Cultural variations in understanding stress

Cultural definitions of Stressor & Strain
- Some researchers refer to stressor as external events that make people stressed out
- Strain = internal stressful states
- Using transactional model of understanding stress, it is not easy to differentiate external & internal stressor (or the order of which becomes the earlier stressor)
- Stress definitions somewhat differ according to disciplines/school of thoughts & cultural contexts

Islamic perspective
- In Arabic, stress = da'ght.
- The state of deep turbulence (confusion, unstable, chaos) for the soul / emotion (Fakhir 'Akil 1985: 110).
- Anxious, unrest, frustration, disorder, disturbance of the soul & emotion due to lack of faith towards Allah the Almighty (Hassan Langgulung, Islam psychologist)
- Uthman Najati (1992) indicated that stress occurs when there is an internal conflict of self between the soul that is obedient towards Allah the soul that is highly following the nafs
• Imam Al-Ghazali indicates the turbulent is due to the fact that human beings do not relate with Allah.
• Harussani Hj. Zakaria (2004) implied that stress occurs due to weaknesses of faith, soul, mind, which are highly influenced by the nafs’

• Quran 9:40 (At-Taubah, verse 40): “…Be not sad (or afraid), surely, Allah is with us” ...
• Musibah / difficulties should be handled following this guideline:
  – There will be a better replacement
  – There will be reward in the hereafter
  – This is a test against your belief system (whether you believe in Qada’ & Qadar – Allah’s will)
• The need to always have good faith in Allah

Ancient concept of Stress in India:
Stress = dukha (pain, misery, suffering); klesa (affliction = burden, difficulty); kama or trisna (desires); atman and ahankara (self and ego); prajanparadha (failure or lapse of consciousness)
Pestonjee (1992) indicates that according to the Samkhya yoga system, the cause of stress is avidya or faulty reality testing of either or all of the following:
1. **Asmita** [(self-appraisal – views of self ability (body & mind))]

2. **Raga** – object appraisal, or how attached a person is to his or her materials

3. **Dvesha** – threat appraisal, or how much a person dislikes negative happenings

4. **Abhnivesha** – coping orientation, or non-specific sequential response to any threat

According to the Eastern viewpoint, life situations that lead to stress can be one of 3 kinds:

- **Adhyatmik** (personal); consisting of pathological diseases or psychological afflictions i.e jealousy, fear, anger, lust, hatred, greed, grandiosity, depression)
- **Adhibothik** (situational); consisting of conflicts, competition, aggression, acts of war, etc
- **Adhidevik** (environmental), due to natural disaster such as earthquakes, extremes of temperature, eruptions of volcanoes etc

Stress operates through 4 levels of stressors:

- **Prosumpta** (dormant stressor) – mental process (imagination, cognitive)
- **Tone** (teneous or weak stressors). Stressors of insufficient intensity and urgency that are kept in check by more powerful stressors (i.e: hunger response can override worrying about being late for class)
3. Vichchinna (intercepted stressors) – alternate between the stage of dormancy & manifestation. E.g: a student who is reprimanded for coming late to class subsequently tries to come on time. The student has a stressor that will manifest when he/she becomes late → intercepted stressor.

4. Udara (operative stressor): These stressors have found complete expression in behaviour. E.g: a student who has conditioned his behaviour to be on time for class is exhibiting his behaviour because of an operative behaviour

According to the eastern views: emphasis is given on the powers of the individual in coping with stress. The person can, with the help of vidya or gyana (knowledge & correct perception) understand the situation correctly, with adequate practice (sadhana) apply appropriate skills to reduce undue response to stressors & ultimately develop a wholesome attitude devoid of manifest stress (samadhi bhavana).

“Correct Perception”

Chinese perspective:

- Suffering = “shou ku” – experiencing bitterness
- Ku = pain, hardship, adversity, difficult times (externally oriented)
- Buddhist psychology: ku is related with defense mechanism of clinging & rejection, craving & aversion, greed & hatred
- Chinese concept: stress=tension & pressure, can be relieved by relaxation of mind & body (not so much of suffering)
Middle eastern:

- Agony, silent grief & deep frustrations due to prolonged conflicts/war, danger & brutalities, poverty, losses
- Related with violence & terrorism

Consider this definition:

- Stress refers to the quality of experience, produced through a person-environment transaction, that, through either over-arousal or under-arousal, results in psychological or physiological distress.

Western:

Mason (1975) – 3 definitions of stress:

- An internal state of organism (or “strain”)
- An external event (or stressor)
- An experience that arises from a transaction between a person and the environment
- See table on “Components of stress process”
1) Stress as an internal state of an organism

- Refers to physiological, emotional and cellular reactions
- Physiological: focus on peripheral & central nervous systems; & neuroendocrine & immune systems functions;
- (of late) includes the cellular level (free radicals disturbs the cell = configurations of molecules/DNA → malfunction

- Emotional: negative feelings of anxiety, anger, sadness, guilt, shame, bored; positive emotional affect & numbing (“blank”)
- Some researchers conclude that some stress can lead to greater resilience to future stressors
• Eg: How do you feel before the final exam?
  – Pale, sweaty palms, trembling hands, dry mouth (peripheral nervous system reactions)
  – Butterfly in stomach, pounding heart, hyperventilate (reactions of autonomic nervous system)
  – Both reactions are mediated by the sympathetic & parasympathetic nervous system + the endocrine system ➔ neuroendocrine stress reaction
  – Flu, gingivitis. allergic, rash (immune system reactions)

2) Stress as an external environment
• Major trauma (war, disaster);
• major life events i.e death & divorce;
• Noxious / harmful environment (pollution, noise, overcrowded
• Chronic role strain (bad marriage, poverty)
• Daily hassles
• Temporal dimension: duration, rapidity of onset, linkage or spread (may influence the reactions)
Aldwin (2007) claimed that external stressor can be either physical or socio-cultural stressors.

Physical stressors
- Trauma
- Noxious environment (i.e. poor ventilated room; a "sick building"); poor work station – mechanical stress
- Physical stressor + socio-cultural can lead to increased symptomatology

Socio-cultural stressor
- Resources, roles & status of the person
- Cultural specific
- Poverty
- Social roles” overload, conflict, role captivity (can’t escape), role restructuring (divorce)
- Psychosocial + sociocultural roles can overlap

3) Stress as an experience arising from transactions between a person & the environment

- Esp. if there is discrepancy between individual’s resources & the perceived challenges/demands/needs
- Cognitive appraisals – harm, loss, threat, challenge or benign lead to emotional or physiological reactions
- Similar stressor is perceived differently depending upon the person & social context (& stressor characteristics etc)

Endless debate:
- Majority of researchers agree with the above stress components; but endless debates on 2 categories:
  1. Stress as an organismic state, disagreements on whether there are general or specific reactions to stress
  2. Disagreements on which come first: cognitive, physiological or emotional reactions to stress; & disagreements on causal directionality between person & environment (environment cause reactions or person's internal state influence perceptions of the environment?)
**Acute and Chronic stress**

- Acute stress = reaction to an immediate threat, commonly known as the *fight or flight* response.
- The threat can be any situation that is experienced, even subconsciously or falsely, as a danger.
- Short term. i.e: Assignment, quiz, exams.

---

**Chronic stress**

- Frequently, modern life poses *on-going* stressful situations that are not short-lived & the urge to act (to fight or to flee) must be suppressed. Stress, then, becomes chronic.
- Long term.
- Eg: relationship problem, financial worries