called exhaustion. Selye calls the three-stage reaction the general adaptation syndrome.
- When a severe and lengthy stressful state occurs, it weakens the immune system and leave the individual vulnerable to illnesses. The symptoms of exhaustion include weakness, fatigue, loss of appetite, and a general lack of interest.
- The effects of stress include impaired task performance, disruption of cognitive functioning, unhealthy lifestyle, psychological problems and disorders, burnout, posttraumatic stress disorder, and physical illness.
- Stressful experiences may also be beneficial. Some individuals are challenged by pressure. Stress can also promote personal growth or self-improvement. It forces people to develop new skills, gain new insights, and acquire new strengths.
- Some positive strategies for coping with stress include, for psychological stress, meditation or autogenic training, recreation, music, and prayer, and for bodily stress, relaxation, reflexology, exercise, and walking.

SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

- 1 What are the stressors that you are experiencing now? Differentiate between eustress and distress.
- 2 What are the stages that an individual goes through in response to a stressful event? Illustrate using your personal experience.
- 3 What relaxation techniques do you apply when you are stressed? Describe them.
- 4 Discuss the concept of general adaptation syndrome. How does it happen?
- 5 Give examples for each of the four types of conflict.
- 6 How do you gauge one's stress level?
- 7 What are the tangible consequences of stress in the job?
- 8 What strategies do you recommend to those who are stressed and who cannot sleep as a result?
- 9 Give at least three negative and three positive effects of stress on the individual. Cite examples.