

1988

## Adolescents and stress

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### Recommended Citation

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## Adolescents and stress

### Abstract

Adolescents today live in a very busy, hectic world that is constantly changing. Problems such as divorce, death, abuse, violence, and accidents can have a negative effect of stress on adolescents (Omizo, Omizo, & Suzuki, 1988). Children who are under stress may become emotionally depressed, impulsive, aggressive, anti-social, self-destructive, or irritable. Herbert (1983) stated that stress may produce a variety of physical symptoms such as: increased heart rate, tenseness in the stomach, sweaty palms, headaches, loss of appetite, or insomnia.

Adolescents and Stress

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

Bret Darnell Adams

July 1988

This research paper by: Bret Darnell Adams

Entitled: ADOLESCENTS AND STRESS

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

June 27, 1988  
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Adolescents today live in a very busy, hectic world that is constantly changing. Problems such as divorce, death, abuse, violence, and accidents can have a negative effect of stress on adolescents (Omizo, Omizo, & Suzuki, 1988). Children who are under stress may become emotionally depressed, impulsive, aggressive, anti-social, self-destructive, or irritable. Herbert (1983) stated that stress may produce a variety of physical symptoms such as: increased heart rate, tenseness in the stomach, sweaty palms, headaches, loss of appetite, or insomnia.

Although the term "stress" has become part of our everyday vocabulary, its definitions vary among different authors and researchers. One formulation of stress developed by Lazarus (Forman & O'Malley, 1984), proposed that stress should refer to a stimulus, a response, and intervening variables. Laster (1981) defined stress both as a nonspecific adaptive response of the body to any demand and as an internal or external stimulus. Herbert (1983) used Dr. Hans Selye's definition, which described stress as the wear and tear on the body caused by life at any one time. One more definition of stress, which was offered by Karr and Johnson (1987), is that stress is brought about by substantial imbalance between demand and response capability under conditions in which failure to meet demand has important consequences.

Stress is an integral element of life and has gained certain negative connotations in some quarters. However, not all stress is bad (Jennings & Vice, 1987; Sensor, 1986). An adolescent's perceptions determine whether stress is negative (distress) or positive and motivational (eustress) (Price, 1985).

Adolescents may be compared to the "plate spinner" from the Ed Sullivan Show on T.V. A plate or two may fall for lack of momentum (stress) and others may fall because they are spun too vigorously (Abood, 1986). For many adolescents, stress is a direct result of trying to keep all of their plates spinning. Students need enough stress for motivation, although too much stress may have a negative effect and result in decreased performance.

Students' lives are so involved with schedules, activities, and personal or academic concerns that they don't realize just how much stress they are experiencing. Adults may understand when their bodies are reacting to stress, but adolescents do not, nor is it likely that they know how to deal with it (Johns & Johns, 1983). Not only is stress harder on adolescents because they are not aware of their own tense state but also because they have less control of their own worlds (Karr & Johnson, 1987; Herbert, 1983).

The purpose of this paper is to review literature dealing with the factors that cause negative, or too much stress (distress) for adolescents, and to consider ways to help students to manage their stressors.

#### Factors of Stress

A wide variety of factors affect adolescents' stress level. The difficult part is to define what is stressful for them. Because, what may be stressful to one may not be stressful to another, depending on how each perceives stress. An event or stressor can be stressful only if an individual perceives it to be (Forman & O'Malley, 1984).

Roghamann's 1973 study (Sensor, 1986) on the influence of stress on child illness found that children were twice as likely to become ill on a day in which they experienced stress, and the chances of illness were three times greater the day after a stressful event occurred. Other similar studies have shown that children are more vulnerable to various medical and psychological disorders during the period of six to twelve months surrounding a major life event (Karr & Johnson, 1987).

Price (1985) categorized adolescent stress factors into four basic groups: psychological, social, physical, and spiritual. These may be divided into three categories: (1) predisposing factors (Type A personality, value of health, locus of control, perceived severity, perceived susceptibility,

and knowledge of stress); (2) reinforcing factors (peers' and parents' attitudes); and (3) enabling factors (stress reduction skills and stress reduction resources).

Problems that may cause stress for adolescents were divided into five different categories by Laster (1981). These are: (a) a loss of significant other through death, divorce, separation, or illness; (b) an introduction into the family of a new member through pregnancy, remarriage of a parent, or care of an aged grandparent; (c) a change in the status or responsibilities of the family through illness, change in a parent's job, change in residence, or unemployment; (d) an interpersonal conflict concerning roles, responsibilities, freedoms, relationships, or values; and (e) demoralization, feelings of inadequacy, loss of control and/or lowered self-esteem due to alcohol, drug addiction, sexual promiscuity or abuse, lack of freedom, disorganized living, over-crowding, or lack of privacy.

Forman and O'Malley (1984) identified only two basic categories of stressors--achievement stressors and social stressors. Achievement stressors are related to academic subject matter and evaluation of performance. Social stressors are related to social relationships with peers, teachers, and participation in classroom activities.



Traumatic factors of stress for adolescents discussed by Sensor (1986) included: divorce, abuse, death, and economics. At the junior high level, factors of stress that rated the highest on research done by Coddington (1972) were unwed pregnancy, death, divorce, birth or death of a sibling, and loss of a job by a parent (Karr & Johnson, 1987). Additional stress factors listed by Herbert (1983) included family vacations (or the lack of), loss of a friend, death of a pet, illness or injury, physical growth and puberty, change of a teacher or school, change in lunch programs or busing arrangements, academic difficulties, and peer pressures. All of these have similar basic factors of stress which are family-related, loss-related, or school-related.

In Omizo, Omizo, and Suzuki's (1988) study to investigate stressors and symptoms of stress in high school students, a sample of 60 children from grades 1-12 was used. Data were collected from interviews with participants and teachers. The five greatest stressors cited by high school students were, in order: (1) the future, (2) school-related problems, (3) peer pressure, (4) substance abuse, and (5) family problems.

West and Wood (1970) investigated the idea that pressures public school students face are too severe and contribute to less than optimal conditions for development. Results of a

brief questionnaire given to 331 students grades five through twelve indicated that the amount of time adolescents spend each day on homework may be a primary source of stress. In the second part of the study it was found that 59 percent of students worried a great deal about not doing well in school, 65 percent worried about exams, and 35 percent reported that school problems were their greatest worry. According to them, schools vary widely in the amount of reported pressures on adolescents, and therefore, it would be unwise to increase the pressures in school until a local study of school pressures and how they relate to stress on adolescents could be done.

In a study by West and Wills (1982) on academic stress among 300 American adolescents and 400 British ages 11-16, it was found that roughly one-third of the sample reported dropping out of some enjoyable activity or hobby because of increased school work. For an academic stress scale consisting of thirty-five items, the test-retest reliability was fairly high at .78. Factors that emerged from the data were fear of failure, peer stress, importance of school, and parental stress.

One hundred eighty-nine volunteers, grades 6-8, were involved in a cross-sectional design study done by Basch and Kersch (1986). The Adolescent Life Change Events Scale, developed by Yeaworth and colleagues (1980), was used to

collect data. The seven events which rated as most upsetting were, in order: (1) death of mother, (2) death of brother/sister, (3) death of father, (4) death of a close friend, (5) involved with drugs/alcohol, (6) parents divorced/separated, and (7) arrested by police.

An adolescent's perception of stress, school environment, and family environment are all important in determining the amount of stress in this person's life. The findings presented in this section suggest that parents and teachers are sensitive to the potentially adverse emotional impact of the factors of stress listed above. Inattention to these factors by counselors, teachers, and parents may convey that they do not understand or that they do not care.

#### Stress Management

Once adolescents understand some of the factors that cause negative stress (distress), they may begin searching for ways of managing these stressors. One strategy for helping adolescents, discussed by Laster (1981), focused on the development of mature interpersonal competence. Based on Laster's Stress Mediation Model, factors contributing to this competence include skills in problem solving, nurturance, interaction, self-control, self-knowledge, and critical and creative thinking.

Omizo, Omizo, and Suzuki (1988) offered the following suggestions for school counselors to use to help students manage stress. Counselors could serve teachers, parents, and administrators as a consultant and could conduct workshops to help students and adults understand stress and its management. Family counseling and parent groups are another way the counselor could help reduce stress among students and parents. Also, the counselor needs to be a good role model in managing his/her own stress effectively according to Omizo et al. (1988).

Jennings and Vice (1987) divided stress management into four areas: students' abilities, track records, pressure of time, and pressure of performance. In working with students' abilities, they suggest that students can be encouraged to: concentrate on their strengths while acknowledging weaknesses, to set realistic, individual goals, and to recognize and avoid conflicting goals. Students' track records can be dealt with by encouraging students' positive thinking and by positive comments given by teachers when grading papers. Suggestions for helping students deal with the pressure of time may include dividing a big assignment into several manageable tasks, they may work to become well organized, or they may become more efficient in time management. The final area is related to pressure of performance. In helping

students manage stress related to performance, they suggested that teachers give many chances to perform a task, space tests appropriately, make classroom requirements realistic for students, and give adequate notice for tests.

Allan and Anderson (1986) believed that it was helpful if students have skills to cope and manage stress before a crisis event happens. Some of these skills may include an understanding of what a crisis event is, an awareness of feelings, thoughts, and how they may change overtime in response to a crisis event, and coping strategies that may be used by students. The classroom guidance program that they suggested is divided into four lessons, consisting of introduction, writing about a crisis event, crisis management techniques, and summary to integrate understanding.

Eight major components of stress management outlined by Stevens and Pfof (1984) may be used with an individual or in a group format. These eight components include: assessment, stress information, relaxation training, cognitive restructuring, problem solving, time management, nutritional counseling, and exercise planning.

Caudill and Carrington (1986) believed that an instructor can help reduce student stress in the classroom by identifying and describing stress symptoms, and by communicating to the student statistics about stress to show its seriousness.

Students' stress may also be reduced by using examples of stress that other students have and by talking things out. Two additional suggestions by them were to be sure to have a sense of humor and to laugh to help cope with stress.

Barker (1987) explained that stressful situations fall into two categories: those which students can't change and those they can. If the problem or stressor is something the student cannot change, then the focus needs to be on using certain techniques to manage the resulting stress. These techniques can help whenever a student becomes nervous, tense, angry, or frustrated. Some examples of stress-reducing techniques may include positive affirmations, relaxation techniques, or taking a break. It was also stated that students need to recognize and act upon those stressful situations that can be changed. Skills useful in recognizing and changing stressful situations include problem solving, role-playing, and organizing.

Richardson, Beall and Jessup's (1982) study showed that a stress management unit for high school students could result in a measurable reduction in heart rates in stressful situations. The experimental group (N = 53 students) received a specific stress management unit while the control group (N = 32 students) received a traditional mental health unit. The stress management unit (fifteen-50 minute class periods)

consisted of three parts including the nature of stress, identification of stressors, and stress management. At the conclusion of this study, the mean heart rate for the experimental group at relaxation had dropped from 83.75 on the pre-test to 68.15 on the post-test while the control group's mean heart rate decreased from 71 to 69. The study showed that a stress management unit for high school students will result in some measurable effectiveness.

In a final study, four helpful suggestions for teachers to use in creating a low stress environment were presented by Barker (1987). These suggestions for teachers are to (1) manage your own stress effectively, (2) create an atmosphere that allows for mistakes, (3) take time to listen to students, and (4) avoid end-of-the class/day bedlam.

The studies and suggestions discussed in this section involved many similar stress management skills for adolescents to learn and use. Self-control and problem-solving were mentioned by almost all authors. Other frequently mentioned skills included exercise and proper nutrition.

One major difference among the authors is that some focused on pre-crisis event intervention, while others focused on managing stress during or after a crisis event happens. A second major difference is to whom the author directed his or her information. Some information was directed to

adolescents, while other information was directed to teachers and counselors to be used in helping adolescents in dealing with stress.

Although teachers and counselors cannot be expected to learn and apply all the various stress reduction techniques discussed in this section, teaching students as many techniques as possible could be helpful. If students learn to relax, it can give them a sense of control over the way they feel, think, act, and learn. Johns and Johns (1983) stated that it is this sense of control that enables children to deal effectively with stress.

#### Conclusion

One overall goal as a counselor is to help students recognize and manage stressful situations on their own. This may be done by teaching a stress management unit in a classroom or may be done by working with teachers, parents, and administrators, in groups or as individuals, to create a less stressful environment.

In these studies it was found that there are both positive and negative effects of stress on adolescents. Students experience mostly negative stress (distress) and most writers have based management practices on dealing with this type of stress. Counselors can help adolescents in a variety of ways using any of the models presented above. There are



also many other models for stress management that have been written for adults that may be adapted to use with adolescents. The important point is that counselors help adolescents to find ways of dealing with this negative stress.

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