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**MANAGEMENT OF STRESS AMONG TEACHERS IN NIGERIA**

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Uli.***Abstract**

*Stress is an integral part of human existence. Irrespective of its associated health challenges, there are people who are not mindful of the fact that they are bearing enormous stress. This paper discusses the concept of stress, its three physiological stages, factors that could induce stress among teachers as well as the implications of stress on the teacher's health. Also discussed are the different stress management strategies that could help alleviate the effect of stress among teachers.*

**Keywords:** Stress, stress management

In recent times, stress has been identified as one of the commonest life challenging issues that threaten the human existence in our contemporary society. Denga (191), opined that Nigeria is a psychological society characterized by various stress inducing problems ranging from national issues to immediate environmental challenges. These stressful conditions are occasioned by changes both in the society and life circumstances as a result of technological innovations, economy, cultural demands, life ambitions, family life and health status among others.

Worthy of note is the fact that stress is an integral part of our existence. Lie without an iota of stress is both impossible and meaningless. So, we have all been exposed to some stressful conditions at some points in our life. Nobody is completely free from stress. Okafor (1984), asserted that people suffer stress in their various occupations even though the problems they face completely differ from one another. This is obvious while the driver for instance is under pressure to avoid traffic congestion, the business man is under pressure to pay back his loan. The surgeon is

saddled with the responsibility of carrying out a successful surgery and the farmer is worried about delayed rains and possible crop failure just to mention a few.

Nevertheless, this write up is specifically concerned about and is particularly meant for the Nigerian teachers. This includes teachers in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. These noble professionals who are highly goal oriented are saddled with the onerous task of developing human resources. This implies that the development and production of the entire manpower required by the nation at various levels of the nation building lies on the teachers' shoulders. Hence the teachers' slogan "if you can read and write, thank your teacher, if you cannot, find a teacher."

However, experience has shown that in an attempt to keep abreast with the demands of this profession, one may sometimes over step one's coping limits thereby exposing oneself to various stressors without even realizing it. Olubumi (2003), in his study pointed out that many people are carrying enormous stressful load without realizing it. Unfortunately, most of our Nigerian teachers constitute *good* example of Olubumi's study. They are oftentimes exposed to stressors as a result of the nature of their jobs. Hence, creating the awareness of this ravaging our selfless and great teachers as well as proffering them with management techniques becomes very pertinent.

### **The Concept of Stress**

Stress has been defined by several experts in various fields such as medicine, psychology and health education. Let's take a few of these definitions. Berkowitz (2001), defined stress as the perceptions of a threat to one's well being and the apprehension that one is unable to cope with the perceived threat brought about by the continual adjustments and demands that individuals place upon themselves as they react to given stimuli. Similarly, Akinboye (1986) saw stress as the physical, mental and chemical reactions of the body to circumstances that frighten, excite, confuse, endanger or irritate the person. For Carison, Heth, Miller, Donahoe, Buskist & Martin (2007), stress is a pattern of physiological, emotional, behavioural and cognitive response to real or imagined stimuli that are perceived as blocking a goal' or endangering or otherwise threatening our well being. These stimuli are generally aversive and in a laboratory experiment carried out by Selye (1976), it was discovered that chronic exposure to severe stressors produces a sequence of three physiological stages in the individual namely: Alarm, Resistance and Exhaustion.

i. **Alarm Stage:** Involves the stimulation of the autonomic nervous system which occurs when the individual is initially confronted with a stressor. His resistance to the stressor temporarily drops below normal and the individual may experience shock.

ii. **Resistant Stage:** With continued exposure to the stressor, the individual enters this stage when his resistance to the stressor increases and eventually plateaus at above normal level. This resistance stage reflects the individuals adaptation to the stressor.

iii. **Exhaustion Stage:** If the stressor persists, this final and dangerous stage becomes inevitable. Here, the individual loses the ability to adapt and his resistance plunders below normal, leaving him susceptible to illness and or even death.

However, every individual is capable of adapting or tolerating only so much stressors and if exposed to more than he can cope with, the individual experiences physical and emotional stress. The extent to which one can adapt to these stressors usually depends on the individual's perception and interpretation of life events.

Several factors could be responsible for the inducement of stress among teachers. These stressors, for the sake of convenience, could be summarized under the following headings:

- Environmental factors
- Emotional factors
- Professional factors
- Health factors.

#### **A. Environmental Factors**

A tremendous amount of stress suffered by Nigerians (teachers inclusive) emanate from the environment. Most forms of environmental stress are imposed upon either directly by other individuals or indirectly by-the social system. Some of these environmental stressors include:

- Air pollutants & toxins
- Extreme climatic conditions
- Over laboring of the body
- Excessive societal demands
- Armed robbery attacks and incessant kidnapping
- domestic issues
- Poor economic conditions
- Lack of leisure

- Political instability
- Religious/ethnic disturbances
- Noise pollution

#### **B. Emotional Factors:**

Sometimes, stress is essentially created by the individual himself as a result of his perception, interpretation and reaction towards life events. These emotional stressors involve:

- Excessive arguments
- Intense disposition
- Disagreement and conflicts
- Impatience
- Deep seated insecurity
- Social dominance
- Compulsive achievement drive
- High sense of time urgency
- Intense ambition
- Fear
- Intense anger
- Excessive competitive drive
- Greed.

#### **C. Professional Factors**

This has to do with the stressors encountered at work place. People usually encounter lots of challenges in their work places which could amount to stressful conditions. School teachers are often confronted with the following stressors at their workplaces:

- Students' unrest
- Finishing the scheme of work .
- Students' threats
- Intensive lessons for exam classes
- Late payment of salaries & benefits
- Harassment by parents
- Societal expectations
- Being abreast with current information
- Unconducive environment
- Incessant research work
- Voluminous marking

#### **D. Health Factors**

Health challenges constitute major life stressors in our contemporary society. Making mention of these innumerable health conditions in existence that serve as stressors

will amount to stating the obvious for it is a common knowledge that every adverse health condition no matter how minor is definitely stressful.

### **Health Implications of stress**

Stress can cause physical, emotional and behavioural disorders which can affect an individual's health, vitality, peace of mind as well as personal and professional relationships (Fawole, 2004).- An individual's physiological response to stressors is governed by the part of the brain known as hypothalamus. When one senses a stressor, the hypothalamus sends signals to the automatic nervous system and to the pituitary glands, both of which respond by stimulating the body organs to change their normal activities. Such physiological changes that take place as stated by Meichenbuaun (1995) include:

- a. Deeper and faster breathing as well as dilation in air passages.
- b. Digestion stops and perspiration increases
- c. The adrenal glands secrete adrenalin which stimulates the heart and other organs.

When the biological changes explained above are in progress, the individual begins to experience some of the following accompanying psychosomatic problems, insomnia, backache, migraine and tension, headache, constant fatigue, digestive disorder, nausea, high blood pressure, skin rashes and breathlessness. Others include peptic ulcers, lack of appetite, frequent urge to urinate, asthma/heart attack and heart related problems, obesity/weight loss, stuttering and other speech difficulties. In addition, the individual could experience a serious reaction to intense stress known to become susceptible to various infectious diseases as well as have reduced immune system.

Emotional effects of stress on the other hand can manifest in the form of quick and sharp temper, depression, moodiness, low self esteem, poor concentration and difficulties in remembering. Also, feelings of helplessness, loneliness, loss of interest, irritability, constant anxiety, general emotional instability and unnecessary aggression in conflict situations, all constitute emotional implications of stress.

Behavioural changes can be observed from restlessness, excessive eating, drinking and smoking, constant gnashing of teeth, inability to take simple decisions, regression to childhood behaviours like thumb-sucking, withdrawal and even violence among others.

Always remember that physical, mental and emotional processes in the human body form a unified functioning unit such that any disequilibrium in one unit affects the other units. The mind has been found to be closely interrelated with the body.

### **Stress Management Techniques**

Stress is relative since no experience in itself is stressful apart from adverse health conditions. For our teachers to reduce the wear and tear of stress in their systems, it becomes very necessary to identify the experiences that are stressful to the individual and find ways of dealing with them by turning stressful conditions into positive experiences. Stress for most of our teachers is a physical, mental and emotional overload of their system that occurs at the point when any experience over bears their reserve of strength and energy and becomes too much for them to handle. However, some people can effectively cope with certain stressful situations, while others find it difficult because their reserves are unfortunately thin. Stress management techniques otherwise known as coping strategies are of two types namely: Problem-Focused Coping & Emotion-Focused Coping.

a. Problem-focused coping is directed towards the source of the stress as to obtain solution. For instance if one realizes that he is stressed as a result of malaria attack, the ideal solution to such stress is to take anti-malaria treatment thereby tackling the source of the stress and off it goes.

b. Emotion-focused coping is directed towards the individual's reaction to the stressor. Here, efforts are made at reducing the impact of the stress on the individual. This comes to play in situations where there are no obvious possible solutions to the stressors. For instance, in the case of one losing a loved one, all that he needs to do is to effectively manage the emotional impact on him.

Generally speaking, teachers can effectively manage or cope with some stressful conditions by applying the following psychological therapies; relaxation training, cognitive reappraisal, aerobic exercise, communication/social therapy and stress inoculation training.

**Relaxation Training:** This simply means learning to relax when confronted with a stressor. It is based on the principle of substituting an incompatible response for the stress reaction. Relaxation technique procedure involves three steps:

- i. Recognizing your body's signals that inform you of stress experience
- ii. Using those signals as cue to start relaxing.
- iii. Relaxing by focusing your attention on different groups of muscles beginning with those in the head, neck, down to arms and legs

**Cognitive reappraisal:** This technique simply involves the belief that alteration of perceptions of the threat posed by stress helps to reduce stress. The underlying rationale is that your cognition appraisal of a stressor is a determining factor in stress and then reappraisal of that stressor as less threatening should reduce stress. Thus a teacher that loses his job could still gain employment in another organization. This could help to cushion the effect of stress.

**Aerobic exercise:** Regular exercise especially jogging, swimming or walking is a very effective way of managing stress. 30 minutes done 3 times a week is recommended for every teacher. It has been proved that physically fit individuals are less reactive to stressors and produce less stress hormones. Regular aerobic exercise reduces anxiety and depression. It also increases self confidence.

**Communication/social therapy:** This is just talking out and getting things off ones mind to somebody else. The important factor here is that the person under stress is able to talk to a listening, understanding and appreciative person and not necessarily that the person solves the problem. This ventilation reduces the momentum of the stress. Every teacher should have a confidant whom he can discuss freely with and confide in at stressful moments.

**Stress inoculation training (SIT):** This is a problem focused coping method which focuses on helping people develop coping skills that will decrease their susceptibility to the negative effects of stress. According to its proponent, Meichenbaum (1985), the best way to cope with stress is to take offensive. This involves having a plan in mind for dealing with stressors before you are actually confronted by them. Hence, Stress inoculation training implies training people to appropriately anticipate the kinds of stressors most likely to affect them and develop the most effective possible coping strategies for dealing with specific stressor to begin to cope with it. This has been found to be very effective in reducing stress levels among workers.

Some other management principles that could help alleviate stress among the teachers are:

a. **Effective time management**

- Formulating realistic goals
- Setting priorities right
- Working at your own pace
- Keeping a flexible schedule

b. **Recreational activities**

- Playing, listening to music and even dancing
- Reading novels, newspapers and magazines for relaxation
- Engage in leisure and hobbies

- Develop, support network of trusted friends, colleagues, neighbours and relations to avoid loneliness.
  - Have enough rest.
- c. **Always express your feelings**
- Try to listen to other people
  - Acknowledge conflicts
  - Ask for what you need from others
  - Go easy with criticisms
- d. **Get a good family doctor**
- Do not neglect breakfast
  - Check your BP at least once every month
  - Endeavour to keep your blood sugar level steady
- e. **Make your environment comfortable**
- Recreate your work environment
  - Ensure a conducive home
  - Strive for a happy and loving family
  - Avoid too much routine
- f. **Stop using drugs**
- Avoid stimulants, sedative and tranquilizers
  - Avoid tobacco consumption
  - Take alcohol sparingly
- g. **Ecclesiastical (prayer) Therapy**
- Prayer has variously been referred to as "major tranquilizer" "antidepressant" and an "anti stress weapon" (Agulanna "and Nwachukwu, 2011). So always go to God in prayers especially in moments of stress. He never fails.

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