

Stress and Stress Management in elderly

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- Dr Vasudha Rao

'It's not how old you are, it's how you are old', said Jules Renard. While the relentless wear and tear on our body and mind is a given, we can certainly modulate how we choose to respond to life.

Stress is body's adaptive response to an event or change. Stress can be internal, stemming from one's own thoughts, beliefs and attitudes or external events like change, loss and tragedy. Old age is shown to bring unique challenges and key biological changes in functioning of body and mind. Positive changes (arrival of a grandchild) or negative changes (loss of a close friend), both can trigger a stress response.

What exactly is stress response then?

Under a possibility of a threat, brain initiates what is popularly known as '**fight or flight**' response. Under some conditions, '**freeze or fawn**' response also can be elicited. It causes a surge in stress hormones like adrenaline, noradrenaline, causing increased heart rate, increased respiratory rate, and increased blood flow to the limbs, to facilitate '**flight or fight**'. Fortunately for us, there are no sabertooth tigers or woolly mammoths to run away from! Our stressors tend to be more chronic than an occasional appearance of a wild animal.

How does the stress of illness or loss of loved ones affect seniors, which alter our inner and outer worlds drastically?

Any stressor which triggers a prolonged stress response can have detrimental effects, as the prehistoric programming of our brain is to tackle the stressor and then return to a relaxed state. Elderly citizens at risk for detrimental effects of stress are:

1. Living alone, no adequate social support from friends and relatives
2. Living in conflict ridden families with strained relationships
3. Are economically disadvantaged
4. Experienced recent losses of loved ones/ friends
5. Have progressive or chronic illness
6. Have experienced head injury
7. Two extremes: Lack of rest and lack of adequate exercise
8. Elders who are verbally, physically, financially and sexually abused

What are the common stressors for senior citizens?

1. Loss and grief

2. Role loss (spouse, friends, work) and acquisition (grand parenthood, great grandparenthood)- mix of new demands and opportunities
3. Losses in physical capacity and reserve

A moot question arises at this point. If stress is part of a normal life and some stress is unavoidable, is there a necessity to consciously modulate our response to it? Unmitigated chronic stress is shown by studies to progress into depressive disorder, loss of memory and concentration, slower recovery from physical ailments, trouble eating and sleeping, poor self-care, use of alcohol, cigarettes etc.

It is shown to affect physical health too, contributing to cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension, etc. Stress is also known to shorten telomeres in our chromosomes, like the plastic cap of shoe laces when worn out, causes shoe lace to fray. Shortening of telomeres accelerates the aging process.

The goal of geriatric medicine is to not only prolong life, but to add years which have lively quality. We are coming of age in the sense that we, as a society, have begun our efforts to acknowledge our later years can be a stage of growth, fulfilment and wisdom. One couldn't agree more with Frank Lloyd Wright when he says, 'The longer I live, more beautiful life becomes'.

Effective management of stresses in later years contributes directly to physical and mental well-being, and succeed at the developmental task of elderly, that is to have a sense of accomplishment and meaning about their life, as posited by Erik Erikson, who first saw aging process as a developmental stage. During this stage, people reflect back on the life led, they come away with a sense of accomplishment over a life well lived or a sense of despair over a life mis-spent. A person harbors old sadness, unable to forgive themselves or others for perceived wrongs, dissatisfied with the life led. At any age, it is possible to reflect and work on the view we hold of life.

Now that the need to manage stress in later years is delineated, we could examine how to effectively do so.

1. First step to coping is to recognize one is stressed. If you have suffered a loss, struggling with an illness or a disability, feeling stressed is normal and not a sign of weakness.
2. Prolonged and persistent sadness or anxiety, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities are not a normal part of being older. Seek help from a professional, in addition to seeking support from friends and family. Recognize that mental health needs are as important as physical health needs, in fact, they are not exclusive.
3. Stay active, mentally and physically. Exercise is the medicine which one doesn't have to pay for. Choosing the type of exercise is important. Any activity which one can do every day, preferably an activity one enjoys

will be helpful. If one enjoys brisk walking and stretching, one can choose that. For others, it may be yoga or Tai Chi.

4. Mindfulness practice is helpful. To be here and now, and to be able to sit back and observe one's own feelings and thoughts is called mindfulness. Ability to be mindful gets better with practice, like any other skill. It can be cultivated by practice, with as little as 5-10 min a day.
5. Relaxation exercises, breathing exercises and meditation practice also helps in handling stress.
6. Intentionality in one's relationships, like giving a car for service and daily maintenance at home keeps the car in good condition. Likewise close relationship, especially with one's life partner, one's children is an ongoing work throughout our lives. If there is a relationship problem, attempting to have conversations about it when both partners are calm is needed. It is important to try to listen to and understand one another. In case of long-standing conflicts, one may seek help of a mental health professional to resolve differences.
7. Maintain a regular and healthy diet and exercise schedule. Once retired, or when one loses a spouse, living alone may pose difficulty to stay motivated about healthy lifestyle. Stress may impede regular schedule, and lack of regular schedule may exacerbate stress. It may become a vicious cycle if uninterrupted. It is important to realise that we have an important responsibility towards self-care irrespective of the support system we have. We can interrupt the demotivation by doing precisely the things we are demotivated about.
8. Loneliness is difficult to endure, but not a death sentence, if we make efforts to handle our feelings, and make efforts to build and maintain a social circle in later years too. Seeking new friends, young and old is a fulfilling exercise.
9. Be aware of financial benefits offered to senior citizens. Keep track of your finances and properties. Be up to date with investments, taxes and legal particulars of your assets. Strive to preserve financial independence as much as possible.
10. Acknowledge that the world has changed for the future generation, and give them space to be themselves, to minimize 'generation gap' conflicts at home. Remember, You are always a source a wisdom when they seek it.
11. In case of persistent sadness, loss of interest and fatigue, seek help of a professional to manage these symptoms.
12. No matter what is your health condition, you are always valued and regarded as a keeper of wisdom!

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As Victor Hugo said, “ When grace is joined with wrinkles, it is adorable. There is an unspeakable dawn in happy old age”. How right he was!

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