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Author(s)	Teo Chua Tee and Lachlan Crawford
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STRESSED OUT! STRESS RESOLUTION FOR SINGAPORE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN 2001

Review by Chu Tee Teo and Lachlan Crawford

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered why so few individuals possess such calmness and serenity that they are not shaken by adverse circumstances? These individuals are often noted to be very accomplished and successful in life as well. If human beings can become composed and peaceful given similar toils and traumas in life, there is really no need for so many others to feel constantly "stressed". While it may be important to educate youths in science and arts, it is perhaps more essential to teach young children how to cope with stress in the process of growing up, both at school and at home. Education, without teaching children about the intricacies of being human, of knowing one's limits and capacities, of how to be happy, is really not complete.

It is a disturbing fact that Singapore students are "stressed" with cases of teenage suicides reported in the newspapers (Mathi, 2001; Mathi, 2000; Goh, 2000). This warrants the concern of adults, parents and educators. In a survey by the local press of 1,742 Singapore children aged ten to twelve, it was found that almost four out of five students spend up to three hours studying after school; seven in ten receive tuition; and one in three attend classes like ballet, music, speech and drama out of school.

The main finding is that Singapore children are so stressed by school that they are more fearful of failing in examinations than of their parents dying (Davie, 2001).

This article examines the sources of stress in school students in Singapore and suggests various strategies for resolving or at least cushioning, them.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

What is Stress?

Rowshan (1993, p. 12) suggests that stress is a physiological response when a person is confronted by both real and imaginary dangers. Stress occurs when there is a discrepancy between the demands made upon a person and his or her ability to respond to these demands. It can have dire effects. School-related stress in America is the most prevalent, untreated cause of academic failure in schools. It is believed to afflict an alarming six to ten million children a year (Barker, 1987). In any classroom of twenty-five students, it has been estimated that between one and three students are at risk of developing stress-related problems which would probably interfere with learning (Hill & Sarason, 1966).

For those who are reluctant to face up to this challenge, stress becomes a source of pain and distress. Those who willingly face the challenge, however, are enriched by the experience. What is stressful to one person may actually be a source of stimulus to another. Understanding the nature of stress and how individuals adapt to it has important implications for personal development, as psychological stress can be a stimulus or an impediment to personal growth and fulfillment. Managing stress is thus an art, and life is a workshop in which people can master the art and grow in the process.

Sources of Stress in School Students in Singapore

In recent months the concept of “stress in education” has been a hot topic in the local media. The *Straits Times* (Davies, 2001; Mathi, 2001) reports that obsession with grades, the Primary 4 Streaming examination, the PSLE, homework, assessment books, extra tuition and the second language exams which students must pass to enter junior college or university are major sources for stress for Singaporean school children. Indeed, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, has acknowledged that the education system is stressful. However, he pointed out that, since Singapore has no natural resources other than its people, it is important to maximize the potential of each and every individual. The education system has thus been rather rigorously structured to bring out the best in each child (“Parents can,” 2001; “Rigorous education system,” 2001).

Another major source of stress is parents’ unrealistic expectations of their children.

Very often, parents send their children to out-of-school classes over and above what the school provides in the hope of increasing their children’s academic performance. These include computer lessons, music lessons, swimming lessons, ballet lessons and tuition classes. Many parents hunt for popular assessment books, new IQ tests, new techniques for developing mathematical skills, and English enrichment texts. It is estimated that parents spend up to \$320 million a year on private tuition classes, with each family spending about \$130 a month. Apparently, more than 28 million hours are spent on extra tuition yearly (“Tuition,” 2000). As long as employers and scholarship sponsors value grades, Singh and Teng (2001) declare, that parents will continue to enroll their children in tuition classes.

Stress on school children also comes from a variety of complex sociological factors such as single parent families, child abuse, low socio-economic status, pressure from siblings and peers and other personal factors like emotional, social, developmental and learning disorders (“They’re not crazy,” 2001). Psychiatrists have noted that children’s attendance at psychiatric clinics has risen dramatically in the last few years. They believe that this disturbing trend is generated by a host of societal factors taken together.

Recognizing stress

The first step towards successful intervention is to be aware of stress and to identify the symptoms. The symptoms of stress are warning signs for a person to become conscious of their mental state. They may be physical, mental,

emotional, social or spiritual (Rowshan, 1993, p.14-16). Examples of physical signs are a pounding heart, back pain, chest pain, or chronic fatigue. Mental signs include having racing thoughts, poor concentration, frequent lapses of memory, constant negative self-talk, phobias and suicidal thoughts. Emotional signs are rapid mood swings, anger, worry, restlessness, feelings of despair, nervous laughter and hypochondria. Social signs include withdrawal, lack of communication, irritability towards people, resentment and intolerance. Spiritual signs include feelings of emptiness, lack of forgiveness, loss of meaning in life and hostility towards others. A person needs to be aware of how often and when these symptoms are experienced; for instance, whether the person becomes depressed when working on a difficult project.

Bandura (1993) suggests that students who have a heightened sense of efficacy, that is, confidence in their ability to manage stress, may be less vulnerable because they perceive themselves as having the tools to cope with adverse circumstances. Some suggestions for helping students develop stress-

management strategies are given below.

It should be noted that any activity, when conducted beyond the bounds of moderation, does more harm than good. Students must be encouraged to undertake work and play in moderation; excessive computer games, over-anxious or "kiasu" syndromes of attending every tuition class, all need to be eliminated for healthy growth of children. Stress comes about when there is unnecessary emphasis on a particular aspect of growth, when there is no balance between study and play. Striving towards obtaining 4As for the PSLE examinations, and neglecting all play is an example.

CONCLUSION

Children in Singapore are under stress from a variety of sources including the demands of a competitive education system; pressure from parents; and a variety of social, developmental and emotional learning disorders. This can result in alienation from school, absenteeism and attrition. The ability to manage stress successfully is critical if students are to survive and thrive in the classroom.

IMPLICATIONS

- *Acquire consultation skills which will enable you to talk about the source of stress and discuss possible solutions.*

Set aside a time once or twice a week to discuss your problems with another person - a close friend or family member, or both. When you discuss frustrations, try to find solutions to the stressful situation. By airing difficulties and attempting to negotiate a solution, you may be able to resolve your problems.

- *Learn skills and attitudes that make tasks easier and more successful.*

Practice effective organization skills. Break down large tasks into manageable steps. Learn to type and revise assignments on a word processor. Learn about yourself and your priorities and use the information to make decisions. Learn to say "no" gracefully when someone offers you another attractive (or unpleasant) task about which you have a choice. Tell yourself that every step you take will bring you closer to your goal. Mark the days that are left on the calendar and enjoy crossing out each one as you near the finish.

- *Learn to manage time effectively to avoid using up valuable energy and emotion on useless worry.*

This means planning your time; recognizing your tasks; placing them in some kind of priority order; carrying them out; ticking them off as you do them; and achieving a sense of satisfaction at the completion of each task.

- *Learn to meditate.*

Meditation means quietening the mind. When you meditate, the mind focuses on a specific point and enters a relaxed state with the brain producing alpha waves, a peaceful state of the mind. Meditation of twenty or more minutes a day is known to relax the body and refresh or calm an overstimulated mind (Woodward, 2001, p.44; Rowshan, 1993, p. 41).

- *Change your diet to reduce stress.*

Certain foods, such as coffee, chocolate and soft drinks are loaded with caffeine, a stimulant known to increase anxiety. Try cutting out caffeine. Foods which contain vitamin B complexes and vitamin C are known to be anti-stressors, so eat balanced meals of fresh fruits and vegetables rather than diets filled with fast foods and sweets. After all, a sound mind works well in a healthy body (Bradfield & Fones, 1984).

- *Take time out for enjoyable activities.*

Everyone needs a support system. Find friends, teachers or relatives with whom you have fun and be yourself, and set aside the pressures of schoolwork, or difficult relationships. Reward your efforts, by giving yourself work breaks: listen to your favourite music, shoot baskets or participate in some other brief activity that is mentally restful or fun. Exercise is particularly effective in reducing stress. It not only provides time out, but also changes your body chemistry as you burn off muscle tension built up from accommodating stress (Long, 1988).

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