

Buddha's Way and Modern Approach to Overcome Stress and Anxiety

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Abstract

This paper explains the overview of stress and anxiety, their symptoms, types, causes, diagnosis and management in Buddha's way and modern approach. The article also highlights that stress is a common and normal response to the demands and pressures to everyday life, activates body response and gives a boost of energy, but stressors like poverty, physical illness and community violence can lead to chronic stress, health consequences and complications. However, apart from modern management, mindfulness meditation practice can help us to reduce stress and anxiety and may improve our overall well-being.

Keywords: stress, anxiety, management, meditation, psychotherapy

1. Introduction

Stress is a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation and is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives.

Ref-<https://www.who.int>

In psychology, stress is a feeling of emotional strain and pressure. It is a form of psychological and mental discomfort. Small amounts of stress may be beneficial, as it can improve athletic performance, motivation and reaction to the environment.

Ref-Wikipedia

There are two main types of stress. Acute stress, which is short-term stress that goes away quickly. In this type, we may feel like slamming on the car brakes, having a fight with our partner or skiing down a steep slope to the ground. The symptoms develop quickly but do not last long. Chronic stress is a stress that lasts for a longer period of time.

Acute stress can lead to acute stress reaction / disorder, also known as psychological shock or mental shock. In this type, the events are usually very severe and typically occur after an unexpected life crisis like a serious accident, sudden bereavement, or other traumatic events. It can last up to one month duration. Chronic stress is the physiological or psychological response induced by a long-term internal or external stressor and can be debilitating and overwhelming. It can affect both our physical and psychological well-being by causing a variety of problems including anxiety, insomnia, muscle pain, high blood pressure, and a weakened immune system.

Anxiety is an emotion characterized by an unpleasant state of inner turmoil/ confusion and includes feelings of dread over anticipated events. Anxiety is different from fear in that fear is defined as the emotional response to a present threat, whereas anxiety is the anticipation of a future one.

Ref-Wikipedia

Anxiety disorders develop when there is repeated episodes of sudden feelings of intense anxiety and fear

of terror that reach to a peak within minutes and result panic attacks. Anxiety is also a feeling of fear, dread and uneasiness. It might cause us to sweat, and have a rapid heartbeat. It can be a normal reaction to stress. For example, we might feel anxious when we face with a difficult problem at work, before taking a test, or before making an important decision.

Ref-<https://medlineplus.gov>

2. Symptoms of stress / anxiety and types of anxiety disorders

Emotional and physical symptoms of stress

Emotional symptoms of stress include:

- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed, like we are losing control or need to take control
- Having difficulty relaxing and quieting our mind
- Feeling bad about ourselves (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless, depressed
- Avoiding others

Physical symptoms of stress include:

- Low energy
- Headaches
- Stomach upset including diarrhea, constipation and nausea
- Aches, pains and rapid heartbeat
- Insomnia
- Frequent colds and infections
- Loss of sexual desire and/or ability
- Nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear
- Cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Excessive sweating
- Dry mouth and difficulty in swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth

Behavioral changes are also expressions of stress. These changes can include irritability, disruptive eating patterns (over-eating or under-eating), harsh treatment of others, increase smoking or alcohol consumption, isolation and compulsive activity (shopping etc.).¹

Stress versus burnout

Stress is inevitable. Burnout isn't. While stress is our response, burnout is the accumulation of excessive stressors over time, which results in unmanageable stress levels. It is now used more broadly to refer to the consequences of "excessive stress" placed on any individual, no matter their occupation. When we get to the point of no longer being able to cope, we are "burned out" like a candle.

- Stress has been referred to as the "silent killer" as it can cause heart disease, high blood pressure, chest pain, and an irregular heartbeat (Chilnick, 2008).
- Telogen effluvium is the result of hair loss caused by stress that can happen up to three months after a stressful event (McEwen, 2003).
- Stress accounts for 30% of all infertility problems. In women, stress can cause spasms in the fallopian tubes and uterus. In men, it can reduce sperm count and cause erectile dysfunction (Bouchez, 2018).

Symptoms of anxiety disorders

The main features of anxiety disorders are fears or thoughts that are chronic (constant) and distressing that

interfere with daily living. Other symptoms may include:

- Panic or anxiety attacks or a fear of these attacks
- Physical anxiety reactions – for example trembling, sweating, faintness, rapid heartbeat, breathing difficulties or nausea
- Avoidance behavior – a person may go to extreme lengths to avoid a situation that they think could bring on anxiety or panic. Some of these persons could have a panic attack which is a sudden feeling of intense terror that may occur in certain situations or for no apparent reason. Symptoms of a panic attack may include:
 - Shortness of breath
 - Dizziness
 - Rapid heartbeat
 - Choking
 - Nausea

The cause of these panic attacks is unknown, but they may be related to a chemical response in the brain, caused by actual threatening or stressful events or by thinking about stressful events. The brain response leads to physiological changes in the body, such as shallow breathing and rapid heartbeat.

Panic attacks can be frightening because some feel like they are going to die or go crazy. Persons affected by these attacks may avoid situations in which they think attacks might occur. In some cases, this may lead to the development of other anxiety disorders including agoraphobia – fear of entering open or crowded places.

An anxiety disorder may lead to social isolation and clinical depression, and can impair a person's ability to work, study and do routine activities. It may also hurt relationships with friends, family and colleagues. It is common for depression and anxiety to happen at the same time. Depression can be a serious illness with a high risk of self-harm and suicide.

Types of anxiety disorders

Anxiety becomes a disorder when it is irrational, excessive and when it interferes with a person's ability to function in daily life. Anxiety disorders include:

- (1) Generalized anxiety disorder
- (2) Social phobias – fear of social situations
- (3) Special phobias – for example, a fear of open spaces (agoraphobia) or enclosed spaces (claustrophobia)
- (4) Panic disorders – frequent and debilitating panic attacks

(1) Generalized anxiety disorder

This type is excessive anxiety and constant worry about many things, focusing on the family or friends, health, work, money or forgetting important appointments. A person may be diagnosed with a generalized anxiety disorder if the anxiety and worry have been present most days over a six-month period (or) the person finds it difficult to control his anxiety.

(2) Social phobias

People with social phobia are afraid of being negatively judged or evaluated by others. This leads to fear of doing something that may humiliate them in public – for example public speaking, using public toilets, eating and drinking in public, writing in public, or any social encounters such as parties or workplaces.

Some social phobia sufferers may only fear one type of situation. Others may be concerned about several types of situations. This can lead them to avoid the feared situations, which can result to severe isolation

and avoiding people and activities which they usually enjoy.

(3) Specific phobias

A person with a specific phobia has a persistent and irrational fear of a particular object or situation. They may fear animals, places or people. Fear of the object or situation is so severe that a person may experience physical symptoms and panic attacks. Fears may include dogs, spiders, blood, storms, other objects or situations but, in all cases, the anxiety is both excessive and interfering.

The adult phobia sufferer usually knows that their fear is excessive or unreasonable. However, their need to avoid the object, place or person can significantly restrict their life.

(4) Panic disorders

Panic or anxiety attacks are common. Panic disorders are less common, affecting about 2% of the population. For a person to be diagnosed with a panic disorder, they should usually have had at least four panic attacks each month, over an extended period of time. Often panic attacks may not be related to a situation but come on spontaneously. Panic disorder may be diagnosed if panic attacks are frequent and if there is a strong and persistent fear of another attack occurring.ⁱⁱ

3. Causes of stress / anxiety

Main causes of stress

- Feel under lots of pressure such as school, work or family stressors
- Face big changes in your life such as death/ separation of loved ones, lose jobs, retirement
- Are worried about something such as accidents, abortion, poor health condition
- Don't have much or any control over the outcome of a situation
- Have responsibilities that you find overwhelming (overpowering)
- Don't have enough work, activities or change in your life
- Experience discrimination, hate or abuse

Root causes of stress in Buddhism

Sorrow, crying, physical and mental illness are most commonly due to mental factors, **love (craving)** or **attachments (clinging)** of oneself.

Ref-MN. 87

According to Buddhist Psychotherapy, the mental factors that cause mental illnesses are identified as mental defilements – “the kleshas”, but in dealing with kleshas, one has to understand, one has to see and know both one's own body and mind. The mind, even in its normal state, is full of kleshas or defilements.ⁱⁱⁱ

Causes of anxiety

Anxiety can be caused by a combination of factors such as -

Social and environmental factors:

- Childhood trauma
- Social isolation
- Negative life events, such as the death of a loved one
- Stress relating to work or education
- Physical or mental health problems
- Social and societal pressures
- Racism and socioeconomic deprivation

Biological factors:

- Genetics
- Brain chemistry
- Personality

Medications

- Drugs containing caffeine
- Drugs to treat ADHD
- Corticosteroids
- Some asthma treating drugs
- Phenytoin (Dilantin), an anti-seizure drug
- Rytary, a drug for Parkinson's disease
- Drugs/alcohol use or misuse or withdrawal can cause or worsen anxiety

Heart problems

- Anxiety can be brought on after a heart attack, stroke, heart failure

Other medical causes: medical problems can be linked to anxiety include

- Diabetes
- Thyroid problems such as hyperthyroidism
- Respiratory disorders such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Other mental health disorders
- Anxiety disorders can run in families^{iv}

4. Diagnosis of stress and anxiety

For the diagnosis of stress and anxiety, the physician/ psychiatrist or a health care provider must do history taking, physical examination, psychological evaluation, criteria comparison (analysis) and Hamilton test.

History taking

A health care provider has to ask the client's family history and medical history including any medications taking by him.

Physical examination

A health care provider must perform a physical examination to rule out physical conditions that may be causing the symptoms of stress and anxiety. He has to ask the client when the symptoms started, how long they have lasted, how severe they are, and whether they have occurred before.

(1) Psychological evaluation

A mental health professional should perform this evaluation, which may include a personal interview or survey. The client may have to complete a questionnaire. This evaluation involves discussing one's thoughts, feelings and behavior to help pinpoint a diagnosis and check for related complications.

(2) Comparison to criteria

A health care provider may compare the client symptoms to the criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5).

(3) Hamilton test

A health care provider may administer the Hamilton test, which is a rating scale that rates moods, fears and tension.

This test was developed in 1959 and was one of the first rating scales for anxiety. It is still widely used in

clinical and research settings and involves 14 questions that rate moods, fears, tension, as well as physical, mental, and behavioral traits. Hamilton test quantifies the severity of anxiety symptomatology.^v

(4) Identify signs and potential stressors

Health care provider can also help the patient to identify signs of chronic stress and stress-related disorders. He may ask the patient about potential stressors what he is experiencing, sleeping patterns, eating habits and mood. As the provider learn more about experiences with stress, he may also try to rule out mental health conditions such as:

- Acute-stress disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Generalized anxiety disorder
- Major depressive disorder

(5) Using Stress Scale

Typically, we can self-diagnose ourself with stress. There is one test that a health care provider can perform to diagnose stress by using a questionnaire, or health indicators like heart rate, or blood pressure to understand our current and overall stress levels. The provider may use one of the following questionnaires to measure stress:

- The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)
- The Holmes – Rahe Stress Inventory

Generally, these questionnaires include a series of questions that we can answer, and depending on our answers, the health care provider can learn whether we have mild, moderate, or severe stress. This can help the provider understand how stress may be affecting one's overall health and can suggest options for treatment and self-care.^{vi}

5. Management of stress and anxiety

Modern management of stress and anxiety

The two main treatment for stress and anxiety are psychological and medical treatment (or) a combination of the two.

(1) Psychotherapy

This is also known as talk therapy or psychological counseling. It involves working with a psycho-therapist to reduce the symptoms of stress and anxiety.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), generally a short-term treatment, is the most effective form of psychotherapy (for anxiety disorders) which focuses on teaching the patient specific skills to improve the symptoms and gradually return to the previous normal activities. CBT includes exposure therapy, in which ones gradually encounter the object or situation that triggers the anxiety; thus, the patient can build confidence that he can manage the situation and anxiety symptoms of the illness.

(2) Medical treatment

Depending on the type of stress and anxiety disorders, several types of medications-drugs are used to help to relieve symptoms. Some antidepressants are used to treat anxiety disorders. An anti-anxiety medication called 'Buspirone' may be prescribed. In limited circumstances, the doctor may prescribe other types of drugs such as sedatives, also called 'Benzodiazepines', or beta-blockers. These medications are used for short-term relief of anxiety symptoms and are not intended to be used for long term treatment. Before starting medical treatment, we should talk with the doctor about the benefits, risks and possible side effects of medications.

(3) Manage by changing life style

Exercise – Physical activity or regular exercise can improve sleep and deep sleep helps to renew the brain and body. Exercise also help mood and stimulates the body to release a number of hormones like endorphins and endocannabinoids that block pain, improve sleep and sedate the patient.

People who do exercise such as running, swimming, dancing, cycling, aerobics also tend to feel less anxious and become more positive about themselves. When our body feels good, our mind often follows.

Diet - Healthy diet can lessen the effects of stress/ anxiety, build up our immune system, level our mood and lower our blood pressure. Try to eat complex carbohydrates, lean proteins, fish, eggs, fruits, vegetables, nuts and have a balanced diet.

Sleep - A common side effect of stress and strain is that one may struggle to fall asleep. Lack of sleep can add to our stress level and cause a cycle of stress and sleeplessness. Better sleep habits can help us to reduce stress and anxiety.

Yoga -This is a form of exercise similar to meditation practice. There are many types of yoga and the ones that focus on slow movement, stretching, deep breathing is best for lowering our anxiety and stress.

Meditation-It works well for many people and has many benefits. Meditation can lower stress, anxiety, chronic pain and improve sleep, energy levels and mood.

Social -Connect with people and spend more time with friends or family member who will listen to you. It is a natural way to calm down and lower stress and anxiety. By this social activity, our body releases some hormones that stops fight-or-flight response and becomes relax.

Laugh -Laugh therapy improves our immune system, lessens pain and improves our mood for longer period of time. When we laugh, we take in more oxygen; our heart, lungs, muscles get a boost and our body releases good hormones to get better health.

Hobbies -Engaging in hobbies that we enjoy such as crafting, knitting, gardening, reading, playing video games, hiking, climbing etc.

Buddhist management of stress and anxiety

More than two thousand and five hundred years ago, Lord Buddha said that human life is full of stress/ anxiety with painful sufferings (dukkha) due to the three causative factors - greed, hatred/ anger and ignorance. Buddha explained the Four Noble Truths and Dependent Origination to understand the detailed nature of stress/ anxiety. He preached his disciples the possible way to stop stress/ anxiety by following the Noble Eightfold Path, which is right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. This Path eradicates hatred and ill will and cultivates good deeds, kindness and compassion.

In this modern age, this method of treating mental patients who suffer stress and anxiety is called Buddhist Psychotherapy because it is based on the teachings of the Buddha. The basic vision behind this method is to be found in the following discourses by the Buddha:

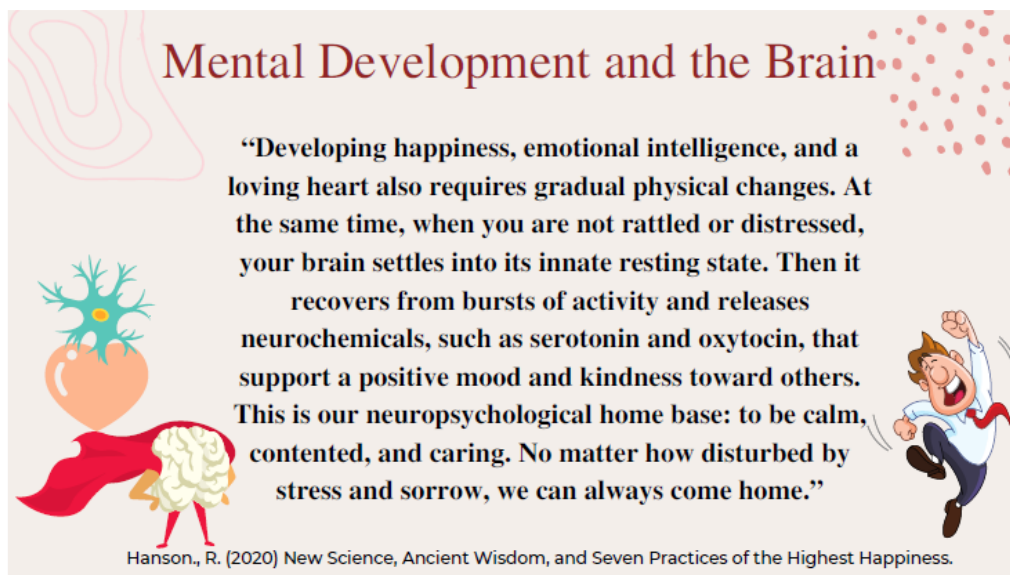
1. Satipatthāna Sutta the Discourse on Mindfulness (Majjima Nikāya No.10)
2. Sabbasava Sutta - the Discourse on All Mental Cankers (MN. No 2)
3. Vatthupama Sutta the Discourse on the Simile of Cloth (M.N.No 17)

Besides the above, the basic teachings on "anicha" (impermanence) "dukkha" (disharmony), "Paṭicca-samuppāda" (Dependent Origination) "pancha-nīvarana" (five mental hindrances) and "dasasanyojana" (ten fetters) are incorporated into this method of psychotherapy.

Buddhist Psychotherapy consists of six steps that a mental patient has to go through:

1. Development of communication between the therapist and the patient.
2. Development of body awareness by the patient.
3. Development of feeling awareness by the patient.
4. Probing into the patient's conscious and unconscious mind and bringing to light materials (memories mingled with kleshas) buried particularly in the unconscious mind.
5. Analysis of the selected materials that are linked to the mental illness – the causes of the illness are made to be seen and known by the patient himself.
6. Rehabilitation and socialization of the mental patient who has successfully gone through the first five steps given above.

Buddhist meditation is almost necessary to treat these mental patients suffering stress and anxiety because it purifies their thoughts and avoids unnecessary thinking.



An experienced Buddhist Psychotherapist can complete this psychotherapeutically effort within eight to ten sessions each running from one to one and a half hours per week. It may take five or six sessions more to treat a patient whose level of intelligence and perceptiveness is lower. Apart from the weekly sessions, the patient has to follow daily instructions given by the therapist under each of the above mentioned six steps. All this cannot be successful if the patient is not motivated to achieve recovery. For daily practice of instructions, family support is sometimes necessary.

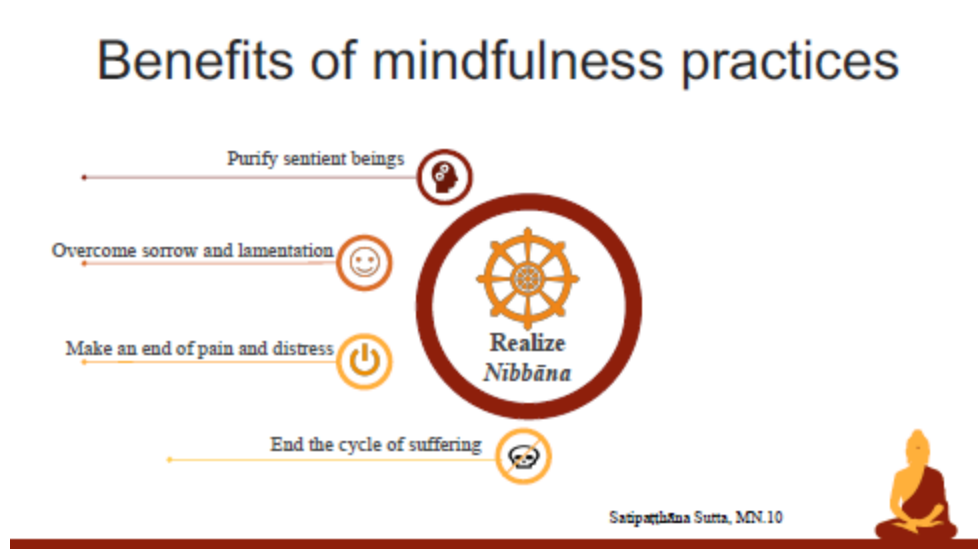
Even after the initial recovery of mental health, there can be relapses of the mental illness. In such a case, the patient has to be brought back to the therapist for further guidance. In treating cases of relapse, the therapist has to use discretion and have a combination of two or more steps at each session. Here, again, the importance of rehabilitation has to be stressed.

The final target of Buddhist Psychotherapy is to make a mental patient a normal human being who can manage his kleshas such as anger, suspicion, greed, malevolence, and jealousy. The Buddhist system of Psychotherapy is nothing, but getting the patient to practice meditation; it deviates from the traditional forms of meditation such as "Samatha (concentration) and Vipassana" (analytical understanding). The Buddhist Psychotherapy uses both these forms of meditation, but they are modified and structured to suit the mental patients who have lost control of their bodies and minds.^{vii}

Benefits of meditation practice

Meditation practice can give us a sense of calm, peace and balance that can benefit our emotional well-being and our overall health. We can also use this practice to relax and cope with stress by focusing on something that calms us. It can help us to learn to stay centered and keep us inner peace.

Meditation can reduce stress levels, which translates to less anxiety. An older 2014 meta-analysis study, including nearly 1300 adults found that meditation may decrease anxiety. Notably, this effect was strongest in those persons with the highest levels of anxiety.^{viii}



For reducing stress and anxiety, we should meditate at least 20 minutes twice a day and later may increase to one hour section to get maximum benefit. Regular meditation practice may make us to become more aware and more purposeful about our actions and teaches us how to respond, rather than react, to situations in our life. Meditation also helps our brain, allowing us to shift from negative thought patterns and habits to positive ones.

The cross-legged sitting postures are best for meditation because they are simple and stable, restful for the muscles, but active enough to keep the practitioner awake. During meditation, the spinal column needs to be erect and in balance so that the back muscles become relax, and this in turn allows our attention to be focused on the breathing process – in and out.

Meditation doesn't replace medical treatment, but it may help to add it to other treatments. Some research suggests that it may help people to manage symptoms of conditions such as: stress, anxiety, asthma, cancer, chronic pain, depression, heart disease, high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, sleep problems and tension headaches etc. There were many scientific studies which gave results that meditation not only reduce stress and control anxiety, it also supports emotional health, enhances self-awareness, reduce age-related memory loss, can generate kindness, may help with alcohol and drug addiction.

Modern meditation techniques

There are two modern meditation techniques popular at present in the western countries.

(1) Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)

It is a therapeutic intervention that involves weekly group classes and daily mindfulness exercises to practice at home, over an 8-week period. MBSR teaches people how to increase mindfulness through yoga

and meditation.

It is especially effective for reducing stress, anxiety and depression and can also help to treat people with specific problems including depression, chronic pain, smoking, addiction and thus improve physical health.

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)

It works to change the person's relationship to suffering by recognizing patterns in thought and emotion. MBCT emphasizes one's choice in how to respond negative mind states. It is also an 8-week program consisting of weekly two-hour classes with a course day-long session. It combines guided meditations with group discussions, various kinds of inquiry and reflection, and take-home exercise of "repetition and reinforcement", coming back to same places, again and again.

It is a therapeutic intervention that combines elements of MBSR and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) to treat people with depression. It can significantly reduce relapse in people who have had previous episodes of major depression.^{ix}

Mindfulness in modern lifestyle



6. Conclusion

Although this article describes ways to overcome stress and anxiety in many topics of study including symptoms, types, causes, diagnosis, management etc., it does not cover the complete picture on this subject. But this paper may show that mindfulness meditation practice can help people to reduce stress and anxiety and is a better technique than modern management because it may also enhance your mood, promote healthy sleep patterns, reduce distress and job strain, improve feelings of well-being and boost cognitive skills.

End notes

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