

The Burnt-Out Mind

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Abstract

The issue that students are overwhelmed with stress and are unable to cope in correct ways is a big one. Many students in school are struggling with a lack of coping mechanisms, which in turn lowers their academic performance. Their mental and physical health is also decreasing because of the lack of exercise or healthy foods. This paper aims to debunk a few misconceptions and teach different coping methods for students; it will also discuss how stress affects one's body and mind in negative ways. This paper will also show how stress management and Islam are connected as seen in many of the lessons in the Quran.

The Burnt-Out Mind

Stress is the body's reaction to a change, and it can present itself in different forms, be it physical, mental, or emotional. It is a normal part of life, induced by one's thoughts, body, and environment. It does not only come from negative changes, but it can also be caused by positive ones such as a promotion, graduating, and taking a vacation. It in and of itself is a mechanism that helps one's body adapt to the environment, "This type of stress that helps the body is called eustress" (An American Addiction Centers Resource, 2015-b). Unfortunately, constant exposure to stress can strain the body and senses, leading to harmful effects and producing distress to the body mentally, physically, and emotionally. Finding appropriate ways to diminish distress can help people avoid its harmful effects. Students have a high degree of distress compared to their adult counterparts (Bethune, 2014). This distress will have an impact on students' school performance, which will hurt them in the long run (Weidner, Hetrick, Orygen, & Parker, 2007). Unfortunately, students have the misconception that performing various stress-reducing activities will hinder their daily lives and will cause them more stress because it will "waste" the time that they would use for studying. However, students who use different stress-reducing activities like eating healthy, having a healthy sleep schedule, and daily exercise will reduce stress and improve their daily lives.

Effects on Body

There are many problems when a person is put under constant excessive stress. When the body is put under stress, an "alarm reaction" is triggered, the body gets excited and prepares to fight the illness or injury. Heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing quickens to supply the muscles and brain with oxygen and blood. In turn, this decreases blood flow to a few organs and

suppresses the immune functions. In order to do all this, the body needs a source of fuel, which would be natural fats and sugars. However, the process is costly to our health, physically and mentally. If the stressor is not resolved, the body goes into an adaptation state where all of the previously mentioned effects on the body are still continuous but slightly lessened. Even though the body is not as burdened as the alarm reaction, it still requires a significant amount of energy to sustain -- eventually, the body will enter the exhaustion state and will start to wear and tear. If the stressor is too strong, it can lead to extreme levels of exhaustion, which can cause death (An American Addiction Centers Resource, 2015-a). Plus, long term or frequent intensive stress reactions can lead to permanent stress-related health disorders such as high blood pressure, arthritis, kidney disease, or allergic reactions. There are natural reactions that happen when an individual's body is under stress, including bad habits like eating excessive junk food. These habits happen when the body is in any of the three states (alarm reaction, adaptation, and exhaustion), continuously draining a person of energy, and leaving him or her continuously hungry. Usually, the food one reaches out for while stressed is unhealthy, which in turn, may increase one's blood sugar, increasing cortisol in the body, which increases stress hormones in the body (An American Addiction Centers Resource, 2015-a). That and ongoing stress can result in major mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, both of which can usually make it harder to enjoy one's hobbies and activities.

So when does someone know when they are under distress? There are many signs that an individual is under distress including (but not limited to): inability to concentrate or complete tasks, getting sick more often with colds (which is the result of the suppression of the immune system), body aches, autoimmune diseases, headaches, irritability, trouble falling asleep, and

staying awake (the result of the formation of the bad habit of overthinking), changes in appetite (the effect of the continuous energy drain to sustain the adaptation/alarm state), substance abuse, and unusual rates of anger and anxiety (Segal, 2019-b).

Connections Between Physical And Mental Health

So how do physical habits affect one's mental health? For starters, aerobic exercises help the brain just as it does the heart. Regular aerobic exercise will bring changes to the body's metabolism, heart, and spirit. Doing different types of activities makes a person feel elated, relaxed, helps counter depression and dissipates stress (Harvard Health Publishing, 2011). At first, it may seem like more work than fun, but as one gets into shape, they will come to tolerate the exercise and enjoy it. The basis of all the mental benefits that come with exercise stems from the neurochemical. While exercising, there is a reduction in the number of stress hormones in the body, like cortisol. It also triggers the making of endorphins, chemicals in the brain that are function as natural pain killers, and improve one's mood.

Just as mental stress and its symptoms can come in different shapes and forms (be it, irritability, restlessness, insomnia, anger, or sensations of dread, foreboding, or panic), so can exercise. Autoregulation exercises are a group of different exercises that help replace stress with cycles of relaxation (Harvard Health Publishing, 2011). These different types of exercise are important because mental stress also produces physical symptoms such as muscle tension, fidgetiness, stretched out facial expression, headaches, neck and back pain, unquenchable thirst, or sensations of a lump in the throat. In addition, the skin can become pale, sweaty, and clammy, and frequent heartburn, cramps, tightness in the chest, and rapid breathing may even occur (Harvard Health Publishing, 2011). These physical symptoms of stress are also a source of

distress. In some cases, the body's response to stress can be such that it produces even more mental stress. The mind and body augment each other's stress signals, which in turn creates a cycle of tension and anxiety (Harvard Health Publishing, 2011). Although the root cause of stress is emotional, it can also involve the body and therefore the mind, too. An individual can learn to use their mind to relax the body and in turn, use the body to relax the mind, reducing mental stress. This is what autoregulation exercises are for, they help train the body and mind to relax one another. Deep breathing is an example of an autoregulation exercise, slow, deep, and regular breathing are signs of relaxation. By being able to control an individual's breathing so it mimics relaxation, it will in turn, relax their mind and body (Harvard Health Publishing, 2011).

Stress Management Strategies

When dealing with stress, there are many approaches to it, and one of them is practicing the four A's of stress management (Robinson, 2019-a). The first 'A' of stress management is avoiding unnecessary stress; it is not healthy to avoid stressors that need immediate attention. Some ways one can avoid unnecessary stress is to look at his or her schedule and put unnecessary tasks to the bottom of the list, or eliminate them entirely. Also, if another person heightens one's stress levels for whatever reason, he or she should try to minimize the interaction with that person, "If you can eliminate the stressor, be it a personal relationship, a job, or even a certain situation, you will be all the happier for it in the long run." (Nelmsc, 2011). Finally, learn how to say no and learn one's limits. When taking on more than one can handle, it will end up with a disaster. The second 'A' is to alter the situation. This involves changing one's lifestyle by communicating one's feelings instead of bottling it up, being willing to compromise with a teacher or boss to lower the amount of workload that is put on an individual by them, and lastly,

trying to have a balanced schedule. Working with no breaks will result in burnout, so one should try to balance out the work with different activities or hobbies he or she enjoys. The third 'A' is to adapt to stressors by reframing the problems, looking at the bigger picture, and adjusting standards. To reframe problems, an individual must try to view different situations in a more positive light. Rather than getting worked up over things wasting one's time, look at it as an opportunity to regroup one's thoughts. Looking at the bigger picture of different situations will remove stress; if it will not affect the individual in a month or years from then, it is not worth stressing over, and they are free to use their time and energy elsewhere. Adjusting one's standards is something all individuals must learn -- demanding perfection will almost always end up in failure, and one should set reasonable standards for themselves and others instead of demanding it to be perfect on the first try. The last 'A' of the group is to accept unavoidable problems. Some sources of stress are unavoidable, so do not try to control the uncontrollable; it will only bring an individual more unnecessary stress.

While these are all mental strategies, the body and mind function as one unit, so one's physical habits can affect his or her mental health. Different forms of exercise reduce stress by preventing illnesses and benefiting the mind. Regular physical exercise lowers blood pressure, blood sugar (which is raised dramatically when put under a significant amount of stress), and improves cholesterol. It also reduces the risk of heart attacks, diabetes, obesity, depression, and even memory loss. These reasons are why exercise is one of the many fundamental tools to manage stress. And amongst its major, positive contributions, it increases one's energy and motivation, which is usually taken away when one is put under significant amounts of distress, enabling someone to progress and deal with stressors.

Just as exercising can keep one healthy and reduce stress, having a proper diet, and eating the right foods can also help, which is why it is important to adopt a nutritious diet. Having a proper diet can counter the side effects of distress by strengthening the immune system, stabilizing moods, and reducing blood pressure. Every "healthy" food has an important role. As an example, consuming foods like oranges that have high vitamin C helps lower cortisol, boosts immune system functions, and lowers blood pressure (UCLA Center for East-West Medicine, 2019).

So what is the best way to encourage students to take an active role in their stress management, and what can schools do to help? The first thing that is needed to help students is to educate them about the topic of stress. Schools could incorporate a class dedicated to teaching students different stress management techniques and debunk any false techniques that may harm them in the end. Schools can go a step further and offer free healthy food options such as fruits to help improve the diet of the students, which in turn encourages them to try different stress management techniques — even handing out calendars with something new to do every day to manage one's stress can be helpful.

Islamic Perspective

Islam teaches us how to avoid stress; it sheds light on the roots of stress and provides tools to deal with a difficult situation. All of these tools come from the fact that Allah (SWT) has ordained all actions and events that happen in nature, and to an individual. Humans have little impact on what Allah (SWT) has destined. "No disaster strikes upon the earth or among yourselves except that it is in a register before We bring it into being - indeed that, for Allah, is easy - In order that you not despair over what has eluded you and not exult [in pride] over what

He has given you. And Allah does not like everyone self-deluded and boastful -" (Quran 57:22-23), this teaches one not to dwell and stress on the past because it was destined to happen and it was an unavoidable thing. He tells one to not be saddened over what has happened in the past and not to be boastful or deluded of what good has come to an individual since it will only slow down an individual and prevent them from moving forward with life. Stress involves worrying or overthinking the results of an event. As such, people tend to freeze and become consumed in the thinking process, which adds to one's stress, making achieving goals more difficult and provoking a cycle of underachievement and strain. These ayat cut to the root of the problem by telling humanity that things are ordained, and man's role is to handle and work with the situations that come their way rather than dwell on the feelings related to them.

Islam recognizes different stress-provoking situations, one of which is at times of war, where a whole communities's livelihoods could be taken away for generations. Even in these situations, the Quran has reasserted that calmness and tranquility are a significant factor in victory, which comes from Allah (SWT). Allah (SWT) mentions in the Quran, "It is He who sent down tranquillity into the hearts of the believers that they would increase in faith along with their [present] faith..." (Quran 48:4). In this ayah, Allah (SWT) asserts to the Prophet (PBUH) that the feeling of tranquility they have experienced was a gift from Allah (SWT). This shows that even in difficult times where the stakes are high, it is important to keep stress at bay and to keep one's focus at tackling the task ahead.

Another aspect of stress that Islam addresses are related to anger within that is framed as a response to factors in the environment, mainly individuals. For this, Islam teaches the spirit of giving at times of ease and hardship, which teaches the spirit and mind to be empathetic and

understanding of the people around an individual. In a hadith narrated by Abu Huraira it is said that a man came to the Prophet and he said, "Advise me." The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said, "Do not be angry." The man repeated his request and the Prophet said, "Do not be angry." (Elias, 2019). That is followed by the nature of restraining from displaying anger and seeking forgiveness from others. These attributes help anybody be it an individual, organization, or community to forge a healthy relationship with their environment that has minimal stress.

These teachings are apparent in Allah's (SWT) sayings in the Quran "Who spend [in the cause of Allah] during ease and hardship and who restrain anger and who pardon the people - and Allah loves the doers of good;" (Quran 3:134). Mankind may not fully understand the importance of such teachings as it trains the mind to let go of personal needs and focus on the surroundings as a source for enriching an individual's life with happiness, instead of focusing on personal gains. From there it moves to enable an individual to stay in charge of their feelings and not act upon them until the person has thought about them and sought forgiveness from others. Such training processes promote healthy relationships within societies and between individuals. We can see that Islam recognizes that stress can arise when society is at risk or during interactions with one another, and it promotes solutions to dissolve that stress and turn it into tranquility, empathy, and spirit of forgiveness. At the end of the day, this enriches the individual's mind and body.

In conclusion, people tend to ignore the effect of proper sleep hygiene, physical activity, and healthy eating on minimizing stress, all of which are essential for helping them maintain good health. In addition, Islam has incorporated some basic core principles that help people minimize stress like believing in destiny and that Allah (SWT) has control over everything; it teaches one to keep moving forward and not dwell on bad or good things. It also notes the power

of empathy, self restraints, giving and forgiving, relieving stress within a community, and improving the relationship between an individual and the community.

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