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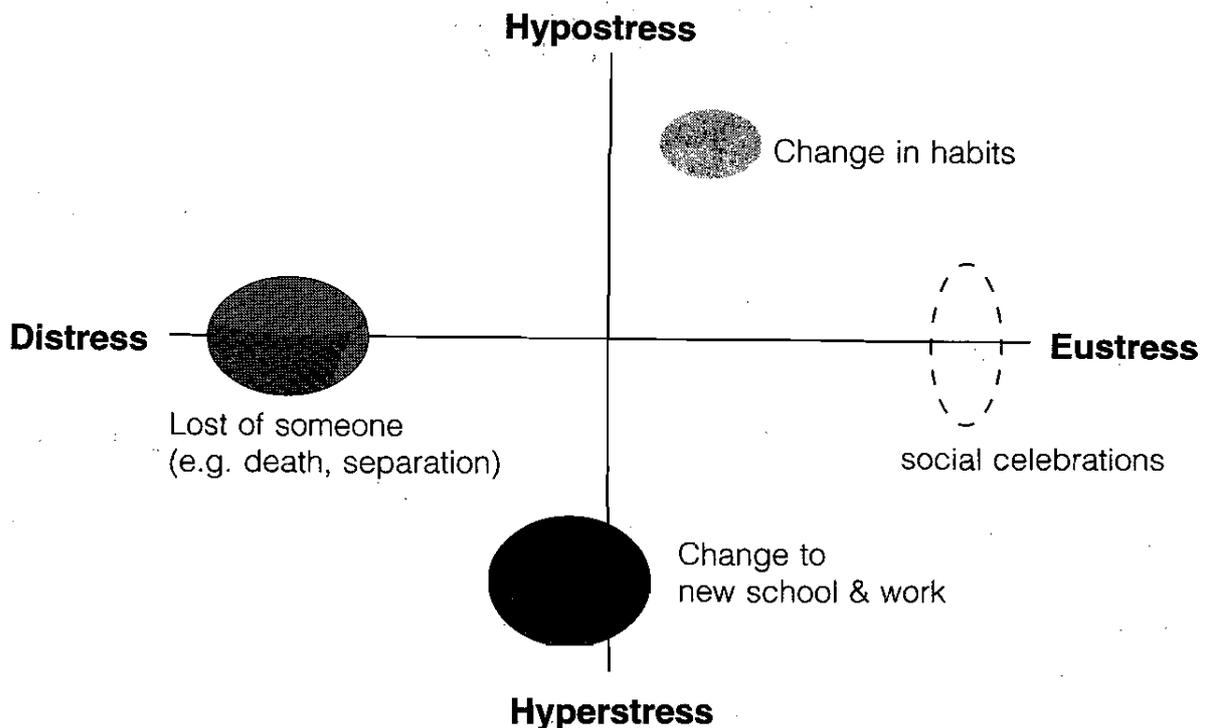
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Stress: More Than What We Know

TAN AI GIRL

Variations of Stress

Distress or unpleasant stress is what most people commonly mean when they say someone is stressed. It is associated with feelings such as worry, anxiety, frustration, fear, discontent, and pain. Loss of someone and divorce are examples of life events that may bring forth *distress*. However, stress does not always generate negative outcomes (Saunders, 1992; Gray & Freeman, 1988). A model of variations of stress (Selye, 1983) suggests that, besides *distress*, there are three other variations of stress: *Eustress* (*pleasant stress*), *hypostress* (*understress*), and *hyperstress* (*overstress*). *Eustress* is pleasant stress because it generates positive outcomes such as an improvement in physical and/or mental functioning. Social celebrations such as celebrating new years and festivals, marriage, and personal achievement are examples of life events that induce *eustress* (see Figure 1). When a person suffers from boredom, physical immobility or sensory deprivation, he (or she) experiences *hypostress*. A change in habits (e.g. eating and sleeping), for instance, might generate *hypostress*. When one has exceeded the limit of one's adaptability, one encounters *hyperstress*. An example of life event that may induce *hyperstress* is a change in working hours and responsibility.



Source: Modified from Tan (1995)

Figure 1: Variations of Stress and Examples of Life Events

Stress, according to Selye's (1980) definition, is the *non-specific (that is common) result of any demand upon the body*, be it mental or somatic demand for survival and the accomplishment of our aims. The non-specific adaptive response of the body to any agent or situation is always the same, regardless of the type of stimulus. What varies is *the degree of the response* which in turn depends only on the intensity of the demand for adjustment. A person's stress level is not affected by the type of stress-stimulator, but by his (or her) skills to adjust and/or to adapt to any stressful situation. Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend (1980) and Selye (1980) share the same standpoint that stressfulness is the accumulation of failure to adjust to any situation, regardless of the type of situation. According to the psychosocial model of stress process (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1980), the state of stress is usually inferred rather than observed, and its nature does not need to be specified. This is similar to Selye's argument on the *non-specific* characteristic of stress. Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend (1980) suggest that "stressfulness of a particular life event may vary from group to group and may change over time" (p.11). The way

individuals perceive the life event is influenced by implicit norms that exist in a culture. Each culture imposes its standards or norms implicitly on existing objects and phenomena. The way a person responds is influenced by standards or norms that he (or she) has learned in the process of socialization. In a cross-cultural study (Tan, 1995), an outstanding personal achievement, for instance, was perceived as a life event that induced eustress for Japanese and Malaysian students. However, it also brought forth *hypostress* for Malay Malaysians, and caused *hyperstress* for Japanese students (see next section for more discussion of culture influences a person's perception of stress).

In a survey, 55 student teachers of National Institute of Education who returned from a five-week teaching practice in primary schools participated in an activity. In the first part of the activity, the word "stress" was displayed. Student teachers matched their emotional responses to this term. Most of them used adjectives with negative connotations such as frustrated, panic, worried, tired, upset, and miserable. In the second part, student teachers listed out a few stressful life events that they experienced in the past few months. Many of them mentioned teaching practice, assignments, and examinations. In the third part, student teachers evaluated and recorded their current emotional state when they thought about the same stressful life events. Some of them cited content and relief. The use of positive adjectives to describe their present emotional responses indicated that their stressful experiences did not last. Student teachers' perceptions of stress supported Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend's argument that the degree of stress of a life event varies according to time.

Factors Influencing A Person's Perception of Stress

Regardless of the influence of culture, some **life events** are more unpleasant than others. Examples of these life events are divorce and the loss of friends or relatives. Some life events such as vacation, marriage and festivals are more pleasant. **Culture** influences a person's perception of stress (see Figure 2). In a collectivist society where goals of a group override those of an individual, outstanding personal achievement may induce discomfort. Japanese students, for example, perceived personal achievement as a life event that induced *eustress* and *hyperstress* (Tan, 1995). Group reward and team work

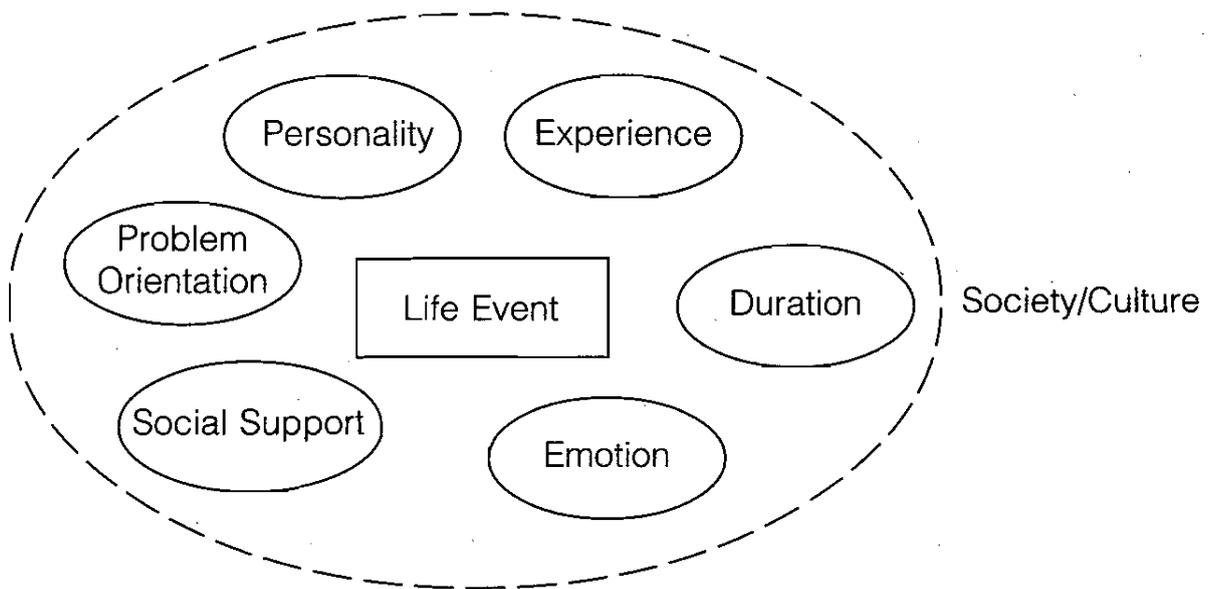


Figure 2: Factors Influencing A Person's Perception of A Life Event

are two important values that make the Japanese achieve excellence (Suzawa, 1985). If one performs differently from the group members, one challenges the principle of commonality. In the same study (Tan, 1995), Malay Malaysian students perceived any changes in religious activities as more stressful than their Japanese counterparts. The Malays are by birth Muslims. They take formal religious courses in schools. Coincidentally, the survey was conducted in the Ramadhan month. Malay students may identify the fasting experience with the change of religious activity.

If a person is in a particularly stressful situation for a long **duration**, he (or she) will associate that life event with a higher degree of stress. It is believed that an appropriate amount of stress is needed for high achievement and creativity. However, a person may lose his (or her) psychological competence as well as biological functions after a prolonged and repeated period of distress. One has to be aware of one's "breaking point" or the limit of adaptability to a stressful situation. If a person exceeds his (or her) limit of perseverance and endurance in a stressful situation, he (or she) may not be able to recover. An analogy is made with the theory of elasticity in physics. If a material surpasses the critical point of elasticity, it cannot return to its original form.

Experience influences a person's perception of stressful life events. Student teachers who experienced positive psychological states during teaching practice are likely to feel satisfied and happy, when they think about them. Considering positive experiences with the life event, one may relate it to *eustress*. However, if one encountered negative psychological outcomes with the life event, one is likely to associate it with *distress*. Besides teaching practice and assignments, examinations may cause stress. Student teachers who attended theoretical courses after a five-week practical activity had to readjust themselves to the routine of university life, the schedule of examination, and to deadlines of assignments. In addition, they had to be able to shift their role of a teacher back to that of a student.

It is believed that the level of stress can be reduced when appropriate **social support** exists. Social supports may act as a buffer to minimise the degree of stress. **Personality** influences a person's perception of stress (see Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). **Emotion** and stress are interrelated (see Marco & Sul, 1993). Good moods, for instance, reduce the negative impact of a stressful life event. **Problem orientation** refers to the motivational component of the problem-solving process. It consists of generalised cognitive, emotional, and behavioural response sets that a person brings to new problem-solving situations (D' Zurilla & Sheedy, 1991). This orientation arises from past problem-solving experiences. It can influence the perception and appraisal of new problem-solving situations. It may either facilitate or inhibit problem solving performances, depending on the nature of the particular cognitive, emotional, and behavioural response tendencies.

D' Zurilla and Sheedy (1991) assumed that problem solving is an important coping strategy that reduces or prevents psychological stress. *Positive problem* orientation enables a person to better manage problematic situations and emotional effects. If a person possesses positive attitudes, a life event may be perceived as a challenge or an opportunity. He (or she) will consider the state of discomfort as a temporary, expected, and normal phenomenon. He (or she) will design active approaches to deal with the situation, and respond with positive emotions such as hope and eagerness. Triandis and colleagues (1988) pointed out that harmony, security, and social support that are available in a society or culture may minimise the degree of stress that a person perceives (see Figure 3).

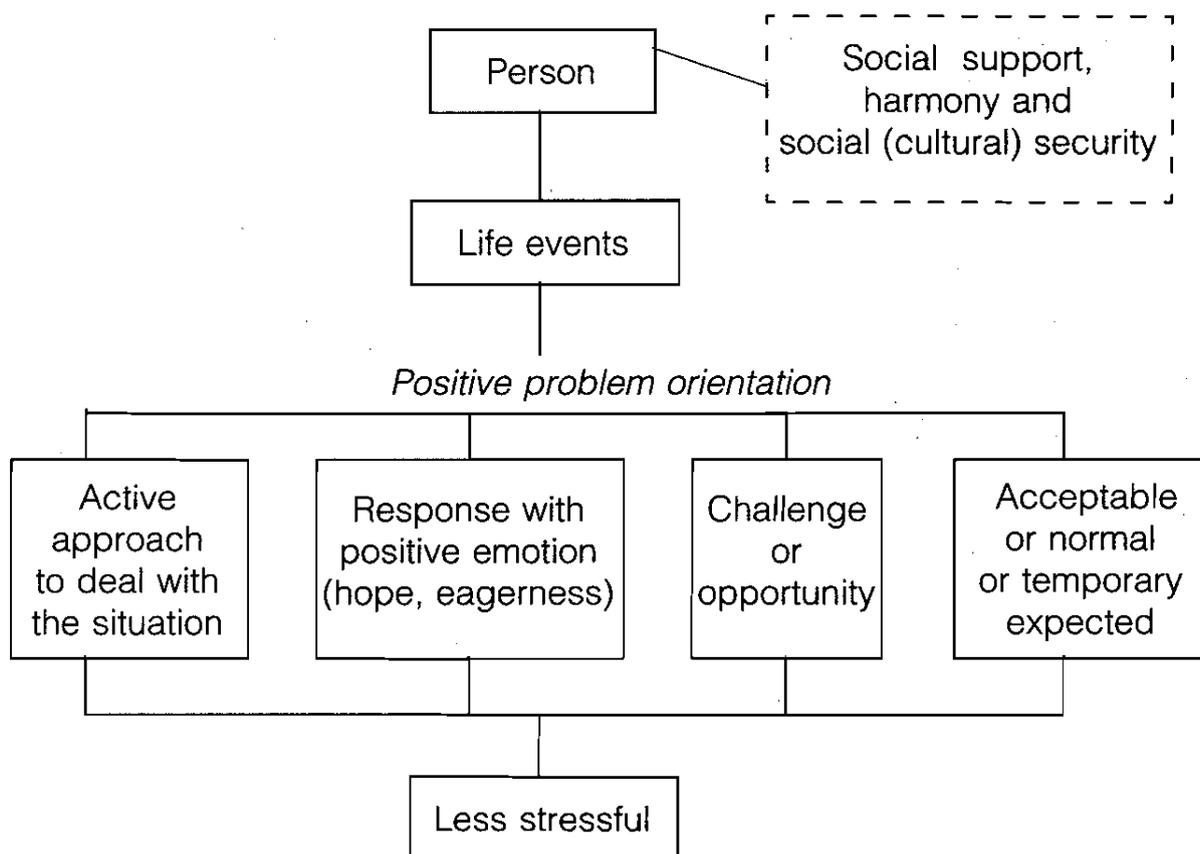


Figure 3: Positive Problem Orientation Improves the Perception of Stress

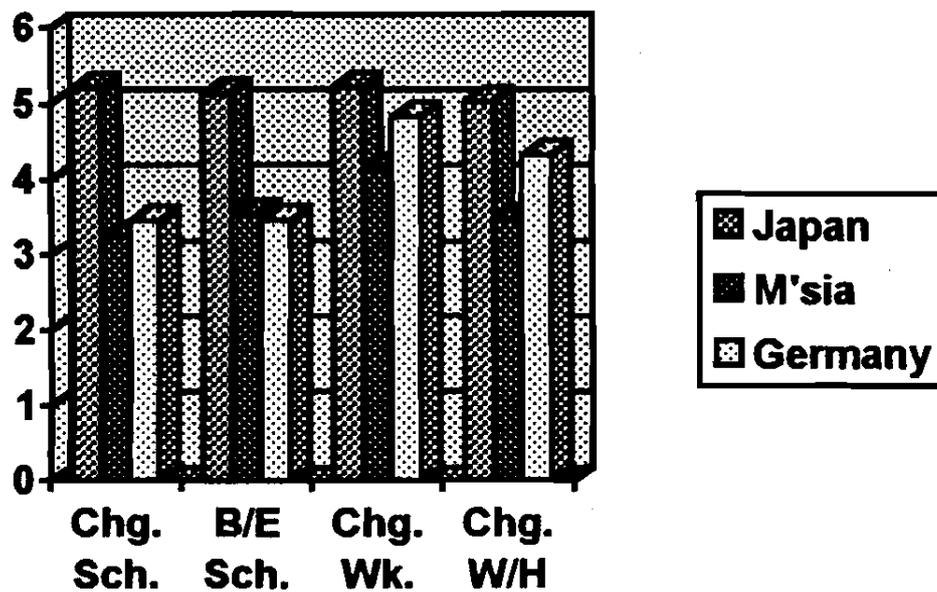
Stress from Work and School Across Cultures

Schooling and work are two life events that concern students and teachers. Examinations, workloads in school, and homework are stressors among Singapore students (Thomas, 1989). Secondary school students in the express stream (a 4-year course) perceive higher academic and social stress than their counterparts in the normal stream (a 5-year course) (Tien, 1993). Living in a society where respect for superiors is highly appreciated, Singapore teachers also perceive high stress from communication with superiors (STU, 1995). Chaplain (1995) investigated the English primary school teachers' stress. He discovered that there was a positive correlation between professional concern (0.79, Pearson's r), pupil's behaviour and attitude (0.31, Pearson's r), and professional task (0.45, Pearson's r) with occupational teacher stress. Pitchers and Fogarty (1995) compared occupational stress between teachers and non-teaching professionals. Their findings showed that there were significant differences between these groups.

Teachers perceived a higher level of stress in adjusting to role overload, role boundary, responsibility, and physical environment than non-teaching professionals. Workloads and student misbehaviours are good predictors of teaching stress (Bolye et al., 1995). Hart, Wearing, and Conn (1995) confirmed that student misbehaviour is a major cause of a teacher's stress.

In a study (Tan, 1994), Japanese students' conceptions of stress were compared to those of their Malaysian and German counterparts. The findings showed that *stress induced from any change in schooling or working* was common in all these groups.

Perceived stress (mean)



Note: Chg. Sch. = Change to a new school
 B/E Sch. = Begin or end of formal schooling
 Chg. Wk. = Change in responsibility at work
 Chg. W/H = Change in working hours

Source: Tan (1994)

Figure 4: Degree of Stress Across Cultures

The values of mean showed that Japanese students perceived a higher level of stress than their counterparts in Malaysia and Germany. Japanese perceptions of life events that were related to schooling and work were unique. Ceasing from work (or school) or starting a new task at work means one has to be in a new environment, and has to make social (organised) adaptations. To the Japanese, changes at work and going to a new school are likely to be associated with adaptations to new interpersonal relationships. The development of a sense of belonging to a new *in-group* takes a long period. Working in a group and keeping to the accepted norms of the society are essential values learned in the socialisation process by the Japanese children (Dore and Sako, 1980). To begin or to end formal schooling means to leave a group and to accept a new group's norm, either at college or at work. Being a new member of a group is stressful because one has to behave like the others to be one of the *in-group*. The same explanation can be applied to a Japanese who experiences *hyperstress* when there is a change in responsibilities at work.

Implications for Teachers

"Our goal should be to strike a balance between the equally destructive forces of hypo-and hyperstress, to find as much eustress as possible, and to minimise distress"

(Selye, 1983, p. 18).

Students and teachers today experience a high level of school stress or work stress. Stress is a component of life. Many of us are aware of negative impacts of stress but neglect positive sides of stress. In stress management classes, students learn how to prevent distress, and how to transform negative stress into motivating forces. Successful management of stress uses positive problem orientations (see Figure 4 for the details). Zeidner (1995) found that students who perceived the test situation as challenging used more problem-focused coping, whereas those who perceived the situation as a threat used less problem-focused coping. For a difficult and complicated task, proper planning and suitable schedule are essential for reducing negative stress. If a person meets unchangeable external constraints, he (or she) should learn how to match his (or her) ability with the goal and how to exert a balance between social expectations and self-

expectations. To reduce stress caused by high social expectations, one should develop a mechanism that moderates the self-perceived social expectation and self-expectations. Sufficient rest is needed for a good performance. Students should be psychologically and physically fit. They need to possess a plan that allows them to study efficiently, and at the same time enable them to have ample physical, emotional, and cognitive rest.

Culture, to a certain extent, influences a person's perception of stressful life events. Culture-specific features of stress are often associated with some common behaviours of a group. An example of this is the Japanese's *in-group* behaviours and their negative impacts on the Japanese's perception of extraordinary personal achievements. In the Singapore classroom where multiculturalism exists, teachers should be aware of various stressors that are related to cultural practices. Singapore's express stream students experience more stress than their counterparts in normal stream classes in terms of social expectations for better academic achievements. Besides cultural factors, individual factors may affect the perception of stress. The degree of stress that an individual perceives is subjective and varies according to situation and time.

Whether it is at work or in school, interpersonal relationship causes stress. Teachers should be aware that interpersonal relationship is an important factor that facilitates as well as reduces stress. Good interpersonal relationship acts as a source of social support. Bad interpersonal relationship is a source of *distress* or other forms of negative stress. Workload may be reduced if a co-operative learning philosophy exists in a group. Through a good social network and supportive peers, competitions may be perceived as challenges. Social expectations may be perceived as encouragement.

Summary

This article highlights different variations of stress. Stress should be investigated in its positive as well as negative aspects. Positive stress is motivating, whereas negative stress is discouraging. The positive aspect of stress can be managed through facilitating problem orientations and successful stress management strategies. The

negative aspect of stress should be reduced. Culture, individual factors, and interpersonal relationship should be considered in stress management. Various methods should be developed to help students to cope with stressful situations.

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