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Role of spirituality in managing stress

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Abstract

Stress is irrevocably an integral part of an individual's life. It serves a very useful purpose by motivating a person or by responding to threat. But if the individual fails to handle or feels overwhelmed due to the pressure they face, then it can seriously affect their day-to-day activities, job, health and family life too. Management of stress can hence make one's life easeful. There are many techniques or ways which can be used to manage this stress and help a person to lead a stress-free life. Spirituality or spiritual practices is one such technique which can be used to lower stress levels. Spirituality is a way which is used to reduce the negative effects in one's life which can be either a death of a close person or severe illness, traumatic event etc. It is a form to have deeper understanding about oneself and includes other attributes like peace, love, bliss and purity. In this research paper an attempt is made to identify the role of spirituality in reducing stress. There are certain spiritual techniques which is being discussed in this paper for lowering stress and also how these techniques assist in reducing stress. The meaning of spirituality, in this research paper is not limited to prayer, meditation, religion but it also includes meditation, connecting with nature, relaxation techniques etc. There is a growing number of researches like Reutter Kirby (2012), Nandeesh *et al.* (2016), Delgado (2007) who have studied spirituality in managing stress and have concluded that spirituality is an integral component not only in effective management of stress but also it contributes to the overall wellbeing of an individual. The present paper makes an attempt to understand the role of spirituality in managing stress.

Keywords: Stress, spirituality, stress management

Introduction

Stress is a condition or feeling which an individual experiences when they assume that the demands exceed their personal and social resources which they are able to mobilize. The term *Stress* was given by Hans Selye in (1936). Selye stated stress as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change". Interestingly, stress can be viewed as a kind of imbalance in the mental, physical and biological states, resulting due to the inability of a person to cope with the situational demands. In words of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) "*Stress refers to the relationship between the person and the environment, that is evaluated by the person as pressurizing or exceeding their resources and is a danger for his or her well-being*".

Generally, stress is seen as a normal reaction to everyday pressures but long exposure to stress, demands, external pressures, inability to cope, lack of social support, it can become unhealthy and can interfere with the day-to-day functioning. According to a survey on Stress, by APA (2019) more than three-quarters of adults reported physical or emotional symptoms of stress, such as headache, feeling tired or changes in sleeping habits.

Spirituality, on the contrary refers to a sense of recognition of a feeling or belief that there is a presence of something greater than oneself, and that we are a part of something which is cosmic or divine in nature. According to Mohr (2006) "*Spirituality as a person's experience of, or a belief in, a power apart from his or her own existence*". Spirituality is a search for meaning in life which is beyond a monotonous existence of meeting the biological needs. It is a universal human experience and being aware that humans are an integral part of the purposeful unfolding of life in universe.

Through a lot of researches has been conducted over the past few year on the various factors of stress e g, Coffey and Appley, (1967), Stewart (1995)^[17], Cherkil (2013), Sherina (2010)^[11], but there is a dearth of literature with special reference to understanding the role of spirituality in managing stress. This intrigued the researchers to pick up the present study.

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Hence, an attempt is made in the present paper to understand the role of spirituality in managing stress.

Stress

The degree to which an individual feel overwhelmed or any mentally high pressure or tension refers to Stress. Mentioning about stress Coffer and Appley (1967) suggested that *“while facing a psychological stress the person perceives that their wellbeing is imperilled and that they must utilize their energies to the protection”*.

When encountered with stress, body is stimulated to produce stress hormones that trigger ‘flight or fight’ response. This response helps an individual to respond quickly to dangerous situations. If this stress response is activated repeatedly it results in wear and tear of the body, which can cause fatigue and unable to cope. Stress can impact our health in a number of ways and can have adverse impacts on the mental health. In one of the studies on the impacts of stress, Stewart (1995) [17] found that *“Chronic exposure to stressful situation can lead to serious health problems like hypertension, heart attack and stroke, diabetes mellitus and obesity, accelerated aging. It can also lead to impaired immune system, suppressed fertility, digestive problem, loss of appetite, increased anxiety, and depression that finally leads to suicide.”*

Generally, stress is regarded as the most common phenomena of modern world. There are various causes of stress, some of them include: work stress, long working hours, risk of termination in job, personal reasons, divorce, illness, emotional problems, death of a loved one etc. On the contrary, individual personality type, nature can be a cause for stress. Likewise, personal attitude and perception can also be a reason for stress like; unrealistic expectations, temperament, nature of a person, or a major change in the life can also be a contributing factor for stress. American Institute of Stress (2004) suggested some basic reasons of stress, which are summarised below as:

- **Job Pressure:** Co-Worker Tension, Bosses, Work Overload
- **Money:** Unemployment, Low Retirement money, Medical Expenses
- **Health:** Health Crisis, Terminal or Chronic Illness
- **Relationships:** Divorce, Death, fights with Friends, Loneliness
- **Poor Nutrition:** Low Nutrition, Caffeine, Unhealthy Foods, Refined Sugars
- **Media Overload:** TV, FM, Internet, Social Networking
- **Sleep Deprivation:** Low amount of good sleep results in inadequate release of adrenaline and other stress hormones.

Spirituality

Spirituality refers to a sense or understanding of having a connection to the transcendence. A connection with something much bigger and broader for our knowledge. A sense of meaning, and a unique experience. In other words, a state of interconnectedness. Spirituality involves a higher form of life, a kind of conscious awareness about the universe.

According to Nwachukwu (2013) *“spirituality can be seen in relationship with the smallest things which people do such as the food they consume, dress they wear, their relationships etc. which is spirituality is a positive sense. Spirituality is both human and divine oriented.”* It is not easy to describe and define spirituality, as there are many different forms of spirituality. Spirituality is a unique term. It can be viewed as

independent of religion or it can be seen inside a religious practice.

For some people their spiritual experience is a sacred or superior or a deep sense of aliveness and interconnectedness. Some individuals tend to pray and develop a personal relationship with god or higher power. But for some spiritual life is entangled with a temple or mosque or church. While others seek meaning in life through their inner connections with nature or art. Hence, the meaning of Spirituality is susceptible to change based on the individual’s experiences and relationships. In words of Puchalski (2001) [15], *“spirituality is a part of humanity that refers to the manner in which people grasp and express the purpose, meaning and the way they undergo the connection with the moment, to their self, to others, to nature, and to the sacred one.”*

There are many ancient spiritual traditions. Many spiritual practices and traditions focus on understanding the essence of universe and its connection to human beings. Spiritual traditions involve practices by Zen, Buddhism, Yoga, Meditation, Vedanta, and many more. Although these are different traditions of spirituality despite this their practices, principles, objectives and beliefs are mostly common in the spiritual path.

Relationship between spirituality and stress



Fig 1: Relationship between spirituality and stress

Stress is our body’s response to pressures from a situation or life event. Stress can vary hugely from person to person and differs according to our social and economic circumstances, the environment we live in and our genetic makeup. Stress can be experienced from four basic sources: Environment around can inundate an individual with strong, extreme, severe and competing demands to adjust with. Social stressors arise from individual experiences arising from the demand of social roles that he occupies such as a parent, spouse, caregiver and an employee. Physiological circumstances affecting one’s body, physically as well as mentally can be described as physiological stressors.

While, spirituality is a form used to reduce or minimize the negative effects in one’s life which can be death of a close person or severe illness, traumatic event, stress many etc. Spirituality comprises of many positive states like, feeling of interconnectedness, self-esteem, a sense of completeness, worthiness, and love. On understanding the relationship between stress and spirituality, Inez Tuck *et al.* (2006) found that *“spiritual well-being is an effective tool in reducing stress”*. Whereas, Labbe’ and Fobes (2010), in their study mentioned that *“spirituality depends on the individual’s personality whereas stress is caused due to personality traits like extraversion, introversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness”*. Many people seek spiritual experiences in various aspect of their lives, while others may be more likely to have these feelings under specific conditions or in certain

locations. Spirituality help people to understand themselves better. It provides a kind of understanding, about their meaning in life. Furthermore, in the case of extreme stress spirituality, helps in coping with the negative feelings of depression, anxiety and fear etc.

Spirituality and management of stress

On the contrary, spirituality provides a sense of fulfilment, optimism and hope. Various spiritual practice like chanting, prayer, etc. focuses on removing negativity and developing psychological well-being. There are many studies like Inez Tuck *et al.* (2006), Winnie Wing-Yi Chau (2006), Catherine Woodyard, (2011) which show that Spirituality and Spiritual practices are beneficial for human body and also reduce stress. Some of the spiritual practices helpful in managing stress are summarised below:

Practising gratitude: Everyone has different experience when it comes to spirituality. Which makes spirituality even more unique, one such thing common to all is practising gratitude. It is a form of spiritual stress relieving technique. Practicing gratitude involves daily writing down the things for which one is grateful for. This is a perfect reminder of significant things in life and greatest happiness, which in turn is a source of stress relieving.

Prayer: Prayer refers to being mindful. Prayer makes us more attentive, aware and appreciative. It has a kind of calming effect on every one of us. At the same time prayer makes us less somewhat less judgmental/ harsh on ourselves and on others. Prayer relaxes our mind, and helps in relieving stress.

Mindfulness: The third practice of spirituality which is effective in managing stress, is mindfulness. Mindfulness means living in the present moment not thinking about the problems of life, rather slowing down purposefully, and relaxing. Mindfulness is an essential practice for managing stress as it suggests rather than struggling/ running over every little thing in present chaotic world, why don't we all slow down and enjoy every little happening (present moments) of our lives.

Breathing: in managing stress, role of breathing is highly significant. Breathing as a stress reliever involves taking deep breaths, focusing on one's own breathing. Counting breaths, inhaling and exhaling etc. There are various breathing techniques which are very useful in managing and releasing stress. At the same time breathing techniques are also used in treating hypertension, anxiety and problems of chronic stress.

Meditation: Meditation is commonly used in the modern world. Meditation is a precise technique for resting the mind and attaining a state of consciousness that is totally different from the normal waking state. It is the means for fathoming all the levels of We and finally experiencing the centre of consciousness within. It is a quick-fix stress reliever, which helps to reverse the body's stress response. It can be included as part of a daily routine in order help to build resilience against stress. It can be used as a technique to get centered when thrown off by emotional stress.

Conclusion

With the changing demands in our day to day lives, it has become essential to develop good coping strategies to help us put the focus back on oneself, calm the mind and help an

individual to become aware of their thoughts and feelings. One such effective technique is spiritualism which helps to manage stress and perform best. A spiritually intelligent person can handle paradoxes and conflicts more efficiently. It is a chain process where once an individual learns to effectively manage stress in their life, they are better able to manage life which in turn decreases their inclination towards drugs, alcohol or any other maladaptive coping strategies. Spirituality practices predominantly involve mind, which further has an effect on body and it in turn reduces stress. As discussed above there are many studies which show that spirituality and spiritual techniques have beneficial effects on the body and also show significant levels of stress reduction. Exposure to spiritual experiences everyday helped adults to cope with negative feelings in a better way and it also enhanced positive feelings (Whitehead BR, 2013). Hence it can be understood that involvement in spiritual activities like prayer, meditation, mindfulness, visiting a particular place, etc. will buffer against stress and also lead to better physical health, enhances psychological wellbeing, more positive feelings, less hypertension, decreased depression and anxiety too.

Implications

- Spirituality and its practices have potential benefits in reduction or managing stress which can be used in mental health services. Understanding and embracing the spiritual beliefs, values of a person/client during assessment will help in therapeutic process.
- People must be helped to identify those aspects which give them purpose, hope, meaning and value in their life. By developing these aspects, the individual will be in a better place to cope with stress.
- Spiritual Practices can be easy to learn and is also proven to help in self-growth and help in handling anything that comes in the way of a person.
- With the changing demands in life, it has become essential for people to develop coping strategies and spirituality is one effective tool to reduce stress levels.
- There is also a need for more awareness among people regarding spirituality and how it can be used as a tool to reduce stress and improve overall wellbeing. People should also be given knowledge that spirituality is not limited to only religion and god; it can be found in any activity which will bring peace to one.
- Opportunities should be provided to everyone to discuss about their beliefs and clarify their doubts regarding spirituality and its role in management of stress, along with it the practical therapy and support should also be given to people who are facing mental health problems.

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