

Modern Life with its de-emphasis on community and its emphasis on individual pursuits and achievements has resulted in ever spiralling levels of stress on its unsuspecting subjects. Stress has become the buzz word in the last two decades or so with many physical and emotional problems being linked to it. Medical practitioners are becoming increasingly more attuned to the psychological impact of environment or people's health and in some cases are ruling out physical and physiological causation in favour of exploring the impact of stress. The teaching profession has been impacted significantly by the force of modernity which has brought changes in value system and ushered in an era of rights over responsibility. This has resulted in many teachers seeking assistance for the high levels of stress either personally or referred by their medical practitioner. Network Services Centre in conjunction with the Office of Public Sector Reform has been conducting Stress Management workshops for Teachers as a preventative response to this reality.

These workshops are geared toward a Behavioural Approach to managing stress and therefore seek to; 1. Help persons to understand the stress dynamic and its impact on physical/emotional health; 2. Build an awareness of how our bodies indicate to us when we are under stress and; 3. Equip the participants with the relevant tools for dealing with stress.

In understanding the stress dynamics, it is vitally crucial to recognise and underscore the role that some jobs and personal issues play in this stress dynamics. According to Dennis Jaffe we spend approximately sixty percent of our waking productive lives at work. This being a truth it means that work becomes a significant factor in our stress level. Work is primarily about "performance", family life is about acceptance and care. It is our retreat from work. When work is stressful and family life is stressful it creates a sandwiching effect thus reinforcing and increasing our stress level. Stress impacts our bodies in a similar way to how fear impacts on us; increased levels of blood pressures and heart rate; increased perspiration; increased secretion of acids in the stomach thereby setting off gastro-intestinal issues and a plethora of other responses.

This therefore creates tremendous strain on the heart and circulatory system thereby creating a greater risk for heart disease in those that are stressed out. Frankly, stress has the ability to kill.

The second phase of the seminar is to build on awareness of how the body signals to us when we are distressed. The seminar pays attention to the physical symptoms such as stooped posture, galvanic issues, as well as muscular and nerve pains. The emotional warning signals or red flags are also explored with a view to helping individuals to identify their stress map or the conflagration of symptoms that indicate when they are under stress. We recommend that participants become aware and in tune with their bodies so that they can identify when their stress level has moved from Eustress, which is normative and healthy stress to Distress, which is Destructive stress. We also invite participants to take a number of tests to identify their stress levels.

Having understood what stress is and its impact on the body, as well as our warning signals, we then move full throttle into equipping persons with tools to combat stress. Firstly, it is important that persons change their paradigm from being victim to being co-creators. In my nearly 15 years as a counsellor I have found that persons who have

a life's plan and definite goals are able to handle the rigors of life better. Persons are challenged in the session to make a personal evaluation of their life by answering three questions, "who am I", "what makes me happy", "where do I want to go". The participants are challenged to make some definite decisions in their lives to reduce and manage their stress.

There are some stressors which have become normative in teaching. Therefore, developing appropriate coping skills become necessary. The seven R's for coping with stress are emphasised:

1. Reframing – finding a purpose that transcends the challenges of the job and give meaning to what you do. As Confucius once said "Once there is a "why" I can handle the "what".
2. Relaxation – creating stress breaks through the day as well as a buffer zone between school and other activities. Breathing and visualisation techniques are taught.
3. Rest – Adequate rest is of necessity to managing one's stress level.
4. Resolution – needing to resolve conflict quickly so that one's inner life is not contaminated. Our mental disposition can create internal stress.
5. Recreation – Exercise actually mitigates against the effects of stress and can result in a lowering of blood pressure and sugar level in the blood stream. The natural endorphins that are produced through exercise gives the mind a sense of calm and tranquillity.
6. Relationship – creating at least one relationship of transparency where you can be honest and share your deepest concerns. This can be cathartic as you express pent up feelings.
7. Religion - cultivating faith in God which creates a sense of security and empowerment.

Our faith gives us meaning and purpose in life but it often gives us the strength to handle difficult situations that can create stress.