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Meena Hariharan
Radhanath Rath

COPING WITH
LIFE **STRESS**

THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE



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Radhanath Rath

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Foreword

Stress and coping with stress are phenomena closely entwined with human life such that the effects of stress are directly linked to coping. They relate to minor and major events in life across the life-span. The phenomenon of stress and the process of coping have multi-disciplinary foci involving many disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, management, sociology and anthropology. A combined effort by biologists, psychologists and medical researchers resulted in the emergence of a new field **psycho-neuroimmunology**, which focuses on the relationship between psychological and biological factors. In essence, psycho-neuroimmunology deals with studying the impact of stress on the biological immune system and the psychological vulnerability of individuals to stress.

In the **1930s, Selye first propounded his theory on the psychological response to stress.** Later studies verified and strongly established the universal physiological and immune response to stress. The psychological vulnerability to stress has been investigated from different angles. The study of 'Life Events' by Holmes and Rahe (1957), (adapted to Indian

Culture by few psychologists) is one such study. While one cannot underestimate the value of such checklists for their predictability of psychosomatic disorders, they tend to de-emphasise the role of the human being as an organism with the abilities of cognitive, emotional and behavioural reactions characterised by unique individual differences.

Personal control—particularly an individual's perception about the same—is directly linked to coping under stressful conditions.

Perceptions of stress vary across cultures and societies. For example, in India the performance of a child in school or public examination system is a matter of great stress, both to the child and the parents, unlike in the West. Therefore, the complex process of coping with stress and the impact of stress on well-being can be best understood when analysed with due emphasis on personality and cultural variations.

Coping is indeed a complex process where personality characteristics, situational demands and social-cultural elements play a significant role.

This book makes an appreciable effort towards highlighting the effect of stress and coping with stress in the context of cultures. It is for the first time that numerous case reports were identified and brought together under various types of coping. The comprehensive academic analyses of these case reports provide a good insight into the contribution of personality and cultural aspects to effective stress coping. The case reports being typically Indian and the contrasts being drawn with Western culture in the process of analysis and discussion, represent a significant contribution to Indian psychology.

Most books on stress and coping can be categorised as theoretical, applied or popular books on the topic. The interplay between the mind and the brain in the context of

stress has been a subject of academic debate, even though it is accepted that by way of stress the brain and the mind mutually affect one another. Perhaps it is for the first time that this topic has received both theoretical and practical treatment. The new theoretical inputs, particularly in Chapter 2 on 'Complexities of Coping', open new doors to research on coping with stress. The case report analysis with its focus on the Indian perspective is a knowledge addition to the practitioners.

A book with such synthesis between theory and practice from the student-teacher duo of Dr Meena Hariharan and Dr Radhanath Rath covers the experience of two generations of Indian psychologists.

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Preface

The study of stress and coping has encompassed a large arena of disciplines. They are researched and analysed under all branches of psychology covering Health Psychology, Environmental Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Neuro-Psychology, Organisational Behaviour, Clinical Psychology and so on. The subject of stress and coping are discussed as a biological or physiological component, cognitive component and behavioural or learned component. The chain of neuroendocrine events resulting in regulating sympathetic/adrenal response as well as the pituitary/adrenal response are studied as biological events of stress. The mental process of appraising the situation is discussed as the cognitive phenomenon. Such mental appraisal includes primary level conscious evaluative processes of judging the situation as harm or loss, threat or challenge. The secondary evaluation refers to existing resources of coping with the stressful situation. The resources include internal resources such as Internal locus of Control, one's ability to think and organise logically, self-esteem, self-efficacy and so on, and external resources such as money, social support network and so on.

The behaviour component refers to the behavioural response to the situation in terms of specific coping strategy. These coping strategies are discussed as learned behaviour appropriately reinforced across the life-span in various life experiences. Changes in coping strategies can be effected through conscious learning processes, observational learning, behaviour modification techniques or bio-feedback.

Cultures and societies have their strong influence in every stage of the process of coping with stress. Hence events judged as stressful, coping strategies adopted, and found productive and effective in Indian society, may be different from those of Western society. In this context, it is necessary to study stress and coping behaviour in a typical Indian context, which is unique in various aspects. For example, education system differs from culture to culture. In some Asian cultures like Japan, Korea and India, the academic performance in school receives high significance. In Indian culture, the importance to academic performance is stretched so much that children have been facing high demands on their learning pace right from their pre-school. Further, the parental and social expectations on academic achievement have proved to stress the children so much that it is one of the causes of suicides among the student community. This phenomenon perhaps is not observed in European and American culture. The cultural norm plays a significant role in determining a situation as stressful. For instance, polygamy is accepted as the norm in African countries. One more partner to the husband is viewed as an addition in the family's work-force. But even a slightest inkling that the husband is interested in another woman would be the source of stress and marital conflict in Indian culture.

Thus, when stress and coping process are examined and analysed in a holistic perspective, there cannot be a universal explanation. It has to be done from a socio-cultural angle.

This book discusses stress and coping process both from universal and cultural angles. It projects a curious combination of new theoretical inputs, and also practical analysis of a number of Indian case reports. This book recorded sixteen case reports under different categories of coping. Under each category, one case report with an effective outcome and one with an ineffective outcome is discussed. The analysis of case reports took into account the personality and cultural aspect too. Wherever relevant, the cultural differences in coping strategy between Indian and Western countries are highlighted. The phenomena of stress and coping are explained with reference to personal dimensions such as locus of Control, cognitive mediation, behavioural dimension of efforts invested, stakes perceived and external dimensions of the time frame and stakes involved.

The book also includes useful exercises for self-assessment, and provides useful tips for stress management and effective coping.

Acknowledgements

The decision to write a book starts with unrest from within—perhaps a stress that functions as a motivator. But the act of writing the book needs an environment that upholds the original stress to drive one to action and also insulation from other day-to-day stressors. People in family and workplace contribute a lot for this. We would like to thank them all. The two authors are in two different places and a number of people helped us in completing the book.

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Meena Hariharan
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Understanding Stress and Coping

1

*L*ived *happily ever after* is the expected ending of a children's story. What precedes this conclusion is either one or a series of episodes where a character encounters problems, and fights them in ways that hold the interest of the child. At the end of it, there is a significant achievement in circumventing the problems and attaining the goal set for the character. In fact, what every story reflects is the stress and the successful coping process of its characters. The experience of stress and coping is entwined into human life. Hence there cannot be a story without a reference to these two important aspects of life. The only difference between fiction and real life is that the story concludes with the statement of *lived happily ever after* while this seems to be a *temporary state of homeostasis in real life*.

Stress and coping are systematically packed into human life. Yet, the irony is that while all of us feel very certain about experiencing it, there seems to be an ambiguity in its expression. This ambiguity is because of the fact that the concepts

of 'stress' and 'coping' contain universal physiological phenomena and unique personality factors determined by the socio-cultural context. The physiological aspects refer to the universality of the phenomenon while the contextual aspect of the stressor to a certain extent has socio-cultural determinants, with the cognitive aspect playing an active mediating role. For some individuals 'stress' refers only to a crisis or calamity while others perceive the day-to-day life problems and mild irritants as 'stress'. Thus the situation causing stress and the experience of stress itself are highly subjective. However, there is also an element of universality engraved into the experience of stress. The complexity of the stress experience will be appreciated, if looked at from the angle of multiple stress responses. A stress situation broadly gives rise to a complex cluster of responses involving physiological response, emotional response and cognitive or problem solving response. The universal physiological responses are likely to be more pronounced in case of a crisis or calamity, while the personality and socio-cultural aspects manifest predominantly in case of everyday life situations. This is, however, not to completely negate the role of the physiological response in everyday life stress and the role of personality and socio-cultural impacts in crisis situations. Nevertheless, while the physiological response is predominant in a crisis situation, the role of socio-cultural and personality factors is more conspicuous in daily stress.

The Physiological Response to Stress

Cannon (1932) has described the physiology of stress response. To begin with, the Autonomic Nervous System

functions as two systems, namely, sympathetic nervous system and parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is active in conditions of stress, whereas the parasympathetic nervous system is active when a person is calm and relaxed. According to Cannon, under stressful conditions, the physiological response begins with an individual's perception of stress. With this, the autonomic nervous system activates the sympathetic nervous system which enables the body to mobilise its resources to face the emotional or emergency situation. The body is, thus, tuned to an intense motor activity that is essential for a behavioural response of attack, defence or an escape from the situation.

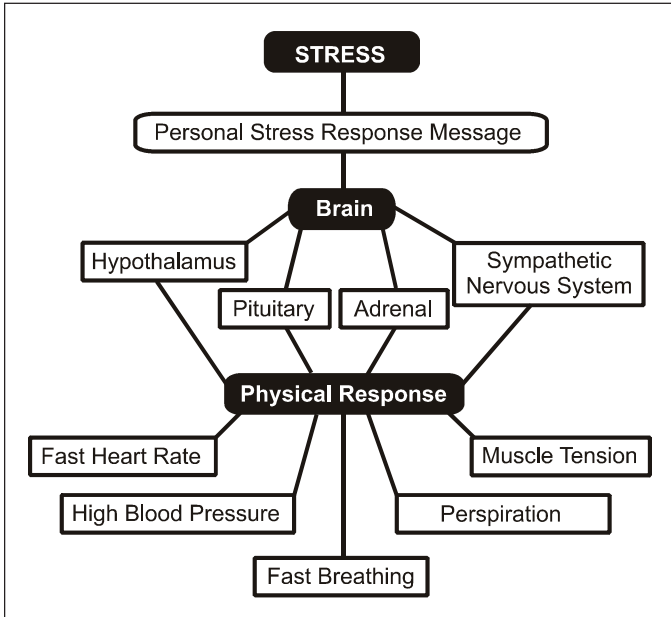
Our body's resources are mobilised in two ways: one, through the activation of the sympathetic nervous system and the other through the anterior pituitary gland. When a person is under stress, the sympathetic nervous system triggers discharge of two hormones called adrenaline and noradrenaline. These hormones enter the bloodstream and circulate to all parts of the body. Adrenaline affects many parts of the body. When it reaches the liver, it helps mobilise glucose into blood. This supplies the required extra energy to muscles and the brain. It also makes the heart beat faster. Another major function of adrenaline is to constrict peripheral blood vessels causing an increase in the blood pressure. Though the sympathetic nervous system is known for its impact on specific systems, there are times when it acts as a whole. This phenomenon is called 'mass discharge'. Such mass discharge occurs at times when the individual is under extreme pain or experiences extreme fright. Under such situations, the mass discharge gears up the body for a highly integrated set of responses involving a variety of bodily changes necessary

for vigorous physical activity. This happens within seconds of perception of such a situation. **Lovallo (1997) calls it survival reflex**, characterised by a set of physiological and behavioural changes happening in the interest of survival of the individual. This response is common also among animals. The impact of mass discharge is seen in the following functions. As a result of these changes, the individual will be able to react with a strenuous activity.

- **Increase in blood flow to muscular regions with a decrease in flow to digestive organs and kidneys, which do not need to function actively in such times**
- **Increase in the sugar concentration in blood**
- **Increase in the pressure on the arteries**
- **Increase in mental activity**

The second set of physiological responses is through the pituitary gland. Experience of stress causes increased activity in the limbic system. This activates the hypothalamus to secrete corticotrophin releasing hormone (CRH). The CRH stimulates the pituitary gland to secrete the adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH). This in turn causes the adrenal cortex to release cortisol and other corticosteroids. **Cortisol undertakes a dual function. It produces metabolic effects to facilitate fight-or-flight reaction** that relieves stress. It also sends feedback to the hypothalamus and pituitary gland to stop producing excessive cortisol. The cortisol hormone helps in reporting back to the brain and body centres to stop the cycle. The release of adrenocortical hormones are good in mobilising energy during the time of stress, but high levels of these for prolonged periods may cause damage to the individual's health.

Figure 1.1
Physiological Response to Stress



Laboratory experiments have shown that animals exposed to high levels of stress have increased levels of stress hormones including opioid peptides that closely resemble morphine in chemical structure and effects (Constable 1992). Humans also produce opioid peptides. This leads to the inference that it is possible that some individuals get 'addicted' to their own morphine-like stress hormones. An individual with a positive personality, if addicted, may show interest in thrilling activities like bungee jumping, automobile race,

mountaineering and so on. But a person with a negative personality with such an addiction may show inclination for anti-social activities like involving in crimes.

Selye (1956) discussed another factor of universality related to stress response. This is very much in line with the physiological responses. He discussed what he called the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), divided into three stages. These three stages seem to have a universal character. The coordinated functioning of sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems resulting in changes in heartbeat, breathing, sweat gland secretion and gastrointestinal system, gears up the body for an emergency. This is called the 'stage of alarm'. This, according to Selye, happens soon after the perception of a stressor. In the second stage, the individual adapts to the stressor though he gives an outward appearance of normalcy. This is called the 'stage of resistance'. If the stress situation is prolonged till the individual crosses the threshold of the 'stage of resistance', he enters the final 'stage of exhaustion'. Here, the ability to resist is depleted and the individual breaks down. This may lead to violence, depression or even suicidal reactions. While the stages are universal in character, the duration of these stages may be influenced by determinants of personality and socio-cultural aspects. How early the individual reaches this stage and whether he adopts an effective coping strategy is to a large extent determined by the cognitive and personality factors. By talking about these three stages, Selye did not underplay the influence of personality and cultural factors. He indicated that the individual's reaction to stress is significant. The individual differences in coping with stress are well-indicated in his writings. In fact, his writings on stress stated that 'stress is a normal counterpart of living. How we react to it is important'.

Gender Difference in Stress Response

Hormonal secretions partly explain the physiological response to stress. On this basis, some researchers argued that because of the hormonal differences in men and women, their physiological stress responses are different.

Taylor et al. (2000) took an exception to the universal model of fight-or-flight. They found that the fight-or-flight reaction is not the same in men and women and hence found a tinge of gender bias. According to them, though the autonomous nervous system functions identically in men and women, they are different in their neuroendocrinal response to stress. Women's response to stress, according to them, is characterised by 'tend-and-befriend' rather than fight-or-flight. They argued that as a part of stress response, both men and women secrete a hormone called oxytocin. Oxytocin is helpful in making people less anxious and more sociable. The effects of oxytocin are reduced by the male sex hormones, while they are increased by the female hormone, estrogen. Hence, women are more prone to the 'tend-and-befriend' behavioural response than men are. This is the reason one finds women coping with stress through higher nurturing behaviour and also through seeking social support. Thus, a physiological basis is laid to explain gender differences in coping with stress.

Apart from physiological differences in reaction to stress, men and women tend to cope differently with stress that suits their socio-cultural expectations. For example, in a typical Indian context, faced with bereavement in family, women break down and weep. Such emotional behaviour is normally strengthened through reinforcement of spontaneous social support. People around them liberally extend their

consolation to them. On the other hand, men exercise restraint and try to bring their emotions under quick control. This is very much in line with cultural expectations; because traditionally, as per Indian culture, men will have to perform the last rites and hence are expected to be action-oriented. Women do not have a significant role to play in the last rituals. Thus, the problem-focused or action-oriented coping by men and emotional management of women in this context is more or less a cultural disposition.

Cognitive, Personality and Cultural Factors in Stress and Coping

The physiological aspect views situational responses to stress as harmful. However, what qualifies a situation as 'harmful' starts with an individual's perception mediated by his cognition. The cognitive interpretation of a situation has a socio-cultural influence too. While the physiological response may be the same, what determines the overt action is influenced by the personality of the individual, the socio-cultural set-up and many other related factors. A hypothetical comparison between a Western and Indian response to the same situation may throw light on the role of socio-cultural aspect in stress response clearly. While the Western culture can be described as achievement oriented, the Indian culture is predominantly affiliation oriented. The achievement orientation of the Western culture reflects in its individualistic society. On the other hand, the affiliation oriented Indian culture sometimes witnesses an element of collective action in an individual's coping with personal stress. For example,

in the Western culture, if there is marital conflict between a couple, the stress is likely to be perceived as 'private' to the couple concerned. The probabilities are that they resolve it between them, seek professional help or decide on breaking the marriage. Any attempt on part of the family members or friends to intervene would be viewed as an interference rather than help. In case the couple decides that the marriage would not work, they go for divorce as the best alternative. A similar situation is perceived and coped with differently in Indian conditions. In an extreme example of rural India, if a couple faces marital conflict that cannot be resolved between themselves, the family members and relatives of the couple or the village elders sit together to use their wisdom and experience in resolving the conflict. They analyse and discuss the problem in public and decide on the future course of action. The couple abides by this decision. If that too fails, they resort to separation and divorce as a last resort. Even in moderate middle class Indian families, if a young couple has marital conflicts, the family members of both—the husband and wife—intervene and try to bring-in a reconciliation. Thus while in Western culture, marital stress is appraised as a private stress, contrastingly in Indian culture it is appraised as family stress. Hence in the Indian context adopting the coping technique of 'Seeking Social Support' while facing marital conflict is a common accepted strategy, while it might not be so in the Western context. This difference is mainly due to the significance attached to the institutions of marriage and family in Indian culture, and the resultant appraisal of marriage as a life long commitment among Indians. This is further reinforced by the social stigma attached to divorce in Indian society. In this context, coping with stress can be called a dispositional response to stress.

The physiological model views stress response at a particular point or as an immediate reaction to a stressful situation. The physiological response to stress also shows for a stipulated time; but the process of coping continues for a longer time until either the person under stress is successful in eliminating the stress or he reconciles to adapting to the stress. Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and Lazarus (1993) defined coping with stress as a process. Though Lazarus endorsed both dispositional and situational perspectives as important in understanding coping, his definition of coping has significant leanings towards situational viewpoint. He defined coping as 'constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person'. It is the 'cognitive and behavioural' aspects that have a strong socio-cultural bearing in defining coping process. For example, every culture has its own dress code. In a Western country, young women wear skirts and shorts. Hence the women care and groom well the exposed part of the legs. Any visible scars, black patches or allergic eruptions on skin and on the legs may be a source of high stress for a young Western lady. On the other hand, for an Indian woman where the dress code is different, it is not perceived as a social embarrassment, and hence, the stress and coping behaviour may just be limited to the physical pain caused by the allergy and compliance with medical advice.

Interpretation of a situation as stressful or otherwise is mediated by one's cognition. While interpreting the situation, the individual takes into consideration other situational aspects like one's personal stakes involved, perception of control and so on. This may be clear from the following example.

Let us assume that a young man working in a bank is on the verge of losing his job. The experience of stress in this case depends upon the country where he lives. A young Indian graduate who is in this situation is highly stressed than his counterpart in a developed country. This is because the young man in a developed country is confident of finding an alternative job while the prevalent unemployment problem in Indian conditions leaves the young Indian in a state of uncertainty. Subsequently, the coping strategy of the Indian going through the stress of being fired would differ from his counterpart in a developed country.

The stress responses and coping strategies have a distinct variation within India too. This can be observed in the daily life events. Let us examine a common instance like power-cuts faced by Indian citizens. Long hours of power failure in domestic sector are perceived as a source of stress by the urban middle class. It causes disruption in the day's routine activities such as pumping and filling the overhead water tank for domestic use, using the geyser in the bathroom, grinding the *masala* (spices) in the kitchen and so on. It creates disruption to routine activities, delay in schedules and results in subsequent irritability and mood fluctuations. This is particularly because the busy middle-class urban life activities revolve around the use of electricity. Urban dwellers may cope with the situation of long unpredictable power cuts with several active options such as rescheduling the day's activities to suit the power supply timings, spending money on the installation of an inverter, writing letters to editors of newspapers or shifting their residence to another locality. However, the same situation in a rural area may not cause disruption and stress in day-to-day domestic activities per se except to the farming community which faces

tremendous stress if power cuts disrupt pumping of water to agricultural fields. The other rural dwellers may adapt to the situation of power cuts without much difficulty. By and large, though the incidents causing stress may vary from culture to culture or place to place, the sources of stress in general can be classified under the following categories.

Sources of Stress

Stress may be induced from different sources. A probable list of the sources of stress is mentioned in Table 1.1. An elaborate discussion on the sources of stress is taken up under different heads. Vulnerability to different sources of stress may be determined by an individual's personality characteristics, past experience and cultural background and so on.

Environmental Stress

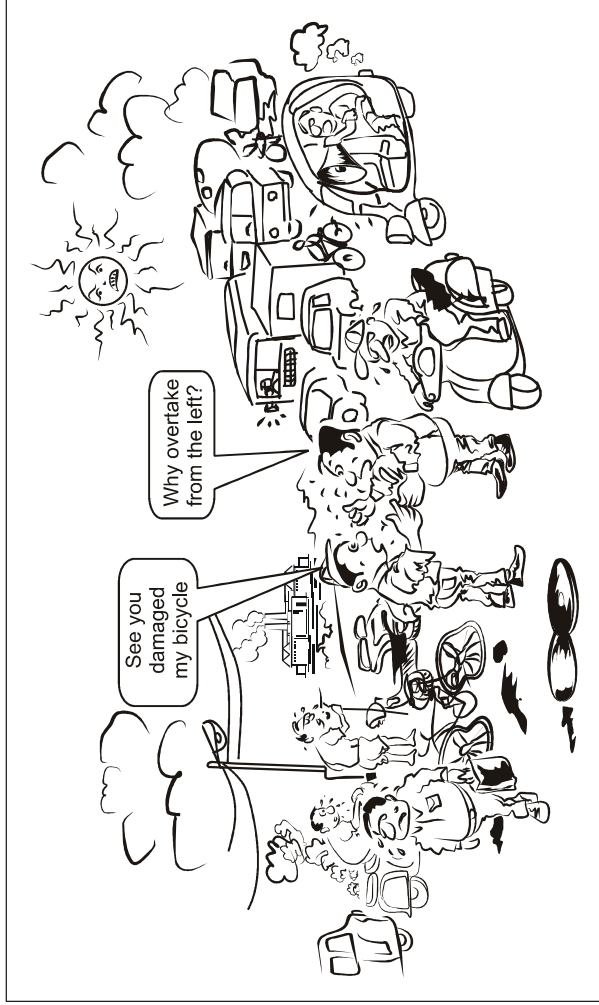
Living or working in an uncomfortable physical environment may be stress-inducing. Excessive noise, heat, lack of ventilation, unhygienic surroundings, crowd, or an environment with strong smell or bright lights may cause stress and lower work efficiency. There are a number of research evidence indicating a lower performance under a noisy environment. A casual observation while travelling on Indian roads gets our attention to the common interaction among strangers on the road. It can be observed that—normally—more interpersonal conflicts and road rages are seen during peak summer when the heat is oppressive. One can also observe a negative change in the mood and interpersonal interaction in the

Table 1.1
Common Sources of Stress

<i>Environmental stress</i>	<i>Change-induced stress</i>	<i>Personality related stress</i>	<i>Stress related to interpersonal issues</i>	<i>System issues stress</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Heat – Noise – Bright light – Lack of light – Suffocation – Chemical emissions – Crowding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Fear of the unknown/new – Feeling of vulnerability – Fear of rejection – Lack of tolerance for ambiguity – Fear of conflict – Fear of taking risk – Fear of inability to cope with change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Low self-esteem – Feeling of over-responsibility – Fear of loss of control – Fear of making mistakes – Fear of being judged – Lack of belief in being 'good enough' – Chronic strive to be perfect – Chronic guilt – Chronic anger – Chronic hostility – Chronic hatred – Feeling of inadequacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of support in a relationship – Unhealthy communication – Sense of competitiveness – Threats of rejection – Inability to be assertive – Struggle for power in a relationship – Poor intimacy or sexual relationship – Over-dependency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of leadership – No sense of direction – Un-cooperative atmosphere – Autocratic leadership – Unclear expectations – Lack of team work – Confused communication



Illustration 1.1
Environmental stress



family on a day when the next-door neighbour digs a borewell and noise pollution invades the neighbourhood. The continuous noise for a long duration—almost the whole day—may even cause physical consequences of stress with headache, nausea and so on, apart from mood swings. A factory worker exposing himself to the noise of heavy machinery in the workplace may get stressed out at the end of the day.

Sometimes, though environmental factors like noise, heat or emission of chemical gases may not induce stress directly, they may increase the individuals' vulnerability to stress. Organic solvents like carbon monoxide, carbon disulphide, pesticides, or strong aromas emitted into the living environment adversely affect the individual's physical and psychological functioning. It is found that stress induced by exposure to carbon monoxide leads to symptoms like unusual fatigue, lack of energy and mood irritability (Srivastava 1998: 11).

Driving in Indian metropolitan cities causes stress due to several environmental stressors. The noise of traffic, air pollution, crowding on roads and uneven road surfaces, individually and collectively contribute to stress levels. After a hectic one-hour drive in heavy traffic, one may find it very difficult to immediately switch over to an important presentation in a seminar. It is desirable to give oneself at least five to ten minutes of time to unwind and relax before getting ready for an important role that demands cognitive exercise.

The environment of those living in congested slums exposes them almost to all types of physical stress. This could be one reason why their low level of alertness makes them prone to several traffic accidents.

Change-induced Stress

As early as 1967, Holmes and Rahe identified 43 life events (later revised to 63) inducing major stress. Most of the events were found to demand readjustment to life because of change. They arrived at the weightage of stress for each event depending upon the severity and duration the change demanded. One major potential of 'change' to induce stress is in the form of 'fear of change'. It is said that 'worse than the war is the fear of war'. Fear of change is considered to be more stressful than the change per se. One of the natural preferences of an average normal human being is to continue the status quo. Any imposition of change from the status quo is normally resisted, unless the change is brought in such marginal incremental units that it misses a conspicuous

Illustration 1.2
Change-induced stress



experience and observation. This phenomenon can be observed in the simple day-to-day behaviour of children. It may be observed that young children manifest different forms of resistance to cease their activities and retire to bed at night. Similarly, sleeping children also are found to show resistance to wake up in the morning. In a broader perspective it is normally observed that the young and the middle-aged detest the idea of their entering old age. However, they get to accept the process of aging only because the process brings the advancement of age in small incremental units so that the change is not felt suddenly. Any change brings with it some element of ambiguity. Those with low tolerance for ambiguity and high fear for the unknown are likely to experience higher levels of stress. This can be compared to a child's 'stranger anxiety' that manifests around eight months of age and separation anxiety in the first few days of school. A child who is not equipped with adequate coping skills experiences anxiety, insecurity and stress on being taken by a stranger or being separated from his/her familiar environment and people. However, gradual acquaintance with the new environment and people reduces their stress. Similarly, adults who are not curious to the challenges of novelty or nurture apprehensions about any ambiguity, suffer from anxiety and stress in any situation that calls for major changes and expects changes in performance. This is one reason why many people who receive a major breakthrough in their careers feel happy and excited, but also secretly harbour stress alongside.

The main reason for change-induced stress is the fear of the unknown. The best coping strategy is to move from the unknown zone to the known zone. For example, a young engineering graduate receiving her first employment letter may feel happy and excited while also experiencing stress.

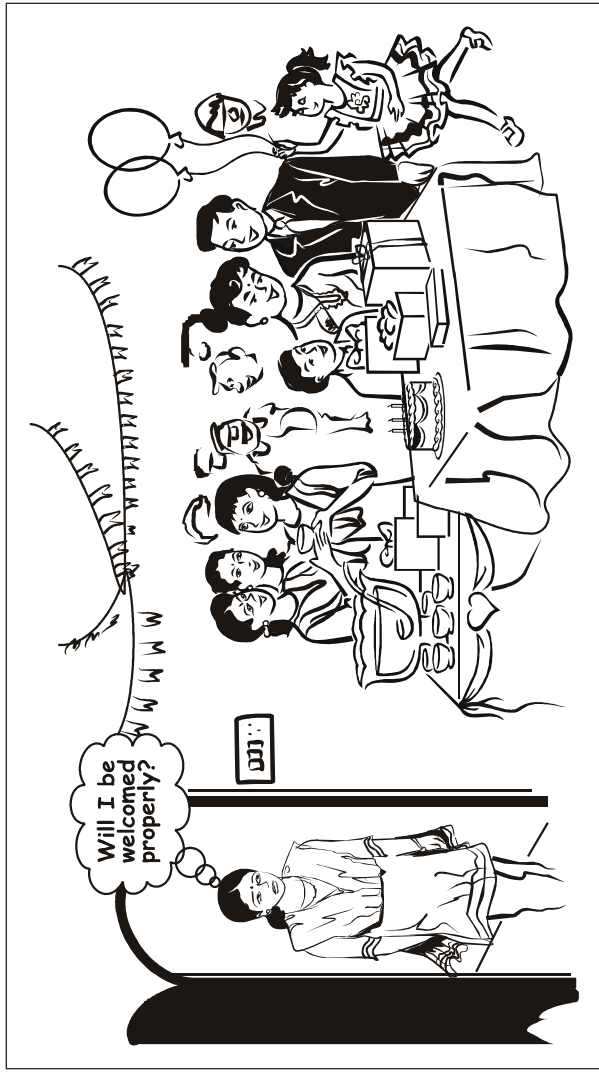
This could be because of several factors associated with her first job offer. First and foremost, the unknown zone is the required transition from college life to job atmosphere for the first time. The other unfamiliar aspects are the location of the workplace, new route, new people and their unknown expectations, and many more aspects. One way of reducing the intensity of stress is to take a preliminary visit to the place to see the office and meet a few people if possible. This bridges the gap between the unknown and known zones, and one can identify the positive aspects related to the new place, people and nature of work. Once this is done, the perception of the situation is likely to change to one characterised by positive features and motivation is likely to surface.

Personality Related Stress

The personality characteristics of an individual to a large extent are responsible for appraising a situation as stressful or otherwise. An individual's self-esteem with its need for power, locus of control and value system play a key role in cognitive mediation of appraisal of the situation. The strength of self-esteem is related to the fear of being judged, and fear of failure or committing mistakes. An individual's value system is closely related to feelings of guilt, and feelings of 'not being good enough'.

In typical Indian joint families, particularly when the only son of the parents gets married, the conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law sometimes has its origin in the fear of loss of control. The mother-in-law who felt a sense of control over her son and also in running the household, experiences a sense of ambivalence on the entry of an efficient daughter-in-law. While she feels proud of her

Illustration 1.3
Personality related stress



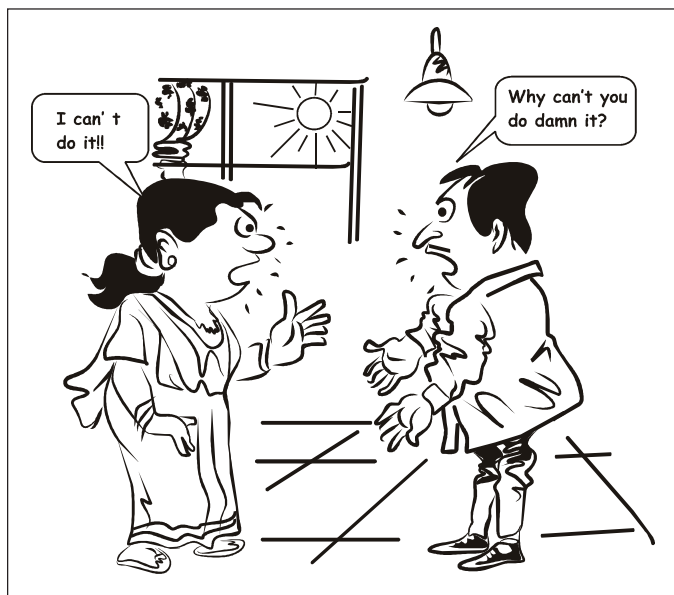
daughter-in-law's efficiency in managing the household, she also suffers from a fear of losing the long established control over the household. This induces stress forcing her to perceive the daughter-in-law as a competitor in managing the home and establishing relationships. However, this is unlikely to happen to a mother-in-law with strong self-esteem who does not compare herself with her daughter-in-law. This is also unlikely to happen to a mother-in-law who prefers her son and daughter-in-law to have their own establishment.

For young Indian couples, parenthood is a status that is attained without any training for the new role. In most middle class families, where both the parents work, the new trend among the young parents is observed to be a sense of guilt for not spending quality of time with their children and not being 'good-enough-parents'. This is observed to be a major source of stress for them. Such stress is also seen to get 'displaced', resulting in marital conflicts.

The change in the role of the Indian woman, who is now 'career-centric', is resulting in role conflict in marriages. For example, demands arising from shift in workplace or timings of the wife are found to culminate in high stress levels in young Indian couples. Such high levels of stress are also found to be the result of a mismatch between the career demands and traditional family values. This is mainly because of the changes brought in the level of aspiration of Indian women without a corresponding change in the attitudes of men.

Interpersonal Issues Causing Stress

Indian society can be described as highly relation-oriented while western society can be construed as task-oriented. Both have their own packages of stress. But the difference is

Illustration 1.4**Stress related to interpersonal relationship**

that in task orientation, one's stress is likely to be limited to the time lines and task-complexity vis-à-vis one's own cognitive abilities. On the other hand, in a relation-oriented society, stress and well-being are determined not just by one's own disposition to others but also on the other person's reaction to one's initiative. Perhaps that explains for the high internal locus of control in Western society while it is not so in Indian society. Stress level is likely to be high in individuals with an external locus of control as compared to those with an internal locus of control.

There may be several interpersonal situations causing stress. It can be observed that more often than not, the extreme negative stress reactions have their origin in interpersonal issues. **In close interpersonal relationships deep emotions are involved.** A young man is emotionally attached to his mother with whom he perhaps lived all his life. He also develops a strong emotional relationship with his new wife. When there is a conflict between these facets, he faces difficulty in being assertive with either. More than the conflict itself, it is his inability to be assertive that induces stress in him. It becomes difficult for him to involve in logical analysis and take a rational stand. **The reason behind this is that in situations of emotional bonding and attachment, rationality is likely to occupy a peripheral position.** Such situations were typical to Indian men until the 1980s when it was very common to take the young brides to live with the groom's parents. However, **with globalisation bringing with it an increase in migration,** this phenomenon is not as high as it used to be.

Another common phenomenon observed in Indian society is an inability on the part of old men to cope with the sudden loss of their wives. Except in cases where the old wives die after a prolonged illness, **old Indian widowers in majority of cases are seen to manifest psychological and somatic stress symptoms within few months of the death of their wives.** It is also not uncommon to observe the widowers taking to severe illness, being prone to accidents or even dying within months after the sudden demise of their wives. One of the reasons for their inability to cope with the loss of the life partner is their over-dependence on their wives. The role expectations in traditional Indian families allow the man to depend on the wife for his food and assistance in every

field. Though the man retires from the job, the wife, despite growing old continues to look after every need of the man. This dependence may cause stress to both the partners—the man may feel stressed because of loss of autonomy and control (though consciously and willingly losing it) and the woman because of not having any respite from this responsibility. However, in many cases this dependence may also form into a habit, losing its potential to induce stress. But in such cases, when the wife dies unexpectedly, the man tends to suffer severe stress, sometimes causing illness and death. But in such circumstances, the old Indian woman losing her husband is commonly observed to cope well with the loss of her man. The main reason for this could be the type of relationship shared between them because she has not been over-dependent on him in her daily life events.

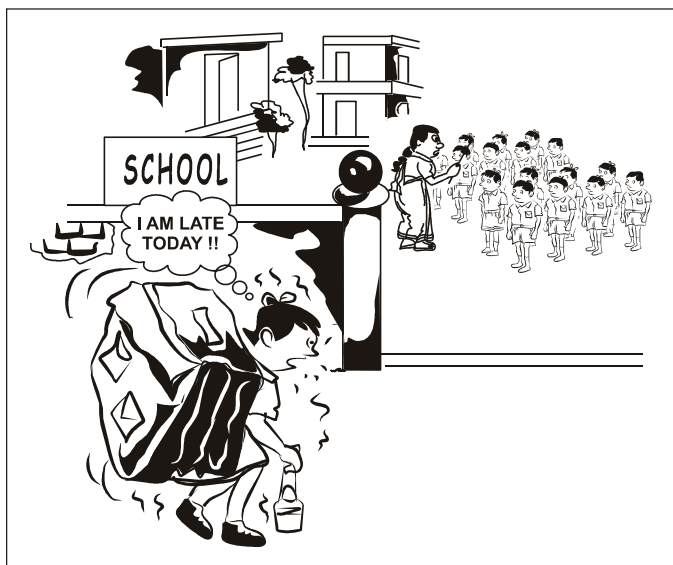
Inherent to the ancient Indian system of education has been its healthy teacher–student bonding. But with the expansion of higher education, there seems to be a change in the scenario. Large class strengths and unrealistic workload on teachers in undergraduate colleges in India are the major causes of lack of healthy personal communication between teachers and students. As a consequence, both the students and the teachers experience severe stress related to their interpersonal relationship.

Stress Caused by System Issues

‘System’ refers to any organisation, family, school, clubs and other social enterprises in which an individual functions. An average individual distributes his/her time between these systems. Life becomes tough if any of these places is excessively stress-inducing. The stress related to ‘system’ has

Illustration 1.5

System-induced stress



become highly relevant in Indian society in the context of changing demands in the family and workplace.

One group of population in Indian society which is the victim of high 'system induced stress' is the student community. The natural interests of children, to be playful and fun loving, are coming in severe conflict with the pressure imposed by academic overload and expectations. The academic overload in schools and the unrealistic parental demands and social expectations are imposing severe stress on students. In an attempt to fulfil the demands and meet the expectations, students are found to strive for an elusive perfection.

This is more pronounced among students who are high achievers. The stress levels of the high achieving students are relatively high because of their fear of losing their rank, facing the disapproval of parents and society at large. Further, the efforts invested to prove their perfection can also be stress-inducing, particularly when they do not enjoy it.

Sometimes attainment of sudden autonomy may pose a threat. In the Indian education system, the students of an average school are under the 'control' of a teacher and school administration. Their behaviour, activities and performance are guided by external sources. There is a 'class teacher' in every class to provide direction in extra-curricular activities and take care of the overall performance of the children. Thus, a student is guided by the process of reward and punishment for his/her performance and behaviour. When these students enter college where they are no more so closely monitored, they are likely to experience stress in the initial days because of a lack of direction. Students take time to inculcate the sense of autonomy and self-directed behaviour. Thus, the transition phase is normally stressful for students.

A common source of stress experienced by the students enrolled in corporate junior colleges (having attached coaching centres for professional courses) originates from the unhealthy atmosphere of excessive competition. This stress is found to be very severe, leading to a number of suicides. According to a research reported in a newspaper, the rate of suicides among students in the state of Andhra Pradesh in the latter half of the year 2006 reached almost an average of one suicide every alternate day (Eenadu Hyderabad, 25 October, 2006). This is the result of a stress-chain targeting students as its final victims. A cut-throat competition between the private owners of corporate colleges also creates severe

stress in students. This results in their unrealistically high demands on the faculty, who in turn thrust their pressure on the students to continuously show progress in higher performance. When this crosses the threshold of the student's physical and cognitive abilities, they are increasingly found to show symptoms of stress reflecting in their physical and psychological well-being. Thus, the atmosphere of competition has begun to pose a threat to the well-being in Indian society.

In several public offices, certain types of assignments call for a coordinated functioning between several departments. Transfer of jobs and placement in higher cadre on promotion is a common phenomenon in public offices. When an official replaces the existing person who was very popular among the colleagues in various sections, the person who replaced him is likely to face stress, at least in the initial days in the office. One of the reasons for this could be the subordinates' constant comparison of the new official with the one s/he replaced, which may result in an uncooperative atmosphere. This would be prolonged if the new officer is not good in communication skills.

Some relevant causes of stress have been discussed so far that play a crucial role in an individual's life. The list, however, is not exhaustive. There are bound to be individual variations, both in the type and degree of stress. The individual tends to choose a specific strategy of coping and develop a unique style to match the variation in the experience of stress.

Coping Strategy and Coping Style

Coping strategy refers to a technique of coping adopted in a specific context. Coping style is defined as the number of

strategies a person has in his/her repertoire. As the person grows in age and experience, one may go on acquiring new skills or strategies of coping. What determines the psychological well-being is the style of coping one adopts.

A young child may not have as many coping strategies in his/her repertoire as an adult. A 12-year-old school student, who forgot to carry the homework notebook, might perceive severe threat in the situation and hence experience intense stress. On being questioned by the teacher, s/he may break into tears, lie or resort to a frozen pattern of non-response. An older student of 15–16 years age, in a similar situation may not perceive as much stake in the situation and hence may not experience as much stress. This child may choose a coping strategy s/he considers as safest. S/he may face the situation squarely by explaining and convincing the teacher that s/he would submit the same the next day, or may seek the help of a friend to copy it in another notebook and submit to the teacher. S/he may even plan to divert the attention of the teacher so that s/he is not caught for the default.

These variations attributed to age and experience in coping with stress are closely related to cognition. Cognition here refers to one's perception, comprehension, thoughts, appraisal and the interpretation of events. Thoughts and interpretation relate to one's mental organisation of the various bits and pieces constituting the event, the meaning attached to it and the way it is related to factors and events outside the actual situation. An individual's interpretation of events changes with age and experience, and hence, the stress and coping responses also may change across time. Over a period of time, the individual may develop a specific 'coping style'. Coping style refers to the disposition of an individual to respond to any stressful event in a particular way. Coping style is described

in different ways from different perspectives. Focusing on the number of strategies a person has in his/her repertoire, it is classified as 'Flexible style' or 'Rigid style'. A person who has under his/her disposal more number of coping strategies suitable to different contexts is said to have a flexible style, while the one who chooses from limited strategies in his/her repertoire is said to have a rigid style. An example of flexible style is a person who copes with different strategies in different contexts. When s/he faces a severe health problem, s/he may seek the help of friends to obtain the right professional information and consultation. When there is an interpersonal conflict with the spouse, s/he may use a strategy that enables him/her to resolve it without the involvement of others. On the other hand, when s/he encounters unjust or discriminatory treatment at the workplace, s/he may choose to confront the concerned person to bring about a desirable change in the situation. The contrary is true in case of a person with a rigid style of coping. S/he may have a tendency to use one or two strategies of coping with different types of stress with wide contextual variations. For example, if there is a domestic problem, s/he may depend on family members to help him/her out of the stress; if it is work related s/he may seek the help of colleagues; if it is a financial crisis s/he may request family, friends, neighbours or colleagues for a loan. This may happen if the person does not have other coping strategies in his/her repertoire. It may also occur because such responses got strengthened through positive reinforcement in the past.

Taking a qualitative perspective, coping style is divided into Proactive Coping and Avoidant Coping. Proactive coping style refers to confronting trouble directly by gathering information, or taking straightforward preventive action (Aspinwall and Taylor 1997). People with proactive style do

not leave anything to chance. They plan ahead, plunge into problem solving, and confront the situation. In this process, they may experience relatively higher levels of anxiety (Dimatteo and Martin 2002: 263). Individuals with avoidant coping style resort to minimising or even completely avoiding the implication of a threatening event. Though such a style may ensure better relaxation at the initial stage, it has the potential disadvantage of making the goal achievement difficult or even impossible. Aspinwall and Taylor (1997) have identified five stages for proactive coping as explained.

1. Resource Accumulation

A person with proactive coping style would equip himself or herself with adequate resources such as a good educational foundation, adequate savings in bank or a strong social network. A prominent difference may be observed between the poor and middle class Indians on this front. In majority of cases, a daily wage labourer in India receives his/her wage and spends them on different heads in an unplanned fashion while a salaried middle class Indian has a monthly budget and sets aside a portion of the salary for saving. A person with inadequate resource accumulation is not only likely to face multiple stressors but also is not likely to adopt proactive coping. Thus it appears to be a vicious circle of inadequate resources, multi-dimensional stress and inability of proactive coping.

2. Recognition of Potential Stressors

The person anticipates problems and takes appropriate steps to avoid or avert them. For example, while leaving for the

railway station to catch a train for a long journey, an individual anticipates traffic jam or delay on the way due to unforeseen circumstances and leaves adequately early to have the 'cushion time'. In a study by Hariharan (1990), it was observed that children who were identified as invulnerable showed significant difference in anticipating a stress compared to those who were vulnerable. It is the characteristic of anticipation that helps in creating a cushion to absorb the actually encountered stress.

3. Initial Appraisal

This refers to one's first assessment of a situation when it occurs. This is done to doubly ensure that there is no error in the perception of a stressor.

4. Preliminary Coping Efforts

This refers to the immediate or first attempt to deal with the stress soon after perceiving it. For example, when your child has a fall late in the evening and fractures a bone, he has to be taken to the doctor. You do not know driving. In this circumstance, the first initiative may be to check if your neighbours who own a car are available for help. Only when you find their door locked do you think of calling a friend two kilometres away.

5. Elicitation and Use of Feedback

The preliminary coping efforts are checked for their effective outcome. If needed, necessary modifications

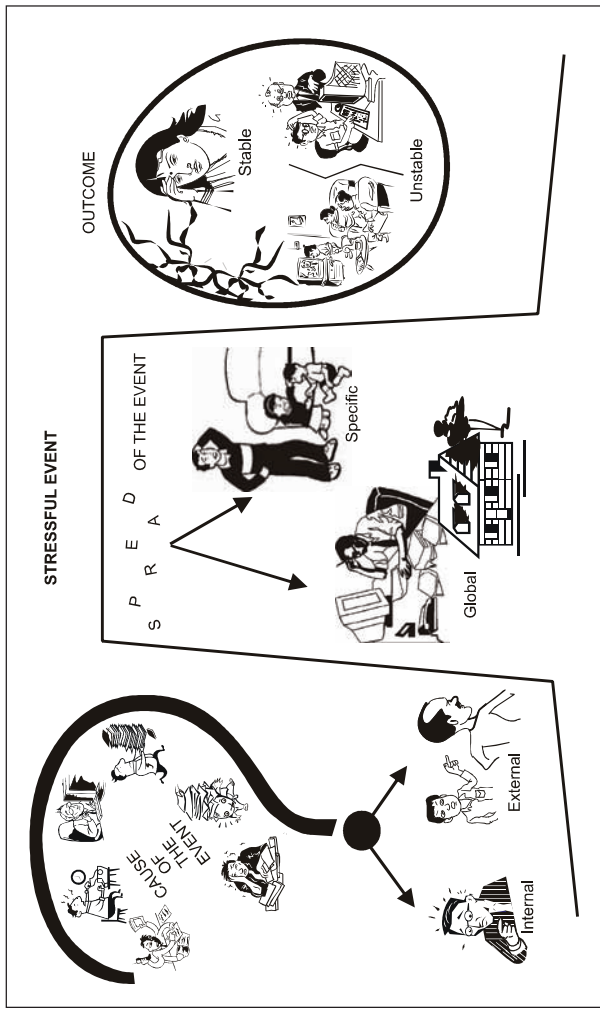
are incorporated into the plan. For example, the initial efforts of driving the child with a fracture may have the plan to take him to the paediatrician you regularly see. But once you set out for the doctor, the opinion of the neighbour and your own reassessment may result in revising your plans to go straight to the orthopaedician instead.

The first stage of proactive style itself explains the possible class difference in coping styles. Accumulation of resources in terms of money, education and social network may be easily possible for the rich and the middle class, while the deprivation of that itself may be a source of stress for those from a lower socio-economic group. Resource accumulation plays a major role in developing a proactive coping style, enriched with prior planning, appraisal, evaluation and modification. If the entire process of coping is explained by these five stages, then proactive coping may prove as a prerogative of the higher socio-economic group, while those from the lower socio-economic group end up adopting avoidant coping.

Thus a clear distinction in coping style across classes should have been observed. However, in reality that is not the case. So, resource accumulation at best may be one of the aspects, but not the sole determinant of coping. The experience of stress and coping process takes a more complex form than the five stages mentioned.

Whether a person develops a proactive coping style or an avoidant coping style is also influenced by the way the stressful event is perceived and interpreted. Dimatteo and Martin (2002) feel that an individual's typical way of understanding a stressful event has 'explanatory style'. It consists of three attributions assigned to the event. On the basis of the attributions assigned, the explanatory style can be optimistic or pessimistic. It is explained in Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2 Stress Map



Peterson et al. (1988) explain the event in terms of 'Cause', 'Impact' and 'Outcome'. The cause can be internal or external. An internal cause points to factors within the individual while external cause indicates some external factors causing the stress. For example, a newly married woman experiences the stress of facing cold behaviour from her husband. If she feels that the reason for her husband's lack of affection is her dark complexion, blunt features and her inability to keep him in good spirits, she is in fact attributing the cause of her stress to an internal factor. In many regions of India, fair complexion of the woman is considered to be the main criterion of beauty. Another woman facing the same situation may attribute the cause of her husband's cold behaviour to the circumstances of being in the joint family and lack of privacy for the newly married couple. Thus she is attributing the cause to the external factor. Many newly married Indian couples will have to live with their in-laws at least for the first few days of marriage. Unlike the Western culture, very rarely do they get total privacy from the first day of their marriage. The impact of stress can be either perceived as global or specific. When the individual feels that the stress would adversely affect all dimensions of his/her life the impact is said to be global. When the person under stress feels that the particular stress would have its influence only on a specific aspect of his/her life, the impact is judged to be specific. Such perceptions perhaps have a cultural load. The importance attached to the institution of marriage and family does not allow an Indian to view divorce as the least stressful alternative in a conflict filled marriage. As a consequence, a conventional Indian woman may feel that divorce affects not just the dimension of life related to her marriage but also as the one that affects her social reputation, image

in the place of work and so on. This may not be so for a Western woman in a similar situation. Thus while a woman filing a divorce suit in a Western country may experience relatively limited source of stress and attribute the impact limited to her marriage (Specific), her Indian counterpart is likely to attribute the impact on almost all dimensions of her life (Global). The outcome can also be two types. If the results of the stress are perceived to be of permanent nature, it is judged as stable outcome. If the individual under stress perceives the outcome as temporary—only to the extent of the stressful event in question—the outcome is called unstable. This can be explained with the example of different perceptions of failure in an exam. A young boy/girl who fails in the entrance exam for a medical college may view it as a permanent loss of opportunity (Stable). Another boy/girl in the same place may look at it as a loss of opportunity for that year (Unstable) and may decide to take another attempt the following year. More often than not these attributions seem to be learned behaviour. In the present example, the unstable outcome attributions are mostly caused by parental over-emphasis on specific achievements. The attributions too indicate internalised attributions of parents. Attributions of internal cause, global impact and stable outcome are known to have a pessimistic explanatory style. In the event of a stressful condition, they tend to blame themselves (internal causal attribution), view the devastating effects spreading to all dimensions of their life (global attribution), and believe that even in future events the impact would always be negative (stable attribution). On the other hand, people with optimistic explanatory style attribute the cause of the stressful event to external factors (external causal attribution), assess the outcome as limited to the situation in

question (specific attribution), and view the outcome of its impact as limited to the concerned dimension of life (unstable attribution).

Individual Differences in Coping

Why do some people attribute the cause to internal factors while others attribute it to causes other than the self? What influences some to perceive the stressors having a global impact while others view only a limited impact of it? Why do some see the outcome of the stress as unchanging and negative even for future events, while others view it as something limited to the event and a specific dimension of life? There are several factors such as personality, the intensity of the stress and the resources available determining the attributions of the individual.

Personality factors to a large extent influence the attributional choice of the individual. Maddi and Kobasa have come up with the concept of 'hardiness' that relates the individual's personality to stress response and coping. Hardiness is a psychological construct consisting of three C's—Commitment, Control and Challenge. People with high commitment get deeply involved in every aspect of life. High control enables one to believe in the influence one can exercise over the events in life. People with a sense of challenge view life changes and adversity as a norm, and hence are not threatened by them. People who are high on these three constructs show better stress responses and effective coping skills. Maddi et al. (1998) found out that 'hardy individuals' have less severe illnesses. Horner (1998) and Kobasa et al. (1994) found in their research that people with

hardiness are less susceptible to illness in the face of a stressful condition in their lives. Thus, hardiness is one factor that enables a person to maintain psychological well-being in the face of stressful events.

Closely associated with the above is the concept of 'Sense of Coherence' (SOC) developed by Antonovsky (1998). This theory of coping emerged out of studies of the survivors of concentration camps, who retained their physical and psychological health despite terrible life experiences. Anthony (1974) and Hariharan (1995) called them 'Invulnerable'. Antonovsky came up with the blunt reality of life that stressors in life are inevitable and omnipresent. Poverty, oppressive working conditions, unsafe or unfriendly neighbourhood, uncooperative family conditions are all stressful, but cannot be avoided. Stressful conditions cannot be generally condemned as 'bad'. Whether the stressful experiences have negative physical and psychological effects, depends upon the individual's handling of the situation or the use of coping strategy. Those who develop a general resistance can withstand stress and cope effectively. Antonovsky named four factors such as money, ego strength, social support and cultural stability as the General Resistance Resources (GRR). They form a protective shield to the individual against the ill effects of stress. Apart from them, the individual's sense of coherence also constitutes GRR. Antonovsky stated that the 'Sense of Coherence' (SOC) is constituted of three components, namely, comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness. Individuals with high SOC cope effectively with stressful life experience.

The comprehensibility aspect of SOC enables individuals to believe that the stressors they encounter would be ordered and explicable. They can explain stressors such as



accidents, loss of job or death of a loved one in terms of external forces and logical causes. Such a rational view enables them to see the world and life as comprehensible.

The manageability aspect enables them to hold a strong faith that things would work out as well as can reasonably be expected. People with high SOC believe that unfortunate events do happen in life, but they can be coped with too, and that one can survive them effectively. Indian philosophy advocates the theory of Karma. This in other words is close to the Western philosophy of 'as you sow, so shall you reap'. However, it goes a little beyond by including the attribution of the stressors of this life as a consequence of deeds of the previous life. Thus it is built into the Indian thought that unfortunate events do happen in life. The belief that they can be coped with effectively has individual variations depending upon one's locus of Control (LoC).

The meaningfulness aspect enabled people with high SOC to believe that the stressful events in life are worth the energy invested. This gives a positive meaning of life and the stressful experiences, too. Though they do not welcome problems in life, but encounter them with a sense of challenge.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified the following factors associated with the 'ability to cope'.

- Health and energy
- Positive belief
- Problem solving skills
- Social skills and
- Material resources

In the factors mentioned, except material resources, all the others are internal to the individual. All the above

factors are amenable to change with age, time, learning, training and experience. There are a number of factors such as meeting time lines, uncooperative children, uncouth life partners, malicious colleagues, cantankerous boss and hypocritical subordinates posing severe stress. There are also life events such as loss of a loved one, transfer of job to a remote area, extreme financial crisis, unacceptable behaviour from a family member, unconventional course of action eliciting unsolicited social audit creating stressful situation and demanding appropriate coping behaviour. Besides these, there is a third category of situations causing everyday stress and coping behaviour in normal life. They are particularly relevant in the life of a middle class individual in a developing country. This comprises events such as breakdown in basic services, uncharitable comments from close relatives, conflicting demands from work and family, low career prospects despite excellence in performance and merit, absence of household help, failure of water supply, noisy neighbourhood, delay or failure of regular transport service, trouble with the car, problems in bank transactions and so on, constituting the 'daily irritants' for the person. There may be wide individual variations in the appraisal of the situation as stressful. There may also be variations in choosing a strategy of coping. Such a dynamic process involved in coping gives rise to certain problems in conceptualisation and measurement (Coyne and Gottleib 1996). Coyne and Gottleib criticised the application of checklists in studying and measuring coping characterised by a diverse population (and their dispositions) and varied situations. The study of coping tends to become too narrow and method-bound because of an uncritical application of checklists. A better approach to the study of coping must take into cognizance

both the universality and the diversity of the phenomenon. There are situations which are highly culture-specific. For example, the inability of a father to conduct a grand marriage of his daughter may induce severe stress in Indian conditions, while it cannot be considered so in a Western culture. There are situations that are highly person-specific. Transfer of job-location may be highly stressful for a person because he has to leave the city where his parents live. For another person, the change may not induce any stress.

Enriched with such dynamism, justice can be done to the study of stress and coping only when the phenomena are discussed with the universality dimension, while simultaneously analysing the specificities and intricacies of individual cases.

Complexities of Coping

2

The word 'stress' is used by all very frequently. Sometimes terms like tension, pressure, anxiety, frustration and distress are used as synonyms for stress. The term is well-understood by its symptoms and manifestations. Unlike 'stress', 'coping' is a term, which is more practised in day-to-day life than used in language expression. Coping behaviour is one that is used by an individual everyday in stress situations that are temporary and also the situations that have a long-run impact. Some of the common expressions connoting coping are—'I handled it', 'I could manage well', 'I had to face it', 'I tackled it', 'I reconciled', 'I have been adjusting', and many more. Behind these small phrases, hides a complex process of coping. The term 'coping' is normally associated with the word 'stress'. However, it may not be an exaggeration to say that on several occasions, when encountered with a very stressful situation, stress is not experienced in the real sense because effective coping from the individual pre-empts the impact of stress, even before it could cast one.

In some other instances, a non-stressful situation turns stressful because of a faulty approach or inefficient coping strategy. We cope with the situation to bring down the stress and sometimes even to avert an impending stress, so that the stressor is handled even before it casts its impact. Thus, coping also helps us in avoiding stress. Now, before you read further, try to do the Exercise 2.1.

Exercise 2.1

Assess your coping strategies

Identify three most difficult situations that you have encountered in the last three months. Write them down on a piece of paper. After recording the stressful situations, also write down the way you coped with each of the stressful event.

There are different ways of coping with the situation. Sometimes it may so happen that you start with one approach and assume another strategy, either as a contingency plan or as a supplementary strategy or because the first strategy failed. Read the following categories of coping and identify the category into which your coping falls. In case you have adopted more than one strategy, you can choose more than one.

Which of the following ways you adopted in dealing with the situation?

1. I stood my ground. I made the person(s) concerned change his/her/their mind. Argued the other person out. (Confrontive Coping).

(Exercise 2.1 contd)

2. Controlled my emotions. Thought **rationally**. Identified the source of the problem and followed a specific action plan to solve it. Planned several alternative approaches to the solution of the problem. (Planful Problem Solving).
3. Talked to someone close to me to release my emotions. Sought the help of someone such as a friend, brother, sister, teacher, aunt or neighbour for advice or requested for direct help such as talking to the concerned person(s), helping me with loan etc. (Seeking Social Support).
4. Blamed myself for the situation. Thought that I brought it on to myself. (Accepting Responsibility).
5. Did not give much thought to the problem. I brushed it aside and carried on as if nothing happened. Waited for the problem to get resolved on its own. (Distancing).
6. Felt hurt/disturbed/annoyed, but never expressed my feelings. I felt that it is, after all, my problem and only I must handle it. (Self-Control).
7. Handled myself by taking to heavy smoking/drinking. Spent more time sleeping or eating. (Escape-Avoidance).
8. Thought, whatever happened was for my own good. It's all God's plan for my own benefit. (Positive Reappraisal).
9. Put the whole burden on God and prayed. Attended religious places. Indulged in rituals like fasting, offerings in places of worship etc. (Shifting the Burden to Supernatural Elements).

(Exercise 2.1 contd)

Interpretation After you have chosen your category of response for the stressful situation, you must know the way you have coped. Each category indicates a specific coping strategy mentioned in the parenthesis.

Stress, Distress and Eustress

The above strategies of coping cannot be generally classified into good and bad. If the process of coping succeeds in reducing the stress, you may call it productive. On the other hand, if the process of coping had to be started all over again, the strategy you used may be called unproductive coping.

The purpose of coping is one of reducing stress. There should be an action, initiated in order to reduce this stress. Initiation of any action precedes a drive originated from motivation. In this context it may be debated whether stress is an emotion or a motivation. Emotion refers to an internal feeling accompanied by a physical action. Motivation refers to the process that directs an individual to a goal-oriented behaviour. If the purpose of coping is to reduce the stress, what action achieves this goal—an adequate expression of emotion or an action that aims to resolve the external problem? One may agree with the fact that stress and coping process involves both emotion and motivation. The stress elicits certain emotions in the individual while it also motivates one to initiate overt action to handle the external problem presented in the form of a stressor. Stress situations are cyclic in life. Situations of stress can be broadly classified into three categories. Figure 2.1 shows three different angles of stress.

Figure 2.1
The Three Angles of Stress

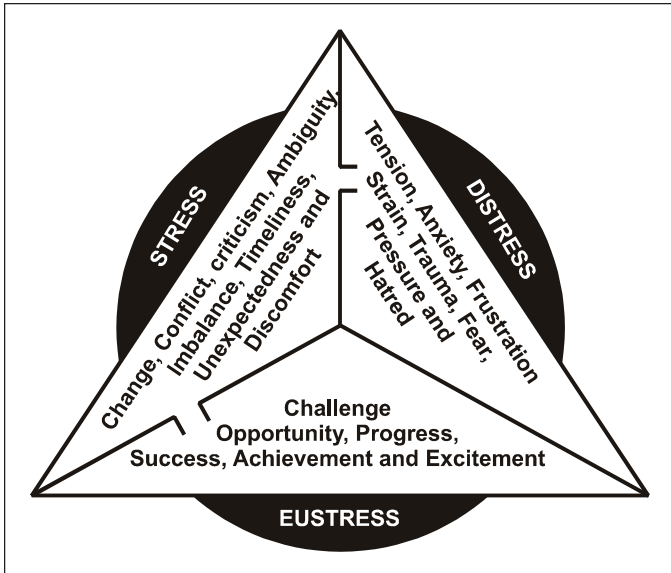


Figure 2.1 presents three dimensions of stress. The left triangle represents the initial experience of stress as presented by external factors and translated into primary appraisal. They are the situations of change, conflict, criticism, ambiguity, imbalance, timeliness, unexpectedness or discomfort. It may be a demand for change in residence, switch-over of job, shift in family or social status such as attaining fatherhood and so on. It could also be a conflict with the boss, conflict with one's own value system or conflict between cultural expectations. In some cases, it could even be some degree of ambiguity in the situation as, it is

presented in the form of a role ambiguity for a newly employed youth, ambiguity in the outcome of a project proposal sent-in for evaluation, uncertainty of the correctness of an answer written in the exam, or uncertainty in the expectations of a panel in an interview board. The situation could also be a time line to finish an assigned task. None of these factors per se can be unpleasant and negative. At best they may elicit the initial resistance. Thus stress is not necessarily negative. However, in common parlance stress is normally perceived in a negative sense, which in fact indicates that stress is misconstrued as 'distress'. The right triangle indicates the 'distress factors of stress'. If we examine the right triangle, it is very obvious that each one of the expressions under distress—such as tension, anxiety, frustration, strain, trauma, fear, pressure and hatred—connotes something unpleasant. The third triangle at the bottom of the figure consists of expressions such as challenge, opportunity, progress, success, achievement and excitement that are pleasant. When an individual experiences 'stress', whether he would move to 'distress' or 'eustress' from that point, depends on various factors such as the general personality disposition and past experience. Whether a stress situation is considered positive or negative, depends upon the interpretations attached to the situation. This happens through cognitive mediation of appraisal. For example, change or conflict need not necessarily bring negative consequences while they may be met with initial resistance. Something good may turn out of ambiguity or initial discomfort. But if change is perceived as a 'block', it is likely to give rise to tension, anxiety and frustration, which are negative in nature. They are classified as distress. Contrarily, if change is viewed as a challenge or an opportunity, the

subsequent feeling is likely to be pleasant, as expressed in eustress, eliciting positive action.

There may be wide cultural and individual variations in the interpretation of a situation and the subsequent experience of distress or eustress. For example, when a middle-aged Indian working woman from a middle-class background has to take up a job in a place away from family, she may experience tension and anxiety, and may feel a strange fear because she has to separate from the family, associate with strange people and manage her day-to-day life independently. The stress here is more likely to take the shape of distress. An identical situation faced by a young middle class Indian bachelor may see him through the experience of excitement because he may view it as an opportunity to live in his own style, a challenge to prove himself at work or a field to exhibit high achievement. Thus the interpretation of stress leading one to experience distress or eustress seems to have cultural and personality determinants. Nevertheless, all the three triangles elicit more or less similar initial physiological and mental responses. In our example of the above situation of the middle-aged Indian woman and the young Indian bachelor, both may experience the initial physiological responses of increased blood flow, heartbeat and fast breathing, even though psychologically, one is going through a pleasant and the other through an unpleasant experience. Any situation that elicits fear (distress), threat (stress) or excitement (eustress) may result in an increased flow of blood, heartbeat and fast breathing. They may also result in a similar mental state such as extreme emotion and also the anxiety to put forth the behaviour appropriate to the situation. Thus it is important to note that any external stressful situation elicits a set of internal emotions. As a result, the

individual facing stress has to handle the external situation and also simultaneously manage his/her internal emotional reactions to the situation. It is the dual skill of managing the emotions efficiently and putting forth the appropriate behaviour that is called coping. An individual's coping varies with the experience of distress or eustress. Hence, it should be understood that though both the situations of distress and eustress may elicit similar physiological responses, the management of emotions tends to differ in conditions of stress and eustress. Handling the external problem and managing the emotions are interdependent to a large extent. Applying these two skills efficiently results in reducing the stress manifested in physiological and mental responses.

When an individual moves from stress to distress, the coping skill may call for more focus on managing the emotions, while the shift from stress to eustress may demand skills to solve the problem more effectively. Many-a-times adapting to an unchangeable stress situation may cause distress to individuals. In this context, it is necessary to discuss the complex process of coping as against adaptation.

Adaptation and Coping

Adaptation and coping are processes that can be explained in the context of our environment. Both refer to cognitive and emotional involvement aimed at restoring equilibrium or homeostasis that is disturbed because of stress. In very simple terms, adaptation can be explained as a process of adjustment to the demands of the environment. Here, environment forms the 'stimulus' and adjustment is the 'response'.

Illustration 2.1

Adaptation and coping



In case of adaptation, the situation or the stressor is presented to the individual, and he responds in a way that suits the situation. But the individual is not left with any alternative to

change the situation so as to suit him. For example, you are reading this page under an electric light. If there is a sudden failure of electricity, you stop reading at once. Here the failure in electricity causing darkness is the stimulus and suspending the reading activity for the time being is your response. You have no other option for the moment. The relationship is one of:

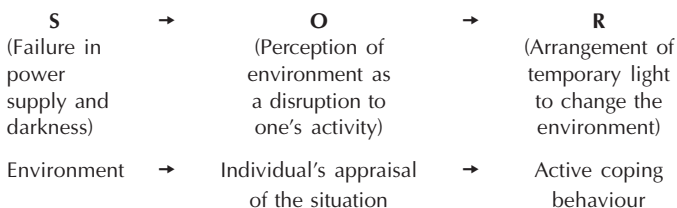
Darkness → Suspension of reading activity
S (Environment) → R (Adaptation)

Your response here, is initially a reflex. If you continue to sit quietly, unable to read the book in your hand, your response may be mechanical. If you decide not to think of alternative lighting to resume your reading but sit back and recollect the points discussed in the book till now, the process is called adaptation. **As long as you try to fit yourself to the environment your response is adaptation.** The minute you initiate some activity to bring a change in the environment that is favourable to you, the process turns into one of active coping behaviour.



To continue with the same example of power failure when you are reading this book, let us assume that the book is too interesting to stop. After waiting for five minutes, you decide to switch on the emergency lamp and resume your activity of reading. Initially, when the environment turned dark, your immediate response of suspension of activity was one of adaptation. You adapted to the darkness in the environment by suspending your activity. Thus, the process was limited to the S–R paradigm. However, *you* as the organism quickly came into the picture. It was you who waited for restoration of power supply, perceived the book too interesting to stop, appraised the darkness as an obstruction to

your activity, and decided to change the environment from 'darkness' to light with some temporary arrangement. Thus, you as an organism played a vital role in changing your own role from adapting to that of active coping. Thus, there is a paradigm shift in case of coping, where it is explained as—

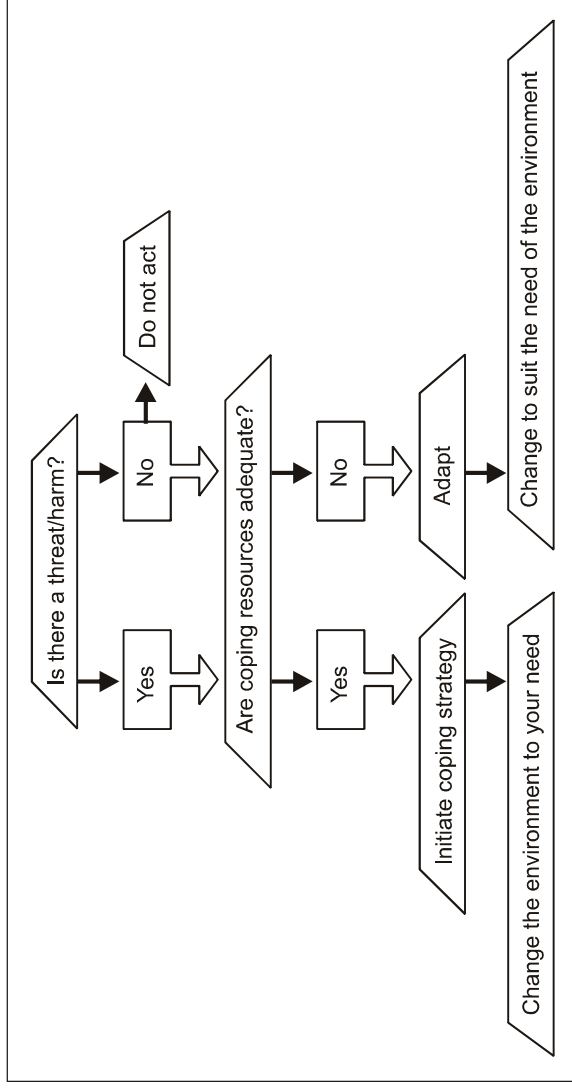


Adaptation does not involve much cognitive exercise on the part of the organism, while coping calls for it sufficiently. There may be an emotional involvement, both in the case of adaptation and coping. However, in the latter, the emphasis is more on the individual's cognitive-emotional functioning.

Whether an individual opts for adaptation or coping, depends upon the appraisal of the situation, in terms of the external and internal resources available to bring in the desirable changes in the stress-inducing environment. The process is explained in Figure 2.2.

The process of response starts with a perception of change in the environment. The first appraisal on the change is to assess if the change has some impending threat or loss to the individual. If there is no loss or threat, there is no further response. On the other hand, if the initial appraisal records either a threat or loss, then it continues with further appraisal of one's own resources to challenge the change. If one realises his/her weakness in resources in terms of capacity to control the situation, then the result is the decision to adapt to the

Figure 2.2
Coping and Adaptation Process



change. If on the other hand, the evaluation equips one with the confidence of adequacy of resources, one may opt to apply a coping strategy. In case of adaptation, the result is the status quo in the stressful condition. In case of coping, the result is a change in the condition. Very often when the individual perceives inadequate resources, any attempt to change the situation may pose higher degrees of stress than the present level. In such cases, one may decide to adapt to the present level of stress. The distinction between adaptation and coping will be clearer with the following case report.

Case Report on Adaptation

Uma, a 40-year-old lady filed a divorce suit after 24 years of marriage. Nobody who knew her since long even guessed that she had trouble in her marriage. The couple was attending all social functions. They had been fulfilling all obligations among relatives. People wondered why Uma sought a divorce at this stage.

Uma explained her position. She got married at a tender age of 16. She was too young to understand another human being with crude instincts and utter self-centredness. But, she always felt uncomfortable with her husband. Several times she tried to discuss things with her parents. But they never allowed her to get into the details and hushed her up advising that she must 'adjust'. Her mother even gave her an impression that all that is 'natural' for a woman in marriage. Believing that, she went on 'adjusting' to her husband's sexual needs, material greed and scant respect for women. The only silver lining in her life was his consent to her pursuing education. But for a long time she believed that a

wife has no say in the sexual relationship; she also believed that children are solely the responsibility of the wife. She graduated from college and wished to pursue her post-graduation in the university. Her entry into the university and her subsequent job in a reputed organisation broadened her worldview. Gradually, she started to resist her husband's demands and questioned his actions. She met another man in whom she found a lot of warmth, love and concern. At this point, she felt that her children were grown up. Hence, she assumed that dissolving her marriage may not affect the children so much. She felt that she had never been happy in her marriage. She had only been putting up with her husband—tolerating him. She wanted to live her life as she wished. Hence, she filed a divorce suite.

(The case report of Uma continues in later pages in the context of case reports under case 2 of 'Accepting Responsibility').

Uma, at the age of 16 was apparently not equipped with adequate coping skills. The internal and external resources she had were insufficient to bring any effective change in the situation. She learned from her parents to 'adapt' to the situation and continued with it. But as she grew in age and experience, she acquired skills necessary to effect a change in the situation she had been adapting to over a long period of time. She felt that the experience she gained in her 24 years of marriage was different from the emotions she experienced with the person she met recently. She experienced a state called cognitive dissonance. This prompted her to question or resist her husband's demands (**Confrontive Coping**); but this never changed the situation. As an alternative, she resorted to solve the problem by estranging from her incompatible husband (**Planful Problem Solving**).

Uma seems to have realised that her long 'adaptation' has been detrimental to her psychological well-being and hence initiated a process of coping to restore her well-being. She, as a typical Indian girl in the late 1960s, fulfilled the cultural expectations of that period. She entered into wedlock as per her parents' wishes and decision. Unaware of role equality, which incidentally was not an issue of debate during those days, she went on adapting to the situation called 'marriage'. However, university education provided her wide exposure to a broader culture. Such exposure with ample opportunity for observational learning, perhaps, was a good experience for her to review and revise her value system. Age, experience, multi-cultural exposure as well as marginal change in the social norms perhaps contributed to her changing response strategy from adaptation to coping. As long as Uma adapted to the situation of her unfulfilling marriage, there was no change in her psychological well-being. Once she changed her strategy from adaptation to proactive coping, there was an apparent change in the stress situation. In fact it changed from marital stress to social stress for her. The consequences of her coping through Planned Problem Solving strategy are discussed elsewhere in the book (p. 157).

The response to any stress situation depends upon the individual's appraisal of the situation. The appraisal in turn is determined by a number of factors such as:

- Perception of seriousness of the situation
- Assessment of the personal stakes involved
- Perceived locus of control (LoC)
- Confidence in the available external resources
- Past experience

Illustration 2.2

Appraisal of stress situation



Exercise 2.2

Check your Appraisal

Read the following three situations. On a separate sheet of paper, write down your probable response to each of the situations.

1. You had taken a very valuable item from your spouse/close friends. You are very well-aware of the fact that s/he attaches a sentimental value to it. Unfortunately you lost it.
2. You planned to attend a very important meeting. Your flight is scheduled to reach the venue the night

(Exercise 2.2 contd)

before. It takes two hours to reach by flight. The airline flies there twice a week. You considered it an opportunity to prove your worth to people who matter to you. However, few hours before your departure, the airline informs you about the cancellation of the flight.

3. You have been standing in the queue of a railway reservation counter for more than an hour. When you are third from the ticketing counter, two hefty people suddenly come and occupy the place in front of the counter.

Once you have recorded your responses, answer the following questions:

	<i>Situa- tion 1</i>	<i>Situa- tion 2</i>	<i>Situa- tion 3</i>
1. How serious is the situation? (Ranges from ‘very serious’ to ‘not at all serious’)			
2. What are your personal stakes? (May mention the actual stakes such as job, relationship, reputation, power, etc.)			
3. Who has control over the situation? (Self/somebody else/ unknown sources like God, Luck, Fate)			
4. Are you going by your past experience? (Yes/No)			

Go back to read your recorded responses. If you feel that your recorded responses are based on the considerations mentioned in the questions above, your appraisal of the situation is proper. In case your responses missed out on any of the four considerations, you may rethink and change your response with the new insight gained.

Certain situations warrant adaptation of the individual to the environment. Any attempt to change the environment through active coping may prove more stressful or disastrous. Let us examine a hypothetical situation. You have planned a function in your family and have invited a large number of people for lunch. Unfortunately due to some group violence, curfew was imposed in the city to prevent any further aggravation of the situation. If food is prepared for a large number of invitees who apparently could not turn up, it is certainly a cause of stress for you. Yet, you may 'adapt' to the situation appraising it on the four determinants mentioned in the Exercise 2.2. Because considering the gravity of the situation outside, you cannot venture out even to distribute the food in the neighbourhood. If you do so, nothing less than your life is at stake. Further, there is no ambiguity of the fact that the situation is absolutely beyond your control. Your past experience tells you that you cannot really count on the support of others in this regard. Thus, resorting to adaptation may be productive on the basis of adequate appraisal of the situation. The choice between adaptation and coping is sometimes weighed on cultural considerations to reap optimal outcome in terms of minimising the stress. In some regions in India, it is customary that the brides of the family do not interact with the husband's elder brother. Though a new modern bride may perceive this very strange and desire to

interact with her husband's brother who happens to be from her professional background, she may choose to exercise restraint and respond with adaptation, complying with the norms rather than applying a strategy like Confrontive Coping. This could be on the consideration of the efforts called for applying the coping strategy and the subsequent additional stress caused by the choice of coping vis-à-vis adaptation. Thus in view of the outcome of the stress-reduction, the choice of adaptation may prove more productive here. However, adaptation may not be desirable when it becomes a pattern of an individual's response. Let us consider another hypothetical situation where adaptation proves undesirable and is counter-productive.

A woman hailing from an orthodox poor family delivered six children in a span of nine years. She understands the merits of the small family norm. Yet, since her in-laws are against it, she continues to bear children. Every new child means additional financial burden. Still she 'adapts' to the family tradition. She is educated and is capable of being employed. However, she chooses to confine her role to a housewife because of the family norm. She is anaemic and feels weak, and yet takes up fasting on religious grounds, following the tradition of the family.

In this case, we find that the woman's adaptation has turned into a pattern, where she does not choose the option of 'adaptation' on the appraisal of the situation. This affects her well-being because the stakes are not weighed appropriately. Thus, while inappropriate adaptation on the part of the individual may cost one the health, finance or self, esteem, collective adaptation by the society may be detrimental for the system.

Sometimes, **collective and mechanical adaptation** syndrome in a society also results in **developmental inertia**. This happens not because of the absence of appraisal, but more because of over-emphasis on the appraisal of the personal stakes involved. Think of the stoic indifference of people to large-scale corruption in public offices. Everyone feels that a fight against it may adversely affect his or her transaction in the office concerned. Hence, they choose to 'adapt'.

There are several situations where you must have chosen to respond through adaptation rather than a coping behaviour. The most common experience is while travelling by train. Recollect the willingness of authorised rail travellers to accommodate unreserved passengers spreading themselves out in the corridors of reserved rail compartments. A majority of the passengers choose to be silent; some because they do not see any personal stakes involved there as long as their berths and luggage are not disturbed. Some others perceive an external locus of control in the situation. They feel that even if they protest, things may not change. However, the majority of the passengers do not attempt a genuine appraisal of the situation and choose to 'adapt' because of the temporary nature of the problem. They tend to feel that it is a question of only the journey period, be it a few hours or one night. It is evident that as long as people resort to 'adaptation' to the social order or system, the society is bound to suffer with developmental inertia. People tend to 'adapt' to the situations rather than involve in systematic and careful appraisal because of the 'short-term' nature of such social conditions vis-à-vis their personal involvement in it. This can be termed as **unplanned collective adaptation, stalling or delaying development in social sphere.**

Optimum Stress Level

Optimum Stress Level (OSL) is that degree of stress with which an individual is able to work happily and optimally (Figure 2.3). Normally OSL is indicated by a single line. A single line of demarcation suggests a universal threshold level. The threshold level of stress is not the same universally and varies from person to person. Hence it may be more appropriate to show the OSL as a conceptual zone rather than a line of demarcation. In Figure 2.3, the area between the lines 'AB' and 'ab' shows the OSL. Since the OSL is highly subjective, different people may have different OSLs. The stress level necessary for an individual to work efficiently may be the point of breakdown for another. That makes it difficult to standardise OSL in quantitative terms. Hence it is very appropriate to depict OSL as a conceptual zone rather than a line. The level below this area may be identified as a state of 'Relaxation' and the level above it as the state of 'Arousal'. When an individual is in the zone of OSL, work efficiency is high. An individual encountering stress within the OSL zone perceives the environment within his/her control (Internal Locus of Control). A situation perceived as stressful and yet within one's control is naturally construed as a 'challenge' and is encountered with confidence to bring about desirable results. Imagine a situation where the stress levels outshoot the limits of one's control. Here the individual perceives very high stress involving heavy personal stakes. Hence s/he perceives no control over the stress factor. Given such circumstances the individual is likely to perceive it as a 'threat'. Once perceived as 'threat', the individual's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) tends to get activated. As a result, the individual enters into a state of 'Arousal'.

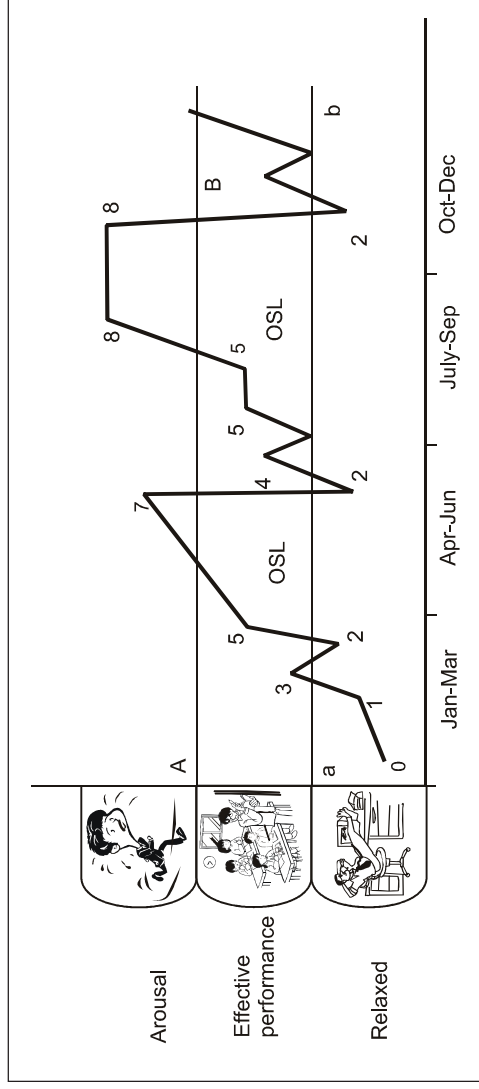
This is a state of high emotionality and reduced efficiency in work. On the other hand, if one enjoys the stress and maintains an internal locus of control, the emotional level is within manageable limits. Hence working at the optimal efficiency is foreseen. This is the period when the person is said to be on the OSL.

The duration for which the individual manages himself/herself on the OSL reflects the effectiveness of coping. The frequency with which the curves peak above the OSL indicates his/her vulnerability to stress. The swiftness with which s/he is able to bring the curve down to the OSL or below reveals the internal locus of control.

In Figure 2.3, stress curve of a university professor is plotted for one year—from January to December. There was no significant incident of stress between January and April. She carried on with her routine work of teaching and research in the university. The stress curve during this period is found to be below OSL. She was invited as a visiting fellow to a foreign university in the month of May. She had to procure a passport and apply for visa. She got herself busy filing the necessary papers and contacting the travel agent in the month of April. She worked optimally and happily during this period. She left the country on her assignment in the second week of May. Her assignment in the university was for a period of six weeks. The period of her stay in the foreign university was pleasant and productive. Thus she placed herself in the OSL zone between April and June. She planned to return to India on 28 June. However, she found that her return ticket was not confirmed for the date she planned to travel. That created some tension and anxiety in her. This is the phase when she found her work getting disrupted temporarily. At this point, she plotted herself on the 'arousal'



Figure 2.3
Assessment of Stress Levels

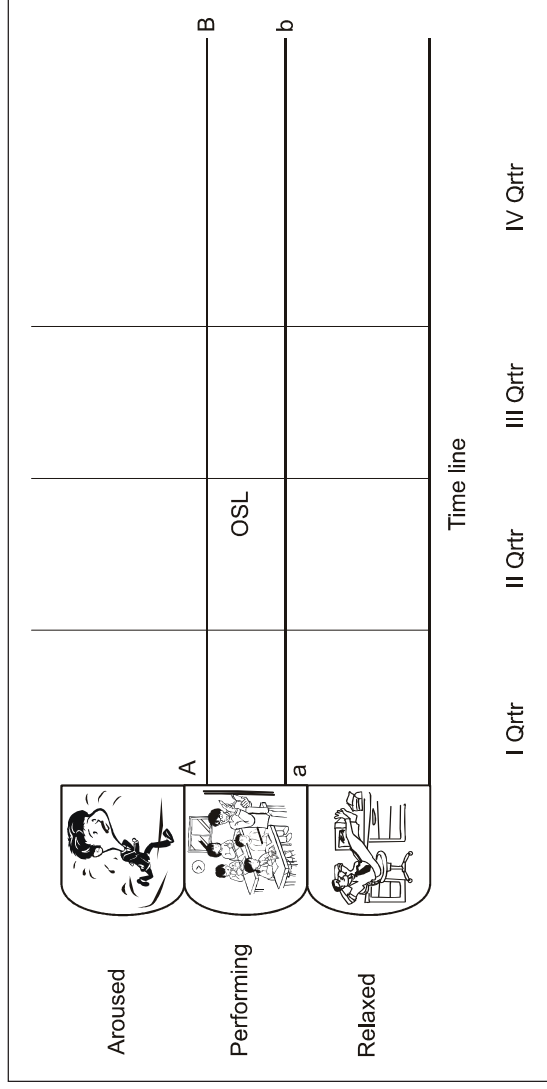


zone. Caught in this situation, she contacted some friend residing there and sought his help. With the help of her friend, she could manage to get a confirmed ticket by another route, which required her to spend some more money. Having done that, she could be relieved of the uncertainty and very quickly could get back to a relaxed state until she returned to India. After returning she was actively involved in designing her course and guiding her research scholars. She enjoyed these peak academic activities, which were highly demanding. Thus she rightly positioned herself within the OSL zone between July and September. In the month of September, the professor's son fractured his leg and had to be rushed to the orthopaedician. This caused anxiety and disturbance in her routine work temporarily. This is when we see the stress line shooting up the OSL level to the 'Arousal' level. She remained in a state of high stress for nearly three weeks as long as her son needed personal attention and medical care. Once he was off the plaster, she came back to the relaxed zone.

Rating her stressors on a ten-point scale, the professor rated her preparatory activities for the foreign assignment and her trip abroad between 3 and 6. She rated her problem of return trip to India at 7. She rated her academic activities between 4 and 5. The stress level when her son fractured his leg was rated as 8. The professor rated her relaxed periods between 0 and 2. Thus it can be inferred that OSL for the professor is between 3 and 6, where she could work happily and efficiently. This OSL zone may be different for different individuals. One can plot one's own stress curve over a period of time.

The X-axis of the above diagram is divided into four quarters, along the time line. You may take the entire time line as one month, in which case each quarter constitutes a week.

Figure 2.4
Self-Assessment of Stress Levels



Alternatively, you can take the time line as one year. Then each quarter constitutes three months.

Exercise 2.3

Plot your OSL

The Y-axis measures your experience of stress at three levels, namely, Relaxed, OSL and Aroused levels. You can plot yourself on this stress scale prospectively or retrospectively. Alternatively, you may also record your stress level as and when you undergo stress. You may follow the illustration in Figure 2.3 while plotting your own stress. Recollect the stressful events you encountered in this quarter. Recall whether you could work happily under this stress or felt the strain of the stress that disrupted your work. If you were able to work satisfactorily under stress during the phase, then you can plot yourself in OSL zone along the Y-axis. Then with an additional stress input if you could still manage to work efficiently during the same quarter, you can plot yourself at a higher level within the OSL zone. On the other hand, if you have recalled an event where the stress level was so high that it disrupted your normal day-to-day functioning, then you must plot yourself above the OSL level for that period. Estimate the approximate time you remained under stress on this occasion. If it was temporary and you moved up or low, immediately mark the level to which you changed your position. Go back progressively to the preceding quarters. Thus try to assess your stress levels for the whole

(Exercise 2.3 contd)

year and plot yourself on the figure. Once you are through, join all the lines and you will get your stress curve for the whole period. When you join the dots you will get your stress curve for the chosen time line as shown in Figure 2.3. If your life is full of events, you can draw your stress curve for a shorter period of one month by dividing it into four quarters each for duration of one week.

Now rate each of your stressful events plotted along the time line on a ten-point scale, giving a score of 0 for 'no stress', 1 for 'very low stress' and a score of 10 for 'extremely high stress' and so on. Once that is done you can see your stress scores for the OSL and Arousal zones. The rating you have given for the stressful incidents that enabled you to work at optimum efficiency level is your OSL threshold. Individuals vary on their OSL threshold levels.

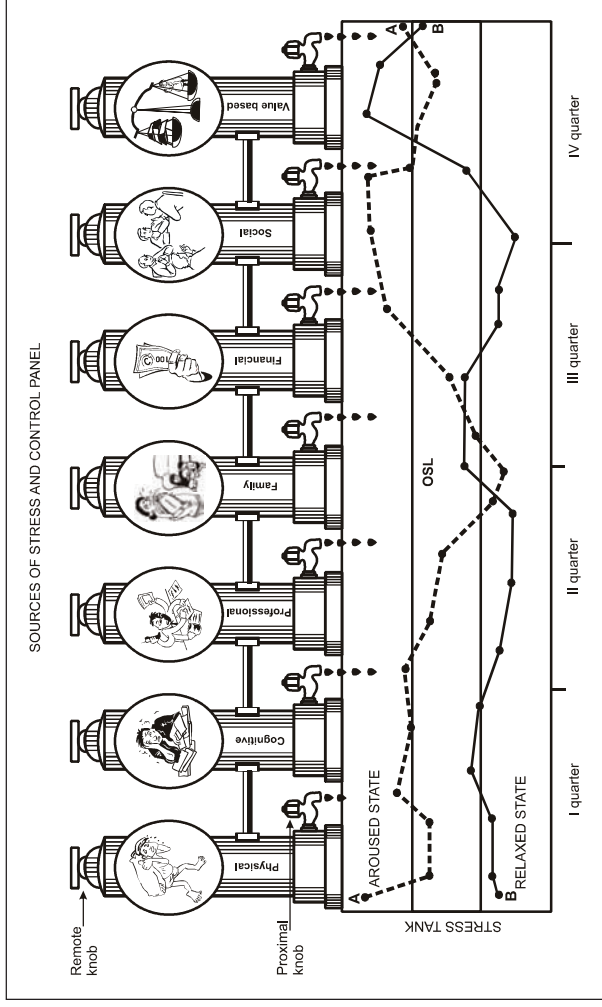
Interpretation

1. If your stress curve positions you within OSL limits more frequently, your performance efficiency must be good during that period.
2. If your stress curve slopes down below OSL and remains there for longer periods, you have gone through boredom stress during those phases.
3. If your stress curve frequently peaks up above the OSL and shows several peaks during a phase or throughout the time line, your vulnerability to stress during that period must have been high.

What does one do about one's stress curve that is not desirable? How does one attempt to remain at the OSL for a longer duration? The answer to this takes us to a discussion on stress and control panels. Figure 2.5 explains this phenomenon.

Figure 2.5 shows the 'stress tank' at the bottom. It is seen that 'stressors' flow into the tank from six cylinders. **Physical stress** refers to the need for working under conditions of physical exhaustion, illness, injury and sexual dissatisfaction. **Cognitive stress** refers to a condition of highly incompatible demands on one's cognitive abilities. **Professional stress** indicates stress related to one's job. **Family stress** refers to pressures and conflicts from various ecological factors within the family. **Financial or economic stress** refers to a condition of financial needs exceeding the resources. **Social stress** refers to the multi-dimensional social pressures conflicting with one's own abilities, values and resources. **Value based stress** includes all pressures and persuasions demanding a compromise with one's own value system. Stressors from all those sources trickle down into the 'stress tank' every day. Sometimes, **these cylinders are interlinked** and cannot be construed as watertight units by themselves. For example, sometimes cognitive stress and professional stress are inseparable. At times, it pours into the tank from one or two sources. Sometimes the inflow is very sluggish. The level of the 'stress tank' depends upon the speed of flow from these different sources. How does an individual maintain the stress level in the tank at the OSL? It may be observed from Figure 2.5 that each stress cylinder has two knobs. One is on top of the cylinder while the other is the knob of the tap located at the bottom of the cylinder. **The knob on top** is **remote** and beyond the reach of the individual. In some situations, the control is

Figure 2.5
Stress and Control Panel



beyond the level of the individual. For example, if you set out for a seminar, and realise that the train you planned to take is delayed by several hours, you experience stress because you know that the situation is uncertain and the indefinite delay would prevent you from reaching the venue of the seminar on time. Now controlling the timings of the train is certainly beyond your control. But like the proximal control knobs in the form of taps in the stress cylinder, there are certain factors related to the situation where you can exercise your control, and reduce the inflow from the cylinder into the tank. In this situation of inordinate delay of the train, you can examine the possibility of taking a flight or travelling by road. This reduces the inflow of stress of uncertainty of attending the seminar, thus maintaining the stress level in the tank at the OSL so as to optimise your presentation in the seminar.

The figure shows the stress curves of two individuals, 'A' and 'B'. Individual A remained within the OSL zone in the most part of the first and second quarters of the time line. Towards the end of the third quarter, 'A' remained above the OSL in 'Arousal' state. However, by choosing the reachable knob of the appropriate cylinder, 'A' restored the position to the OSL. Individual 'A' by temperament seems to be enjoying the challenge and hence maintained the OSL position most of the time. Individual 'B' is a contrast to 'A'. In the first two quarters, most of the time 'B' was found below the OSL. There were only three occasions when 'B' was found within the OSL limits. Only towards the end of the fourth quarter, 'B's position rose above the OSL to the arousal state. Most of the time in the first two quarters, B remained in a relaxed level below the OSL. A prolonged stay at this level may inflict on B what is called 'boredom stress'. 'B' can get out of

this stress by joining an aerobic club or a Yoga centre. By doing so, B is in fact releasing the knob of the physical stress cylinder to fill the stress tank to the OSL level. Alternatively, B can unwind the tap of the cognitive or professional stress cylinders. This can be done by taking up a cognitively challenging task, a part-time job of interest or by taking up more responsibility at the workplace. However, in order to do this, A or B must identify the control panels and discriminate between remote and close control panels, so as to operate with ease and efficiency.

Exercise 2.4:
Identify Your Control Panels

Recollect two recent stressful episodes you have encountered. Write them down in three descriptive sentences. Identify as many remote and close control panels for each episode.

Episode No	Description of the episode	Control Panels	
		Remote	Close
1.			
2.			

For each identified ‘Close Control Panel’ think of as many functional approaches to control it. For example, let us assume that your stressful situation is that you met with an accident and fractured your leg, four days before your exam. The remote control panels are getting the exam postponed, or arranging for a special exam for you after you get well. Some of the proximate control panels are managing

to get a wheel chair to reach the exam hall, requesting for an extra chair to rest your leg while writing exams, arranging a transport, or getting the exam centre changed to a place closer to you. It is very important to note that you have several approaches for each of the close control panel. For example, you can procure a wheel chair by buying one from the shop, borrow one from the nearest nursing home, or alert your friends to find out if someone can find a wheel chair from any source known to him/her. Now weigh the path you followed against the alternative approaches available. That would enable you to judge whether your attempt to cope with the situation was good in terms of identifying the 'close control panel' and how it could have been better. If your coping strategy proved unproductive, it may be important for you to check if you had involved the remote control panels. If so, re-examine the possibilities of the proximate control panels you might have missed then.

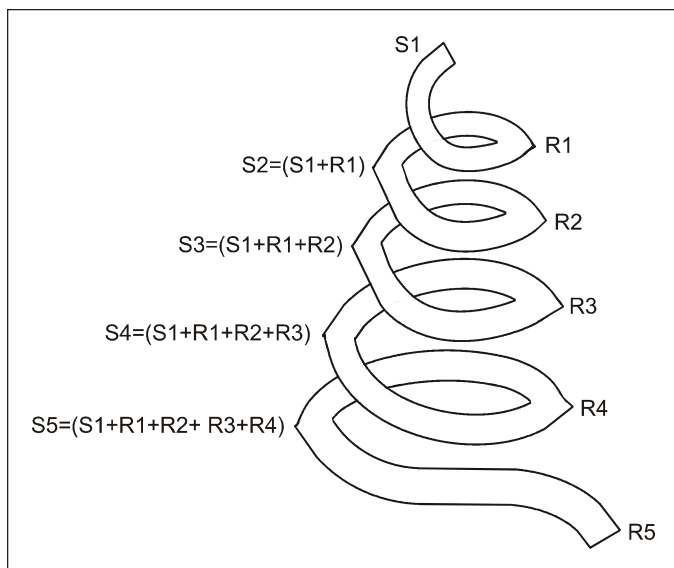
Coping Process

Sometimes, it may so happen that errors in identifying the right control panels or attempts to reach out to the remote control panels complicate the stress situation. In such cases, each attempt of coping results in some situation that adds on to the existing level of stress. This is what is called **counter-productive coping**. Coping is not a one-time response. It is a process in which each strategy adopted at a point of time gives rise to an outcome. This outcome adds on to the situation of stress and presents itself with this add-on effect. If the right control panel is identified and the

strategy chosen is suitable, the add-on effect of the situation is positive and reduces the stress. On the other hand, if a wrong panel is identified, the outcome adds to the stress situation creating complications thereof. Figure 2.6 explains the situation.

Let us try to understand Figure 2.6 with a hypothetical example. Though not identical, many of us must have faced similar situations in our lives where a single problem is complicated because of a wrong initial response. One such example is explained in the stress–coping spiral below.

Figure 2.6
Stress and Coping Spiral



Kumar is an employee in a government office. He has been putting aside some savings for his son's education. His elder brother with whom Kumar is emotionally close, was caught in a financial crisis. He asked if Kumar could help him out of the crisis by sending him the money immediately. Kumar is at a loss because the only way to help the brother is to break the bank deposits set aside for his son, and he is not very sure of the repaying capacity of his brother. He feels obliged to help his brother who brought him up. He is also apprehensive of his wife's reaction. This stress situation of Kumar is represented as S1 in Figure 2.6. He does not disclose the problem of his brother to his wife and son. He decides to satisfy his brother's emergency for the moment and think about the rest later. He feels stressed and tells his son that he cannot support him on further studies (R1). This creates uproar in the house, and the wife and the son argue with him and question his decision (S2). Thus $S2=S1+R1$. The arguments of his wife and son add to his existing undisclosed stress of having to choose between his brother and his son. Thus, further stressed with the arguments with his wife and the son (S2), Kumar feels severe distress while entering the bank. Unable to take the tension, he lights a cigarette and enters the bank and asks for the concerned officer in an irritable tone (R2). The concerned person at the counter reacts to this by demanding Kumar to put out the cigarette first. This stimulates anger in Kumar (S3), $S3=S1+R1+R2$. Kumar responds angrily, saying that the bank official should behave politely with customers (R3). This argument attracts the attention of many other customers and other bank employees who gather around the area complicating the situation, some supporting the bank employee and others just viewing the whole scene (S4). This embarrasses Kumar further. The

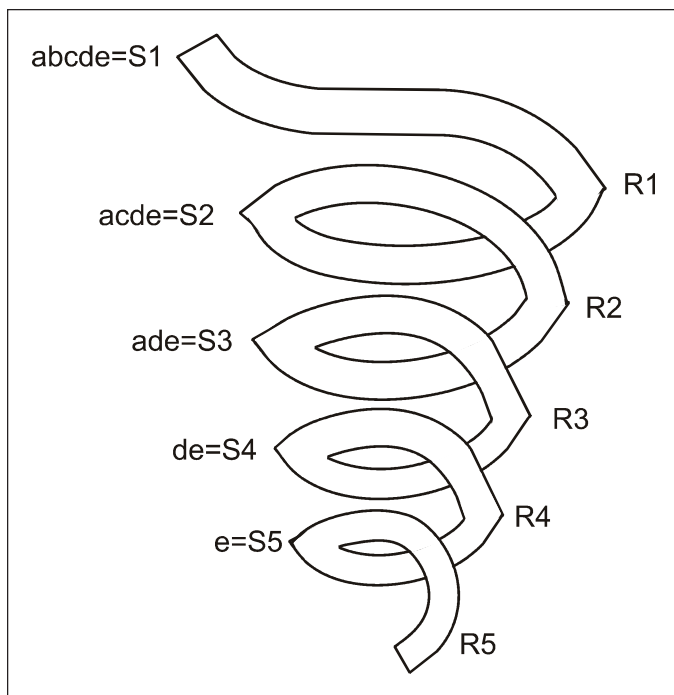
situation at the moment is $S4=S1+R1+R2+R3$. Kumar leaves the bank without fulfilling the transaction ($R4$). Now Kumar is further stressed because of the delay in helping his brother in need ($S5$). The present distress of Kumar is $S5=S1+R1+R2+R3+R4$. Thus, Kumar's choice of response resulted in enhancing and complicating the stress situation for him. One wrong appraisal or one wrong choice of control panel may result in enhancing the stress level so much that the person has to leave the original problem long behind him and has to indulge in clearing up the subsequent problems that evolve as the offshoots of a wrong initial choice.

It is also often observed that **a correct appraisal of a stress situation, and an appropriate choice of response helps in dissipating complex stressful situations.** Let us try to understand it with a hypothetical example in relation to Figure 2.7. Many of us must have gone through such complex stress situations where we faced multiple stressors tagged to one single change. The situation of an Indian bride is a typical example, where marriage brings with it a change in the place of residence, food habits and a shift in the career, financial position, family expectations, social circles, physical state, and many more concomitant challenges.

The example cited in Figure 2.7 is only suggestive so that one can relate it to a similar complex situation in one's own life.

Rakesh is a middle level government official. His wife is employed in a bank, and their two children are in school. Rakesh's parents live with him. His father is a chronic asthma patient, and needs good medical support. Rakesh is now transferred from the state capital to a relatively small town on promotion. The place does not have a branch of the bank his wife works for. The schools in this town follow the state

Figure 2.7
Coping and Stress Reduction



syllabus while Rakesh's children—at present—follow the CBSE syllabus. Further, the medical support is meagre. As the new town does not provide official accommodation, he has to make his own arrangement. The new official position entrusts him with higher responsibilities. Thus the 'transfer order' brings five dimensions of stress, namely, (a) inadequate medical support for his father, (b) absence of opportunity for

wife's job, (c) lack of suitable school for children's education, (d) private arrangement of residence, and (e) additional responsibilities of the new post. Thus, the stress situation, S1 initially is complex with five dimensions of stressors or $S1=abcde$.

He discusses with his wife and after a long talk could convince her to apply for a long leave and join him in the new place of posting (R1). This enables him to reduce the stress on one dimension, which turned from S1 to S2 carrying with it only four out of five stressors.

$$R1=S1 \rightarrow b \text{ S2} (acde)$$

Rakesh now will have to work on a lowered stress level with the problem of his wife's job (b) resolved. He decides to put the children in hostel as his wife and himself always felt that they would learn to be more responsible if they are on their own for a while. He feels that it would do them good. He gets ready to make all the necessary arrangements for that. This response of R2 further reduces the stress, which is now represented as S3—only with a, d and e as sources of stress.

$$R2=(S2-c) \rightarrow S3(ade)$$

Rakesh next consults the doctor regarding the arrangement for his father's medical emergencies. As per the advice of the doctor, he decides to purchase the essential medical equipments that can be used at home to meet the emergency without the professional help. He decides to buy basic equipments like an oxygen cylinder, and the emergency medicines. He and his wife learn the necessary skills to use them in times of emergency. He also convinces his wife to get trained in giving intramuscular injections. This effort on the

part of Rakesh (R3) lightens the stress further, which is now presented as S4 with only two units (de).

$$R3=(S3-a) \rightarrow S4 \text{ (de)}$$

Having successfully coped with three out of five segments of stressors associated with his transfer, Rakesh now sets himself to handle the remaining two stressors. He seeks the help of his colleagues (R4) in finding a suitable accommodation for him in the new place.

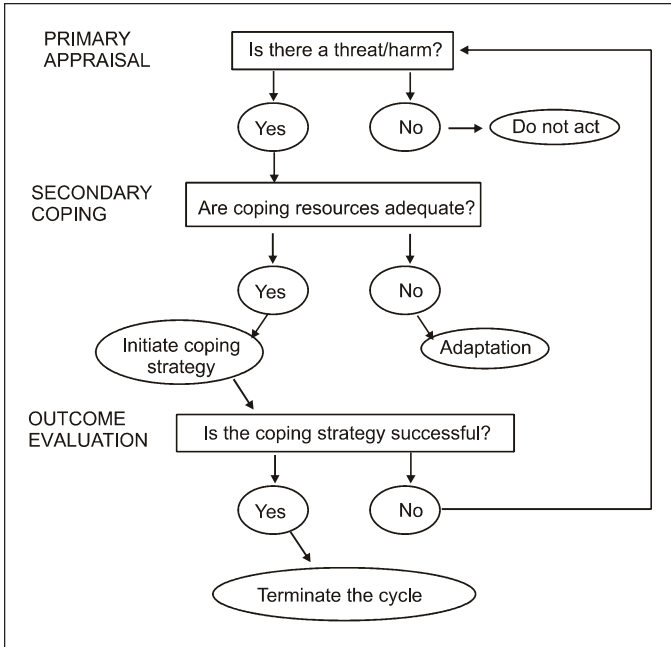
$$R4=(S4-d) \rightarrow S5 \text{ (e)}$$

Now Rakesh is going to be left with the stress situation of only one unit (e), that is, the work pressure. He can rely on his wife for all the emotional support to discharge his additional responsibilities. He always liked to take up professional challenges and hence the situation is now S5, that is, only professional stress, which is within the OSL for him, and hence, R5 is expected to be nothing less than efficient performance.

In the process of coping, sometimes, it may so happen that initially you choose one strategy to cope with the stress. It may not succeed in bringing down the stress level. You tend to adopt another strategy, which brings a marginal change in the situation. In the third stage, you may feel that the situation is ripe enough for you to approach the problem with yet another strategy of coping.

One must understand that the coping process continues until equilibrium is restored through appropriate management of emotion and handling of problem. The initiation and termination of the coping cycle is mediated by a cognitive evaluation process. Figure 2.8 explains this phenomenon.

Figure 2.8
Coping Cycle through Cognitive Mediation



On perceiving a stimulus, one may have a **primary appraisal** of the situation. This answers the question whether there is a threat or loss. If none is perceived, no action is taken. If there is one, further action is initiated. Before initiating any concrete action, one tends to go for a **secondary appraisal**. This assesses the adequacy of resources for initiating the coping strategy. If one is confident about the internal and external resources, s/he chooses an appropriate

coping strategy suitable to the context and resources. If one judges the resources inadequate, s/he may decide to simply adapt with the stress situation. Now the individual needs to evaluate the outcome. If the outcome is judged to be effective and successful, the coping behaviour is terminated. If not, **one goes back to reappraisal**. Thus the chain continues till equilibrium is restored.

One may continue to cope using different strategies until the problem is resolved and the stress is handled adequately to restore homeostasis. A concrete example may provide a better insight. Many parents experience this in the process of parenting. We take the example of one such parent.

Gangadhar's only son Jaydev had been **neglecting his academics and was found in the company of wrong peer group**. This created stress for Gangadhar (S1). He called his son and advised him to change his priorities. He gave him a thorough dressing down and warned him that he would stop the pocket money if he continued his waywardness (R1). This situation can be explained in simple terms of S and R as below, where S1 is the stress situation 1 and R1 is Gangadhar's response.

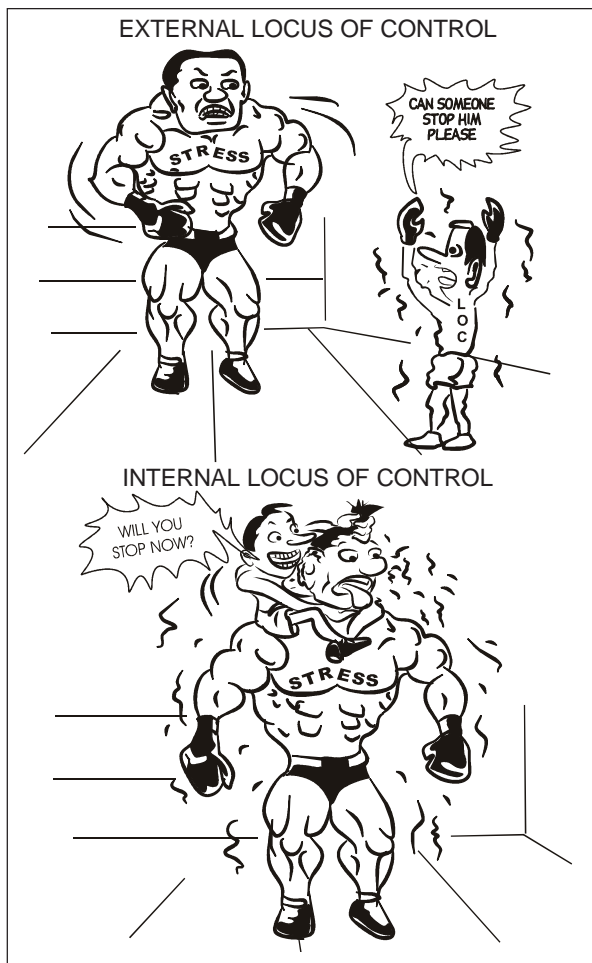
S1 → R1

After sometime Gangadhar realised that it did not work and Jaydev continued bunking classes and his association of the undesirable peer group. Thus there was no change in the situation. This prompted Gangadhar to re-examine the situation and his response to the situation. He realised that his issuing warning to his son was merely a release of his own emotion of anger but it failed to address the original problem of his son's misconduct. Gangadhar realised that

his R1 was not aimed at resolving the external problem of his son's bad company but was only limited to managing his own emotions of anger. As a result, the problem curve remained unattended and hence continued its upward movement. Here Gangadhar will have to try some other strategy to cope with the stressor posed by his son, so that the problem curve starts to slope down. This would happen only when Gangadhar's response addresses the stress situation of his son absenting himself from the classes. Gangadhar's stress levels would come down only when his son resumes regular attendance in the classes. But it may be endorsed that, the emotion of anger in Gangadhar would not have enabled him to examine the situation in the new light unless he released it by chiding his son initially. Only after he managed his emotions, proper reasoning and analyses could have taken shape. Thus it may be inferred that his release of emotions perhaps helped in better cognitive mediation making a reappraisal possible.

Locus of Control and Coping with Stress

In the process of coping—initiation of a response category, changing the response and assuming a multiple approach strategy—everything depends upon the individual's appraisal and reappraisal of the stress situation. Intermittently, the individual may evaluate whether the change in the stress level is commensurate with the effort invested in coping with the situation. S/he evaluates it against the stakes involved in the situation. Given the identical personal stakes, different

Illustration 2.3**External Locus of Control and Internal Locus of Control**

individuals experience different levels of stress. One of the factors determining the degree of stress experienced is the locus of control (LoC). LoC refers to the extent to which individuals believe that they or others around them or unknown factors can control events that affect them. Some individuals believe that the events result primarily from their own behaviour and action. They feel that they are responsible for the events in their life. They are known as persons with an internal LoC. Some individuals believe that powerful others, fate, chance or luck determine the events. They are known as people with an external locus of control.

External LoC can be of two types. The first category refers to people who perceive that some others with power or position control the factors related to the stressor. This could be one's own family member, teachers, administrative boss, colleague or a neighbour depending on the context of the situation. Here the person or institution perceived as having control is someone specific. During stress, when one perceives others in control of events, the ameliorative efforts to dissipate the stress are perceived to be relatively difficult and not within our control. A situation demanding more efforts in coping is naturally perceived as relatively more stressful.

In contrast to the first category, the second category of people with an external LoC perceive that an unknown phenomenon such as Luck, God or Fate causes and controls events in their lives. When the control of events is attributed to such unknown abstract sources, one tends to feel helpless in dissipating the stressful situation. As a result, there is high likelihood of adapting to the stress and experiencing relatively higher degree of stress.

A person with an internal LoC is likely to appraise the situation as less stressful when compared to a person who is

guided by an external LoC. The reason for this is that s/he is more likely to feel confident about the internal and external resources under his/her disposal. Internal resources refer to one's own cognitive, emotional and social capabilities, potentials and competence. External resources refer to the financial and material resources, and the social support network that one has under control. A person with an internal LoC feels the adequacy of his/her internal and external resources. As a result, s/he is confident about the good utility of these resources for an effective outcome. This disposition is likely to influence one's appraisal of stress. Though the individual perceives the involvement of high personal stakes, the rich resources within his/her purview enable him/her to perceive a relatively lower degree of stress. This phenomenon can be explained with the help of Figure 2.9.

Figure 2.9
Perceived Stress and Locus of Control (LoC)

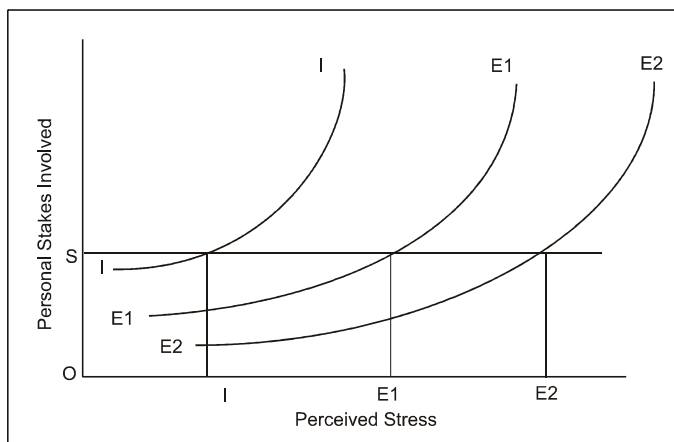


Figure 2.9 explains—assuming that the stakes involved remain constant—how individuals with internal and external LoC differ in their perception of stress. We are discussing here three individuals—Individual ‘I’, individuals ‘E1’ and ‘E2’, representing the three curves in Figure 2.9. All the three are facing the same stress situation, where the personal stakes involved are constant at OS (along the Y-axis). Individual ‘I’ is a person with an internal LoC; the second person ‘E1’ has an external LoC (Powerful Others), while the third person represented by the curve ‘E2’ is one with an external LoC (Unknown Abstract). The figure reveals that, given a constant level of personal stakes at any level, the stress perceived by I is OI, while E1 perceives the level of stress as OE1, and E2 perceives the stress as OE2. The perceived stress of E2 is greater than that of E1; and the perceived stress of E1 is greater than that of I ($OE2 > OE1 > OI$). Thus, individuals with an external LoC tend to perceive greater stress as compared to those with an internal LoC. Further the individuals with external LoC–Unknown are likely to perceive higher stress than those with external LoC–Powerful Others. This happens because a person with an internal LoC can estimate the effort s/he has to invest to circumvent the stress. More important than all, s/he is confident about the chosen coping strategy and its effectiveness. Contrarily, a person with an external LoC–Powerful Others—though s/he can name the source of external control in terms of any specific individual or systems such as bureaucracy, administration, law or the academia—s/he is left with a certain degree of unpredictability. Because s/he will on her/his own have to estimate the influence one can exercise on the source and the course of action of the identified ‘external source of control’.

Contrastingly, a person with a higher degree of external LoC–Unknown has to be under higher ambiguity, unpredictability and helplessness. This is likely to create a higher degree of emotionality adding to the stressor. In certain cases, there is also a risk of this category experiencing the defence mechanism of denying any stress.

To understand the phenomenon, let us take the help of an example in a concrete situation. A subordinate has committed a mistake in an official transaction. The perception of stress on the part of the subordinate depends upon his/her LoC. If the subordinate feels that he can manage the boss either with his/her confession to the mistake, or charm the boss by a smart explanation or can bring the boss to ignore the mistake by applying social pressure, s/he is likely to perceive a lower level of stress. This is because s/he has already chalked out one or more approaches to encounter the stressful situation. On the other hand, if the subordinate feels that everything rests on the mood of the boss, the advisors to the boss, or the meeting preceding his/her encounter with the boss, the impending uncertainty and unpredictability enhances the experienced stress. Further, if s/he perceives that the problem rose because of the position of his/her stars of the day or as per the zodiac predictions, then s/he is likely to feel helpless and depressed about the stress and may suffer it passively. The difference in the reaction of the subordinate with the external LoC (Boss as the Powerful Other) and the one with the external LoC (Stars, bad Luck as the Unknown Abstract) is that the former subordinate plays an active and proactive role in influencing the boss, while the latter is likely to play a passive and emotional role. This is because of the simple reason that the Stars/God/Fate or Luck are unknown abstract phenomena and

hence cannot be directly manipulated. Sometimes it is not uncommon to see people indulging in performing special worships, or visiting holy places in order to bring in a positive influence on the 'Unknown Others'. When the situation is realistically perceived as not within one's own control, or where a dear one is terminally ill, taking recourse to such rituals may be the best way of handling one's own emotions. This may at best have a therapeutic effect in handling the emotional turmoil caused by the stress but may not be helpful in handling the concrete problem which incidentally is beyond one's control.

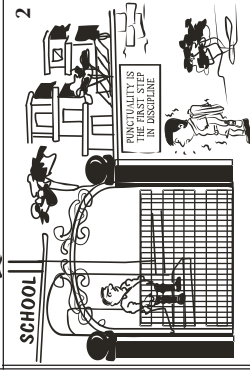
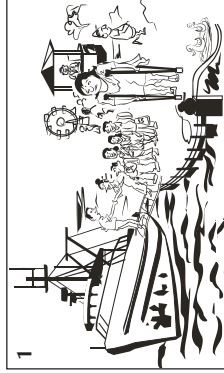
The individual with an external LoC tends to perceive a 'threat' in the stress situation while an individual with an internal LoC tends to perceive challenge in the stress situation—the challenge of aptly manipulating the internal and external resources to get desirable outcome that restores homeostasis.

Exercise 2.5

Test your Locus of Control

Read the following pictures (page 108) and answer the questions on the right columns pertaining to the main character in each picture. Choose your response from the alternatives given in each column.

If the responses to the question in the first two columns are the first option, it indicates that you have a clear internal LoC. Verify if the strategy suggested in the third column corroborates with the responses. If there is a discrepancy, respond again.



What happens next depends upon

1. The actions initiated by the main character
2. Another person
3. Luck/Fate/God's Will

How does the main character perceive the situation?

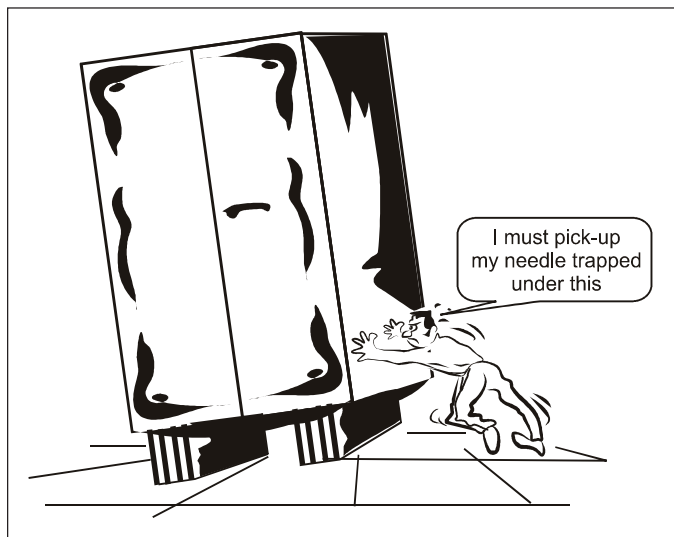
1. Challenging
2. Threatening

Try to give three possible ways of coping for the main character in each picture

Effective Coping

Is it advantageous to perceive a situation as challenging rather than threatening? What results in effective coping? Is it the internal or the external locus of control? Is effective coping the outcome of active or passive coping strategy? These questions are highly relevant in providing a proper direction to cultivate the right coping strategies. It is not very simple to talk about effective coping in terms of LoC or the perception of the situation, or active or passive coping. Effective or ineffective coping involves many factors. The three factors—LoC, appraisal of threat or challenge, and the outcome of

Illustration 2.4
Efforts invested and stakes involved



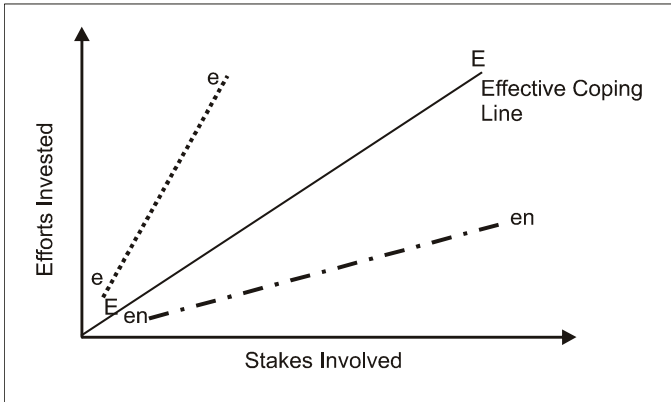
the strategy—taken in combination determine the effort one invests in reducing the stress. It is the effort invested in relation to the amount of stress reduced from the total stress situation that decides the effectiveness or productiveness of coping. This can be explained with the following example.

Shankar is a bright student and appeared in the final exams of the intermediate level. He procured a good percentage and passed with a first division. Shankar missed the state rank by few marks. On receiving the marks memo, he found that the marks awarded to him in Chemistry were much below his expectation. He was disturbed, frustrated and stressed. He strongly believed that something must have gone wrong with the evaluation. The Intermediate Board has provision for recounting but not for revaluation. Shankar put pressure on his father, who succeeded in getting the revaluation appeal sanctioned. The revaluation confirmed the original marks awarded. Shankar and his parents remained frustrated feeling that the revaluation was a mere eyewash. This is a typical example where Shankar and his father perceived an unrealistic internal LoC. They took it up as a challenge and encountered it with confrontive coping. However, for all the efforts put in terms of time, energy and resources utilised, the outcome was found to be disproportionately low. Hence, this coping cannot be qualified as effective or productive coping.

Any coping strategy would result in a productive outcome only when the efforts of coping are commensurate with the stakes involved.

Figure 2.10 depicts an Effective Coping Line. E–E is the effective coping line. It is observed from the effective coping line that at any point the invested efforts equal the stakes involved.

Figure 2.10
Effective Coping Line



If the efforts exceed the stakes involved, coping cannot be effective. The line $e-e$ represents the instance where the efforts invested in coping with the stress are disproportionately higher than the stakes involved. This is likely to result in adding to the existing stress rather than mitigating it. The line $en-en$ represents the instance where the stakes involved are disproportionately higher than the efforts invested in coping. This is an example, where the individual perceives high stakes in the stress situation but does not take necessary initiative to solve the problem and reduce the stress. Such possibilities arise in people with a very high external locus of control.

The exact measurement of effectiveness of coping is complex. However, one can broadly judge the effectiveness on the basis of subsequent coping behaviour. In effective coping, the cycle of coping behaviour must terminate after the coping strategy is executed. If the cycle of coping repeats

itself even at the terminal point, it is ineffective. The effort required to cope with a situation is determined by several factors such as the context, resources available, people involved, and the chosen strategy of coping. The context and the chosen strategy of coping decide the efforts to be invested in translating coping into behaviour. For example, when it is a conflict with one's spouse, confrontive coping may not call for much effort. However, if the context involves the Vice-chancellor of a university and a lecturer in a college, the lecturer may have to invest a lot of effort, to handle the issue by confrontive coping.

Nevertheless, the 'least effort coping' sometimes may not result in a productive outcome simply for want of adequate effort. Effortless strategies may sometimes emerge out of impulse or the person's rigid style not properly mediated by cognitive function.

Coping process performs two distinct functions. On one hand, the individual is required to manage the emotions elicited by the stress, while on the other hand, s/he must solve the problem concretely and realistically. Stressors have the capability of stimulating a wide variety of emotions such as shock, anger, grief, fear, hatred, excitement, causing anxiety, tension, frustration, depression or conflicts. The subsequent emotion results in a homeostatic imbalance in the person. In a state of emotional turmoil, the cognitive functioning is disrupted. Thus, unless the individual manages the emotions efficiently, the problem created cannot be handled. Effective coping depends upon the individual's efficiency in managing the emotions and appraisal of the problems on an assessment of the seriousness, weighed against the stakes involved, past experience and present resources along the time line. Figure 2.11 explains this phenomenon.

Figure 2.11
Effective Coping

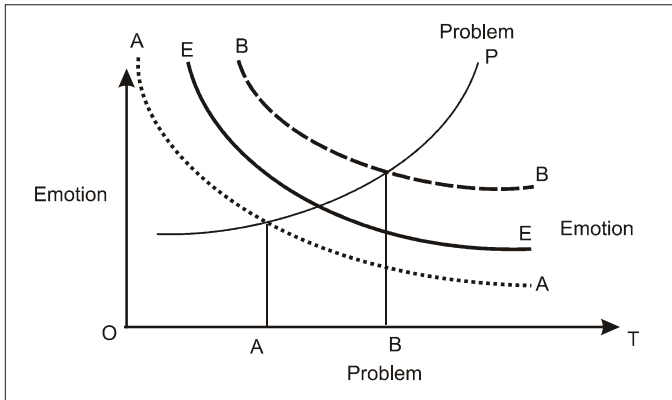


Figure 2.11 explains **effective coping in terms of time**. OT is the timeline. The Y-axis measures the emotional intensity while X-axis measures the problem intensity. When a person is faced with a stressful situation, s/he encounters two dimensions of stress—the 'problem' involving the stakes and the concomitant 'emotion' aroused with the perception of the stress. The emotional intensity has a tendency to slope down along the time line even though it is left unattended. The time taken for this state is determined by the swiftness and adeptness with which the focus is distributed between emotional management and problem solving. It is essential that the peak emotional arousal be appropriately managed to balance the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. Efficient cognitive mediation is possible only after effective emotional management. Emotional management is achieved through different means depending upon the personality variables of

the individual. Some may choose to vent deep emotions through weeping or an outburst of anger by shouting at someone; some others seek support from others by finding an emotional anchorage in someone, whom one confides in. Yet others may take recourse to defence mechanisms with subliminal activities like expressing their emotions in art, creative writing or sports.

People may have their own individual choice of managing emotions suiting their personality and temperament. At the onset of a crisis—like bereavement, natural disaster or heavy loss of finance—the aroused emotions may outweigh the magnitude of the concrete problem. Perhaps this is the **reason for certain social customs**—like visiting the bereaved family or the socio-political reaction of reaching out immediate relief to the areas affected with a natural calamity. Such customs and systems are helpful in managing the emotions of the people under stress. With all the emotional support extended, people differ in their emotional management and coping abilities. This is indicated in Figure 2.11. Curve 'E' showing a downward slope from left to right indicates an average emotion curve. Curve 'P' having an upward slope from left to right is an average problem curve. The point of intersection between the two lines refers to a stage and time where emotions are efficiently managed and the problem is adequately attended to, in order to attain an equilibrium state. The intersection between the curves 'E' and 'P' may represent the average person's response. The individual differences in managing emotions and coping with problems is depicted in the contrast shown between the individual 'A' and the individual 'B'. Some take a long time before controlling their emotions and focusing on the problem, while some others do it in minimal time.

The problem being constant, the emotional curve of the individual 'A' slopes faster, indicating that 'A' manages the emotions quickly. Once the emotions are managed, an objective appraisal of the situation is possible, leading to an appropriate handling of the problem that is external. Thus 'A' fulfilled the dual function of coping taking 'OA' time to reach this stage. Individual 'B' in the same situation could not cope as effectively as 'A' because s/he did not have appropriate skills to handle the intense emotions. S/he took 'OB' time to attend to the problem after the emotional intensity dropped to a level to enable an appropriate appraisal of the situation to handle the problem that is external. By then the intensity of the problem had increased. It looks as though 'B' had to invest more effort for a productive outcome as the magnitude of the problem and emotions are at a relatively higher level than what 'A' faced.

Let us assume that 'A' and 'B' are two women who lost all their family members and property in the tsunami that hit the Indian coast. The emotional trauma and the magnitude of life problems are the same for both. Both 'A' and 'B' lost all their family members in the calamity. Their small huts and little belongings got swept away in the tsunami tides. Under these circumstances, 'A' chooses to join a group of victims who lost few members of their family and some of their property. She shares the grief with the group, which formed into a cosy mutual support system. Their absorption of mutual grief and exchange of information about the relief activities enabled 'A' to manage her emotions and do the needful for rebuilding her life within a span of 'OA' time. 'B' on the other hand was totally broken. She perceived those who had at least one surviving family member as relatively 'better off' people. The world looked hopeless to her and

she prolonged her peak emotional trauma, until she found that the affected applicants were having their houses rebuilt by the government. At this point, 'B' realised that she had not submitted her appeal till then, and decided to act. However, due to the time-lapse in submission of the application, verification and getting the relief sanctioned by the authority was difficult at every level, as a suspicion of the genuineness of the applications had set into the system. Getting the work done alone added to her emotional trauma and the magnitude of the problem, too, increased with a time-lapse. Hence, 'B' required more effort to be invested for the same outcome. In view of this 'A' seems to have coped more effectively than 'B'.

Effective coping is a process guided not only by the personality, temperament and cognitive abilities, but also by learning, modelling and experience. The process of effective coping can be learnt. Learning or training in effective coping involves learning a number of aspects such as realistic perception of control, appropriate appraisal of the problems in terms of stakes involved and the seriousness of it, and an evaluation of the context vis-à-vis the proper choice of coping strategy to be applied. There are several types of coping from which an individual can choose the one s/he thinks best suits him/her. An understanding and analysis of various types of coping is essential for learning effective coping.



Case Reports and Analyses

3

There are different methods of classifying coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) have classified coping on the basis of the approach taken up by the individual. According to them, coping is classified into eight types. This book discusses nine types of coping. In addition to the classification by Lazarus and Folkman, the ninth category, 'Shifting the burden to supernatural element', is added in view of its prevalence in the Indian society.

- Confrontive coping
- Planful problem solving
- Seeking social support
- Accepting responsibility
- Positive reappraisal
- Distancing
- Self-Control
- Escape–Avoidance
- Shifting the burden on supernatural element.



When an individual chooses one of the coping types and puts it into operation, it is referred to as 'Coping Strategy'. Each of the coping type has the potential to be productive or unproductive. For this reason, the coping types cannot be hierarchically organised. Hence the effectiveness or productivity of an individual's coping cannot be judged merely on the strategy adopted in a specific context. What is also significant to examine is the number of coping strategies the person has in his/her repertoire. An individual who is aware of more types of coping, has the advantage of choosing a strategy that is most suitable in a given context. Contrastingly, another individual who has fewer types of coping, is limited in the choice and may be forced to apply a strategy that may not be appropriate to evolve optimal effect in a given situation. An individual who applies strategies from a wide range in the repertoire is said to have a 'flexible coping style' while the one who limits himself/herself to a few strategies has a 'rigid coping style'. Needless to say, a person with a flexible coping style is more effective than the one with a rigid style.

A person with a rigid coping style can be trained to develop a flexible style. Coping behaviour is closely associated with personality and cognitive aspects, which are found amenable to training. The training—meant for the readers—is a four-phase process. Applying the basic principle of learning, one of the effective approaches to training in effective coping can be termed as FARC process. This follows four stages, namely Focus, Analyse, Reconstruct and Compensate. The initiative starts with focusing on the coping processes of selected cases and analysing the process thoroughly.

The guidelines the reader may have to follow are described here:

- Read and understand the case thoroughly
- Think of a closely or remotely similar situation in your life
- Reconstruct the situation to your context
- Examine your original choice of coping
- Evaluate the effectiveness of that coping (Recall if the coping effort terminated after achieving your goal. If so, the strategy can be considered effective. If the chain of coping resumed with the goal unattained, the strategy can be considered ineffective)
- Compensate your original strategy of coping with the one successfully used by the person in the case
- Try out the new approach learned from the case report when faced with a similar situation
- Evaluate the outcome

Explained in simple terms, the transfer of learning can be adopted where one can reconstruct the situation to a context suitable to him/her, and compensate his/her original choice of strategy (which failed), with the one learned from the cases reported here.

The types of coping enlisted earlier are described and explained with illustrations of case reports. Understanding the process of each type of coping is easier through a case report than through theoretical explanation. The cases reported here are real cases observed and analysed by one of the authors in the course of her interactions with clients and close associates. They are narrations made by the individuals while confiding in the author and supplemented with the author's own observations. For the sake of confidentiality, names of the individuals, their occupations and names of the places have been changed. The reported cases are not case studies,

as the procedure of a case study was not followed. Two cases are reported for every type of coping—one describing effective coping and the other, reporting a failure. Each case is thoroughly analysed on various aspects of coping to understand the factors responsible for their success or failure.

Confrontive Coping

Confrontive coping can be best explained as ‘taking the bull by horns’. It can be identified when one explains his/her

Illustration 3.1 Confrontive Coping



behaviour in the following ways: 'I stood my ground', 'I discussed/argued till the other person changed his/her mind', or 'I persisted until the other person conceded to my point'.

Case Report 1: Himani Saved Her Marriage

Himani's case may sound like a typical Indian film story, though it relates her real experience. Himani is a young girl in her early twenties from a lower middle-class family. She is the eldest daughter of the family with a younger sister and a brother. Her father worked in a government office. After graduation, Himani married Prakash who was employed as a medical representative. During the initial days of her marriage Himani experienced post-marital adjustment problems with Prakash's joint family, which included his parents and a retarded sister. Six months after marriage, Himani felt some problem with her vision and assumed that she may have to change her spectacles. Prakash took her to an ophthalmologist for a vision test. The ophthalmologist revealed a shocking diagnosis. Himani was diagnosed as suffering from *Retinitis Pigmentosa*, a disease where the retina develops some pigmentation, disrupting vision. Though research is still continuing in this area, medical science has not found any solution to this. The doctor informed Prakash that the result of this problem would be progressive blindness. He also said that none could predict the speed with which the problem would progress to cause total blindness; it could take 30 years or few months.

The diagnosis came as a thunderbolt on Himani. It was not easy for Prakash, too, who had just started his married life, and he withdrew into a silence. When Himani's parents-in-law

came to know about the diagnosis, hell broke loose on the family. They accused her parents of concealing this fact from them prior to the marriage. Himani pleaded with them that nobody knew about the problem until Prakash took her for a vision test. But her in-laws continued to brand her and her family as cheats. As a result, Himani experienced severe stress. Unable to put up with all these, she left for her parents' place. She expected Prakash to visit her parent's place and coax her to return. He did go to her parent's place and asked her to return home. In an angry mood, she refused which annoyed him and he returned. Himani's father was terribly shaken with the development of these events. He suffered a massive heart attack and died in a few days. Struck by shock and grief, the family found itself in a terrible emotional turmoil. About two months passed but Prakash or his parents never showed up. Himani's mother, left alone with the burden of two unmarried children started blaming Himani for her father's death. With all these events, Himani gradually went into a state of depression.

She joined a teacher-training course. Unable to answer a question in her psychology class she broke into sobs. Her teacher found this odd and offered to give her time in case she wanted to talk to her. Himani met her and narrated all her problems. She poured out her grief, anger, anguish, disgust and disbelief. That helped her in letting off the heat and unburdening herself. The counselling sessions continued with the psychology teacher. Encouraged by her empathy, she continued to confide in her frequently. This helped her to reorganise her appraisal of the situation.

She tried to call her husband on the residence telephone. Her father-in-law received the call only to tell her that Prakash was not interested in speaking to her. She found the situation

growing complex. One day she decided to go to her in-laws. However, before reaching their home, she went to the police station, nearest to their residence and wrote a complaint against her in-laws for not allowing her into the house. She spoke to the police officer and sought immediate police protection so that she could return to her husband. Himani reached her in-laws' place with police. That took everyone by surprise. The parents-in-law abused her for bringing the police. Prakash was dumbstruck and found her actions unwarranted. She did not react to the resistance of Prakash's parents. But after the departure of police, she spoke to Prakash in privacy. She apologised to him for the humiliation she caused when he went to her parents' place with an intention of taking her back home. She convinced him that of all the people she was the worst victim of the doctor's diagnosis, while others added to her trauma by their unfair accusations. She spoke to Prakash and argued rationally. Her persistent talking broke the ice and he consented to the reunion. All these took several weeks. They started building their relationship all over again. They learnt about a team of Russian ophthalmologists visiting a corporate hospital in the city to identify patients of *Retinitis Pigmentosa* to join as volunteers in their sample to test a new treatment method. Himani decided to take a chance and underwent the treatment process. The drug was found ineffective but Himani did not lose heart. She procured a certificate of her visual handicap, and fetched a job in the training wing of a bank. She, along with Prakash, moved out to a flat closer to her office and managed her house with the support of her husband. How did the crisis almost break Himani's marriage? How did she cope with it to save her marriage? An analysis of the entire process should enable us to identify the various factors.

First of all, the diagnosis of the doctor taken in isolation declared that the problem was of a high magnitude and was irreversible. The timing of the stress was also very improper as Himani was going through the initial hiccups of marital adjustment. The stakes involved were her eyesight and her marriage. Both these are considered highly valuable in life. The irreversible nature of the stakes and the timing of its onset, together created the greatest emotional turmoil in her life. In such a situation, what she required immediately was an external emotional support and solace to manage her emotions. Ironically, what she received from her in-laws was negative support which added to her stress. She did receive the initial emotional support from her parents but they too were highly stressed. They were afraid of their daughter's uncertain future.

Over a period of time, when Himani found her emotions too difficult to manage, she became depressed. That is the reason for her breaking into sobs in an unwarranted classroom situation. The timely emotional release to her psychology teacher and the counselling sessions helped her in managing her emotions and sloping down her emotional curve to an extent where she could concentrate on the concrete problem in hand. This is where her effective coping started. When a stress situation projects itself with an irreversible situation like death of a near and dear one or loss of a body organ, 'emotion focused' strategy is of great use in reducing stress.

Himani found her mother, who was also stressed, as a source of negative support. She considered her husband Prakash a source of support. Yet, she was unsure of the influence his parents would have had on him. She decided to handle her in-laws with law, and determined to bring an

attitudinal change in Prakash. She reappraised the situation and could foresee interference from her in-laws. To pre-empt any such move from her in-laws, she took the formal support of the police and demonstrated remarkable perseverance in bringing a change in Prakash. Here, Himani used a combination of playful problem solving and confrontive coping techniques in dealing with her in-laws and the husband, respectively. Her further actions such as volunteering to join the sample for the new experiment of the Russian ophthalmologists, procuring a job on visually handicapped quota and moving into a separate flat are part of the playful problem solving technique.

Himani seems to have optimised on the informal social support unique to Indian culture. Her decision to move to her parents' place when she encountered severe stress after marriage is a response that is not normally frowned upon in Indian society. She decided on using her parents for emotional cushioning during her post-marital trauma. This is very typical of young Indian brides, who till the time of marriage live under the emotional and social protection of their parents. Further, the assurance of continuation of such support is normally an unwritten law for them. Thus given the circumstances, the initial coping strategy of seeking (emotional) support from her parents is a response that is accepted in Indian middle-class families. It is also true that prolonging such support from the parents would not bring-in the desirable results. Sensing this Himani encountered the situation with a different strategy. Further, her emotions were well-managed by then and she was ready for an objective encounter with the stressor. Her problem-focused approach was also evident from the way she organised her various stressors such as the shock of the diagnosis, conflicts with her in-laws, the

impending problem of losing vision, and finally, given all the limitations, the need for having a job and financial autonomy.

Case Report 2: Manaswini's Incorrigible Man

Manaswini is a 40-year-old married woman with two children of school-going age. She works as a personal secretary to the Managing Director of a renowned firm. She completed 15 years of successful marriage with Manoj, who is employed in a UN organisation. Manoj and Manaswini lived in good harmony because of their mutual trust. They had an unwritten understanding in managing the family. Manoj used to manage finances and Manaswini managed the rest of the things in the household and looked after the children. She never bothered about the finances. She signed blank cheques for Manoj whenever he required.

Manaswini observed that Manoj had been gradually growing moody and reserved over the past few months. One day he asked her to apply for a loan from her provident fund, as there was an urgent need for money. She found this a little queer and asked him as to why he could not withdraw money from the bank account. Manoj revealed that neither of their accounts had the balance. For the first time, Manaswini visited her bank, took a statement of account and realised that he had been withdrawing heavy amounts from her account for the past one year. She wondered why he needed such large amounts of cash and where and how was he spending. She decided to find out and confronted him on why he needed the money and what was the emergency. Manoj revealed nothing more than giving a reason that he had borrowed money from someone and had to return the same. This was

not convincing. Manaswini told him that she would apply for the loan only after he revealed the whole fact. However, he refused to divulge any further information.

Manaswini gradually gathered that her husband had been engaged in a very close relationship with a lady colleague and was spending liberally on her. Shaken by this, she confronted him again and accused him of breach of trust. She spent several nights and days trying to talk to him on this. The only reaction from Manoj was a denial that there was nothing serious, followed by a stoic silence. Manaswini argued with him rationally. She explained how their two children would be affected by his misconduct. She pleaded with him and even threatened to leave home with the children. This affected her fragile health and she had to be hospitalised. After being discharged from the hospital, she stayed with her brother for a week to get sufficient rest. During this period her family learnt about the whole problem and summoned Manoj, and advised him to change his conduct. Manoj called all that false allegations, and never revealed why and on what pretexts had he been spending huge amounts of money. Manaswini returned home after a week and resumed her dialogues with Manoj, but he did not budge. He spent more time outside, returned late in the night and left in the wee hours. He started growing moody and became irritable towards the children. He still maintained that there was no serious problem and yet refused to reveal the reason for his need for large amounts of money. Manaswini decided to refrain from any confrontations with him and leave him alone with his conscience for a while. During this phase, he once again tried to persuade his wife to apply for the loan to meet his financial crisis. Hoping to restore normalcy, Manaswini yielded to his request and arranged for the money.

She could restore peace only as long as she suspended questioning him on the issue of money.

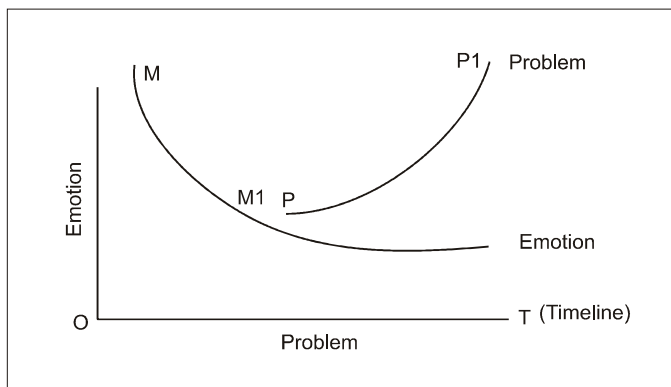
Manaswini made all possible attempts to handle the stress through confrontive coping. She tried to bring a change in her husband with reason, emotion and social audit, but nothing worked. What are the possible reasons for the failure of confrontive coping here?

The stress situation for Maniswini involved a two-fold stake. The primary stake was her marriage and the second was her financial security. However, these two stakes were so highly intertwined that it was difficult for Manaswini to assess them separately. The stressor was the interpersonal relationship, involving emotional banking. The problem itself involved the emotions of the partner in the interpersonal relation.

Manaswini possibly perceived a threat in the situation—to her marriage. This is possible because the time of the onset of the problem (of which she was not aware) was left to her imagination. Her position is explained in Figure 3.1. Thus, Manaswini found herself open to appraise her position somewhere in the middle of the problem curve. Since she was not aware of the beginning of her husband's proximity with his lady colleague and was not sure about their relationship, a part of the problem curve in its origin remained concealed. This ambiguity was translated into tension and anxiety, causing distress to place her at the peak of the emotion curve (marked as 'M' in Figure 3.1).

Her confrontive coping with Manoj did not produce the desirable results of changing his behaviour. However, it was helpful in releasing her emotional stress. Manoj's 'under reaction' to Manaswini's confrontive coping left the magnitude of the problem to her imagination. Driven by her imagination, she opted to mark the problem somewhere up on the

Figure 3.1
Problem Emotion Incompatibility



rising curve. Over a period of time when she significantly came down on her emotion curve (marked as M1) she complied with her husband's demand for money with a hope that he would confess to her. But his continued silence once again left her to the imagination of her position on the problem curve marked as P1. Thus, though Manaswini came down on her emotional curve, she could not meet the problem curve, which according to her remained far above.

The main reason for this was that the problem curve did not manifest itself in the initial stages of the time line, leaving an opportunity for an intersection between the two curves. Confrontive coping helped in bringing Manaswini down the emotional curve because she could ventilate her anger and anguish to Manoj through her arguments. However, the strategy could not achieve anything beyond this. It is observed that the reaction of Manoj (the outcome of confrontive coping) left Manaswini guessing about the magnitude of the

problem. As a consequence, she placed the problem elusively high on the curve. Thus, confrontive coping failed to produce the desirable results for Manaswini. Hence, she opted for other strategies. It may be appropriate here to mention that confrontive coping need not necessarily have the tinge of aggression. One can adopt confrontive coping and change the mind of the opponent with unmixed rational arguments. What determines the strategy as confrontive coping is its end objective of changing the target person's mind. Thus when the target is another individual, the choice may be confrontive coping. But when the target is a 'situation', the coping option may be playful problem solving.

Manaswini's focus of appraisal was 'Manoj and his behaviour'—not the whole situation. The situation here refers to its totality: Manoj's newfound interest in his colleague as a deviation from his marriage and the expenditure incurred by him. Manaswini was focusing on a part of the problem by questioning him on his inexplicable expenditure but not taking a holistic perspective of the situation. That is the reason for her adopting the strategy of confrontive coping. Had she focused her appraisal on the 'situation', she would not have persisted with confrontive coping.

Manaswini's arrangement of managing the family with the type of division of labour, where the man manages the finances and the woman manages the children and the household needs, depicts the typical conventional arrangement of an Indian middle-class family. Her prolonged confrontive coping strategy intercepted with giving-in to the husband's needs also points to the significance given to save the marriage despite prolonged unreasonable behaviour by the husband. One of the reasons for the persistence of Manaswini's husband's obstinate stand could also be his

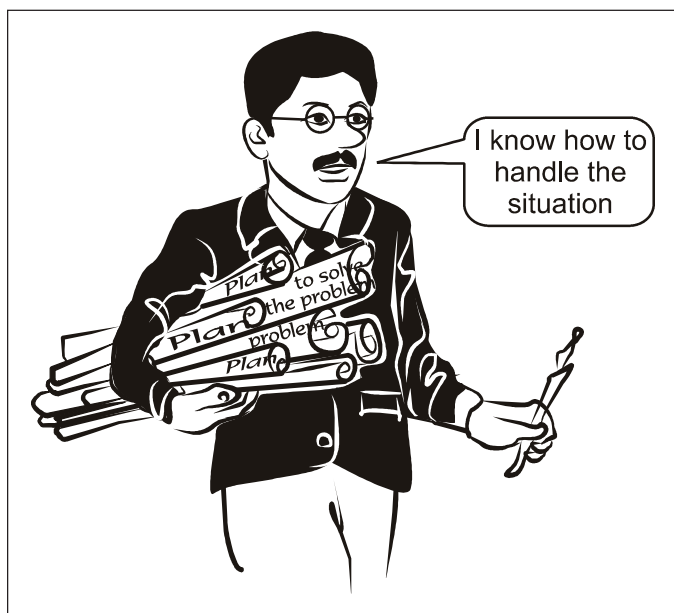
confidence that his wife would not take any extreme step that would stake their marriage. Sometimes the social considerations that influence the choice of coping strategy may be the cause for its ineffectiveness.

Planful Problem Solving

Planful problem solving is marked by objectivity. It is conspicuous by an absence of emotions, and a significant pursuit

Illustration 3.2

Planful Problem Solving



of a solution in the most logical way. This is a coping technique where the person encountering stress chalks out a definite plan of action and follows it. The behaviour of the person following this coping suggests the following tone: 'I know what has gone wrong. I also know what has to be done to rectify it. I have more than one way of handling it. If one approach fails, I have a contingency plan.' Planful problem solving refers to cognitive appraisal involving objective assessment and logical thinking.

Case Report 3: Pains and Plans in Raising a Handicapped Child

Himaja, a post-graduate, hails from an educated family. When she was a student, her peer group always rated her as a quiet and cute girl. She chose to remain reserved, and yet had a friendly disposition. She achieved average grades. Himaja got married at the age of 30, which was considered a late marriage in her community. Her husband had a very busy profession that kept him out of the country for most part of the year. Himaja conceived and delivered a daughter, Navya. There were problems in labour and the baby who suffered asphyxia during birth was born with mild cerebral palsy, which was diagnosed later because of delayed milestones. This left the couple emotionally shattered. They consulted many specialists in India and abroad, read books on cerebral palsy, and discussed with people who could contribute to their knowledge. The only response they consistently received was that what their daughter suffered was a milder form of the problem and that they should be satisfied about it. It took about two years for the couple to reconcile to this

fact. They found great emotional support in each other. Himaja's husband was the first to come to terms with the fact.

Himaja and her husband used to talk emotionally about their misfortune. Gradually, their emotional talks started taking the turn of rational planning. They examined all the information on cerebral palsy. All that indicated to the only fact that the condition cannot be fully reverted. On the other hand, several medical opinions on their daughter indicated certain path of exercise through physiotherapy, and complete attention on care and training, which alone could help the child rise to her optimal level of functioning. For this, they needed a solid financial resource to bank upon and total attention of one of the parents to ensure quality attention. They decided that the first priority was to provide individual care for the child, which Himaja would provide. They decided that her husband who was holding a job that required him to sail most of the time must change and take up a more viable job that would enable him to spend time with the family. Himaja spent long hours with the child. She engaged the child in activities as per medical advice. This showed its results in two years. The doctors were happy with the improvement and assured the couple that the child could attain more motor abilities if the same care continued. They found Navya improving in many motor functions. Encouraged by this, they decided to strictly stick to the medical advice and admitted her in a school at the age of five. However, Himaja and her husband realised that whatever be the improvement, Navya might not be able to use public transport to go to school. It may be the right thing to provide her the transport support. This idea culminated into the proposal of owning a separate car for Himaja, and that she must learn driving and get acquainted with the

city traffic in the next one year, so as to drive Navya to school with confidence. Himaja learnt driving and dropped Navya to school, picked her back, drove her to physiotherapy clinic, and then to the swimming classes. All of Himaja's time was devoted to Navya, who could reach normalcy on all motor movements except her gait. She was self-reliant, went to a normal school, formed her own peer group, and ate and played with normal children. However, she remained an average achiever in school.

Himaja kept herself busy with Navya and the household chores. However, whenever there was a need to attend a social gathering at the family or social level, Himaja continued to suffer an emotional outburst following the function. She felt that everyone pitied her. The thought of Navya's future worried her a lot. Once she expressed to her husband the growing fear of what would happen to Navya after she and her husband grew old or died. These emotional releases led the couple to further discussion. Himaja strongly felt that they must go for a second child. They decided to discuss the risk factors with the doctors. They had their second child when Navya was seven years old. The second child was a boy and a normal child.

Both the children shared a normal sibling relationship. Navya continued with her physiotherapy, swimming and other activities. Himaja, who was once a 'quiet, cute' girl became the busiest among her college peers. She managed everything on her own, as her husband joined a profession involving extensive touring. Navya, on reaching the adolescent age, had her emotional problems related to her inability to run and play tournaments as her friends could do. Himaja absorbed this and believed that it would be hypocritical to claim that she did not anymore get affected by

Navya's handicap. In her words, 'Only a mother of a handicapped child can fully empathise with me. Any way, this is the fact I have to live with and this is all that we could do about it.'

Himaja and her husband used planful problem solving as their coping strategy. This demanded a total revision of their life plan. The birth of a child with cerebral palsy is not an easy fact to accept. What helped them face the trauma was the mutual emotional support. Once they brought themselves to a manageable emotional level, they started to focus on the main problem. The appraisal of the situation through proper cognitive mediation triggered the internal locus of control, encouraging them to seek medical information and advice on the health of their daughter. Their wisdom lay in identifying the two crucial needs to handle the problem—intensive personal care and a strong source of financial support. In the revised plan, the division of responsibilities fixed Himaja to the total personal care of Navya, while her husband sought a change in the job so as to satisfy the financial and emotional needs of the family. Their apprehension regarding Navya's problem in using public transport evolved an alternative of equipping Himaja with the required skills of managing her own transport. The unique fact about their coping refers to their adequate focus on the problem as well as the emotion at the right time. They aptly identified the stress of being the parents of a handicapped child, packed with the loss of feelings of parenting a normal child. Preoccupation with this feeling, perhaps, would have reduced their efficiency of coping. It was highly appropriate for them to handle this emotion in time, and go with the plan of having a second child. Thus, it may be observed that in the process of their coping with planful problem solving, the couple

changed their entire lifestyle. They had to come up with a contingent plan at every stage so as to fruitfully solve Navya's problems in the most systematic way. The fact that Navya could attend a normal school, and started achieving her average grades and became highly self-reliant is a testimony of the fact that her parents are not required to care for a 'handicapped daughter'. To that extent, planful problem solving of this couple can be credited with effective coping. This was possible only because of timely and efficient emotional management, a realistic locus of control, readiness for reappraisal and revision of plans at every stage. It must be mentioned here that planful problem solving strategy of coping produced desirable effects because the focus of appraisal was the 'situation' of raising a child with cerebral palsy. If they identified Navya as the stressor, they would not have coped through planful problem solving because the emotional turmoil would have been manifold and beyond manageable limits.

Case Report 4: Sravan's Wrong-End Attack

Sravan is an associate professor in a well-known university. He has put in long years of service in academics. Sravan's appointment as an associate professor was on a University Grants Commission (UGC) scheme. His experience in the post has been long enough to get him a promotion as a professor. All his colleagues in other departments had already received the promotion. But the university denied him his due promotion on the plea that he was working under a scheme. The informal legal advice clarified that a person employed in a post for more than a stipulated period, and

fulfilling certain criteria ought to be treated on par with the regular employees. Sravan satisfied all these conditions. Yet he was denied his due promotion. He once had a chance encounter with Harisyam, a counterpart of his from another university. He learnt that this person was given all the benefits including promotion in his university, despite the fact that he, too, was employed under the same scheme. Notwithstanding their first meeting, Sravan requested Harisyam to send him the copies of the appointment and promotion letters of his university administration. Sravan persuaded him to help him with these documents, though Harisyam hesitantly told him that their universities were guided by different administrations; hence certain policy matters may not be uniform. Sravan also approached his own university authorities through the teachers' organisation. He apparently had a few contingency plans up his sleeves. But he felt that the easiest way was to pre-empt his university administration with the actions of another university that may be cited as a precedence to gain his promotion.

Sravan telephoned Harisyam several times. After dodging the issue for some time, Harisyam had to tell Sravan that he was advised not to share his university's official documents with other university without an official permission. Sravan still persisted and thought he could get the papers by speaking to Harisyam's Head of the Department, whom he had met only once. When he called him, he was told that it is he who advised Harisyam not to share these papers without proper official permission. He frankly expressed his regrets. Thus, Sravan failed to reach his goal by applying playful problem solving strategy of coping.

Why did Sravan's coping strategy fail to produce desirable effects? What went wrong with Sravan's approach?

Sravan's focus of appraisal was the situation but not the Vice-chancellor or the Registrar of the university blocking his promotion. His identification of the problem was appropriate. He also did well in examining the alternatives to solve his problem. His appraisal of the problem appears to be one of 'challenge'. However, his locus of control was external. He always felt that the university 'administration' decided his fate. He did not think of taking up a confrontive coping approach with his university administration. He did not seem to have contemplated discussing with his own Vice-chancellor or Registrar, and convince them about his case on the merit of it. He seemed to have attempted to reach for the 'remote control panel', ignoring the 'proximal panel'. Thus, his attempts revolved around 'influencing' the university administration through others. Unfortunately, the others through whom he wanted to influence the deciding authority happened to be very remote because his familiarity with them was just one of acquaintance. First, it was Sravan's locus of control and then his identification of a wrong control panel that resulted in ineffective coping through planful problem solving. With an internal locus of control, a person would have opted for legal help where the administration would be bound by the verdict of a court of law. Thus, it is the locus of control, which determined the coping strategy for Sravan that proved ineffective.

Seeking Social Support

Coping through seeking social support refers to a situation explained by expressions and statements like, 'I sought help', 'I cried on his shoulders', 'I shared my feelings with him and

Illustration 3.3

Seeking social support



received good moral support' and so on. When an individual copes with a stress situation by tapping resources from one's interpersonal relationship, the strategy is called coping through seeking social support. A stress situation typically creates ripples at two levels—a concrete external problem

out there and the subsequent emotional disturbance within. So coping through seeking social support can be a request for a concrete support in solving the problem, or finding an emotional anchorage in others to absorb the shock or share and lighten one's feelings. Both are considered important functions in reducing the stress and restoring equilibrium. This depends upon one's social support network.

Some relationships are excellent for the first function, while only a select type of relationships are efficient for the second function. Thus, during stressful events, cognitive mediation must enable an individual to exercise his/her discretion to tap the right sources to function as good emotional buffers. Productive outcome rests on this discretion of the individual under stress. This calls for two evaluative functions. At the outset, the person under stress must ascertain whether the situation warrants the use of social support. This involves a judgment if it is indeed beyond one's own control. If so, whether what is beyond one's own control can, in fact, be controlled by others. The second evaluation calls for a judgment based on past experience to identify from one's own social network, the correct source that can extend the kind of support sought. This judgment includes an assessment of attitudes of the social support agents towards the self and the degree of their probable willingness to intervene.

Any error in exercising this discretion may result in inadvertent negative support. Coping through seeking social support has one of the three possible consequences—positive support, failure to receive positive support or negative support. Failure to receive positive support is any time tolerable than receiving negative support. This is because negative support, instead of reducing the stress level, contributes to the existing stress level.

Case Report 5: Sumitra's Success with Social Support

Sumitra comes from a socially disadvantaged background. She is the eldest daughter in the family with one sister and a brother younger to her. The family lives in a slum where people from their own community reside. Most of the inhabitants in the slum are her relatives. Like all children, Sumitra too went to a primary school run by the state government. A majority of the girls in the slum discontinued their education after a certain stage. Sumitra could circumvent that stage and joined sixth standard after passing her primary school. She used to be regular in her attendance. When she was in class seven, her mother fell seriously ill. Being the eldest daughter, she had to attend to her sick mother and the younger siblings. This prevented her from going to school for several months. When the exams approached, she could appear as a private candidate with the help of a teacher who taught her at school. She reached up to class ten but failed in the board exam. The family discouraged her from reappearing. On the advice of the family and neighbourhood, she joined a tailoring class. She developed contacts with the other co-learners, most of whom were housewives. This was the time when the Government of India launched its literacy movement and Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) was in full swing. She learnt about the programme and joined as a volunteer in the campaign and started teaching the non-literate adults. Around this time, Sumitra learnt about a voluntary agency in the neighbourhood, which imparted education to girl children working as household helps. She learnt that the school needed a teacher. She approached the concerned person and joined the school to teach the young

girls. Through this school, she developed contacts with a number of people from different professions. Sumitra's unfulfilled desire to clear her class ten board exams surfaced again.

She requested the founder member of the school who resided close to her place to help her with certain subjects. Thus, with some academic guidance Sumitra passed her class ten exam. Her family members decided to get her married. The bridegroom was a close relative. Within a few months of marriage, Sumitra experienced harassment from her husband and in-laws. She realised a wide gap between her values and that of her husband's family. It was not possible for her to compromise on that. Unable to put up with their ill treatment, she walked out of their house to her parents who lived in the same city. Learning about the rift in her married life, the entire community (that also formed her neighbourhood) pressurised her to return to her in-laws. Their unanimous verdict was to 'adjust' with her new 'home'. She contacted a lawyer with the help of a member of the voluntary agency where she worked, and filed her papers for divorce. Her parents and the entire community disapproved of this. They arranged a local *panchayat* (an informal legal body constituted by the members of a community), which questioned, cross-examined and pressurised her. Facing the *panchayat* on such issue is highly stressful and could be humiliating, too. Sumitra had two of her young friends who hanged around at the end of her street to intervene in case of any need. Sumitra withstood this trial by the *panchayat*. She stood her ground and declined to rejoin her husband. Later, the court granted her divorce. But, bitter with her decision and afraid of the community, her parents were not supportive. With the help of some friends, Sumitra fixed a

one-room accommodation for herself and moved out of her parents' place.

She discussed her future with people who were close to her. With their encouragement she decided to pursue higher studies in distance mode. Again, she sought the help of her senior colleague to help her with the preparation for exams and completed her graduation from an open university. She taught in the school in the afternoon. She wanted to utilise her free time to earn more to meet the financial needs of her separate establishment. She joined a project run by a women's organisation. She got this appointment with the help of a university teacher who was also a member of this organisation. Her social network expanded further, and she could impress people with her sincerity and hard work.

Sumitra's relationship with her parents improved and she visited them frequently. She developed a cyst in her breast, which had to be operated upon. Her parents took her to the hospital and supported her in all respects. She stayed with her parents until she recovered completely. Friends visited her and cheered her up.

Her parents ran into a bad financial crisis, and the house they stayed in, was mortgaged and was likely to be sold-out to the moneylender. Sumitra shared this problem with a circle of her close friends. They felt that she could purchase the house by repaying the moneylender and her parents could continue living there, while she would own the house. Everybody contributed towards the loan for Sumitra, with an understanding that she would clear these hand loans within two years. Before she reached 30 years, Sumitra owned a house, was a qualified graduate and worked in a school as well as a women's organisation. She still maintains her contact with

her wide social network and willingly extends help to anyone in times of need.

Sumitra encountered stress from multiple sources. Initially, the family was an obstacle in her pursuit of education. This was followed by her marital problem, health hazard and also financial stress. Sumitra found that she could fight her battles with moral support from others. She perceived the stress and appraised her stakes objectively. Her internal locus of control was limited to tapping adequate support at the right time. In certain situations, she thought that her cognitive mediation was not strong enough in applying the strategy of planful problem solving. For example, the family's financial crisis had to be circumvented in a way so as to extricate the parents from the crisis, benefit Sumitra, and at the same time, not allow the support network to be exploited by her family. Sumitra alone could not have evolved such planful approach. It was the cognitive support of the right group of friends that fetched her the optimal solution. It is here that she used her discretion and consulted the right circle to tap the right resources. When she needed help during times of health problems, she knew that the post-surgery period demands continuous care and nurture. For this, she relied on her parents so that her circle of friends can limit itself to moral support. Thus, she exercised her discretion in tapping support from appropriate sources depending upon her problem. She knew very well whom to approach for legal aid and whose help had to be sought for academic guidance. Sumitra did not perceive a very strong internal locus of control in many situations, except fighting the battle of her disturbed marriage, where she decided to face the local *panchayat* all by herself. However, even here, considering her general disposition of a low

internal control, the social support was kept in reserve in case of a need.

Sumitra perceived high personal stakes in each of her problem, but this did not match with a high internal locus of control. Yet her overall perception of the stress condition, by and large, was one of 'challenge' rather than a 'threat'. This was possible because she was confident of her strong social support network. She knew that she could rely on this source both for concrete and emotional support, where the network functioned as an excellent buffer. This was possible for Sumitra because of her good understanding of her social network, her efforts to keep it alive and her discretion in using it.

Case Report 6: Nagaratnam's Negative Support

Sarat Kumar and Nagaratnam belong to an orthodox family. Nagaratnam is married to Sarat Kumar. Sarat, a commerce graduate, worked as an accountant in a private concern at the time of his marriage with Nagaratnam, who had just then completed her school education. They stayed in a joint family consisting of their parents and a younger brother whose marriage was performed a few weeks after Sarat's marriage with Nagaratnam. Sarat's younger brother Bharat worked in a private company as a marketing manager, while his wife Vidya was employed in a central government office. The three working members used to leave for their place of work at around 8.30 in the morning. Thus Nagaratnam used to be at home to cater to the needs of her old parents-in-law. Since she was attending to her in-laws, she expected Vidya to complete the kitchen work before she left for work. Gradually, she requested Vidya to complete the peripheral household

jobs, too, as she found it difficult to distribute her time between caring for her in-laws and other jobs. Sarat's salary was relatively low. So, Nagaratnam sought the help of Bharat and Vidya for any financial exigency.

Whenever Nagaratnam felt the need for rest and a break from her routine household chores, she along with Sarat would shift to her parents in the same town. Her stay in her parents' house ranged from a few days to a few weeks. Nagaratnam's parents belonged to the low socio-economic class. Whenever their daughter came over with the son-in-law, they felt a heavy burden in feeding two more adults. Yet they honoured their daughter's need and struggled to make her stay comfortable. Sarat's private firm posted him in a nearby town, as that branch needed an experienced hand. Sarat, who had got used to the big city, resisted the move. He resigned from his job. After tendering his resignation, he decided to start a business of his own. This required some capital investment. Nagaratnam suggested that they seek a hand loan from his elder brother working in northern India. The new business was launched with the financial support of Sarat's elder brother. As expected, the initial stages did not fetch any results. In the mean time, within a span of one year, Sarat's parents passed away, one after the other. This left only the two brothers and their families. Sarat and Nagaratnam had no children while Bharat had one son and Vidya was expecting her second child. Even during Vidya's advanced pregnancy, Nagaratnam expected Vidya to complete all the regular chores because she kept herself busy with a number of rituals that would fetch her divine blessings to get a child. Sarat and Nagaratnam contributed nothing for the household expenses. Their visits of long stay to Nagaratnam's parents almost stopped because their parents

communicated their problem in hosting them. Vidya felt the burden of household chores in her advanced pregnancy and along with Bharat felt that it would be difficult to support the extended family of Sarat who contributed nothing. They decided to gradually withdraw from Sarat and Nagaratnam, and stopped giving out money to them. They at last told Sarat that it would be proper if he moved and lived separately on his own. Sarat and Nagaratnam made no move to fend for themselves, and continued to stay in the same house. Finally, Bharat and Vidya decided to look for a separate accommodation. Leaving Sarat and Nagaratnam, they moved out of the house to a distant place by renting a house there. This forced Sarat and Nagaratnam to find alternatives. What caused the absolute loss of support for Sarat and Nagaratnam? Why did they fail in obtaining support from the brother who was so dear?

Sarat and Nagaratnam relied on only one strategy of coping through seeking social support. They persisted on the single strategy of coping, that is, Seeking Social Support. Trying out another strategy calls for a change in the approach. People who have an innate 'resistance for change' cannot think of an approach that is new. Thus it could be this 'resistance for change' that prevented Sarat and Nagaratnam from trying out any other coping strategy. This tendency reflected in their clinging to parental support, and also Sarat's resignation of job rather than moving out of the city. Further, Nagaratnam's social support network was very narrow and limited to family and relatives. Thus, given a very narrow network of social support limited to immediate family and friends, her rigid style of coping through social support overshoot into the zone of negative support. This can be explained with the help of Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2
Social Support Zone

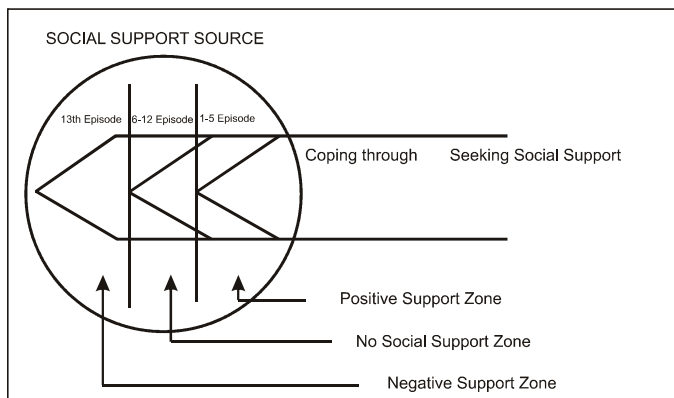


Figure 3.2 explains different social support zones. A social support source can be divided into three zones, as described in the circle of Figure 3.2. In the first few encounters with the stress situation, when Sarat and Nagaratnam tapped the social resource of Bharat and Vidya, the outcome was a positive support. Reinforced by the positive support when the couple continued relying on the social support from Bharat and Vidya, they had unknowingly entered the zone of 'no social support'. After this stage, though they did not actively seek additional support, their non-withdrawal from the status quo position took them into the inner zone of negative support resulting in counter-productive effects.

Further, Nagaratnam's resorting to the strategy of coping through using social support did not seem to have been preceded by proper cognitive mediation. In other words, she never examined if she could handle the situation herself.

This caused a leap above the highly required appraisal of her personal stakes involved and the locus of control. Had there been a proper appraisal through cognitive mediation, Nagaratnam would have avoided tapping the social resource when the situation was found to be under her control or the stakes were not high enough to warrant seeking external support. This would have helped in preventing her from entering the 'no support' zone. Here, the main cause for the failure of Nagaratnam's coping is her rigid style. It may be said that her leaping over the stage of cognitive appraisal is because she had no other type of coping in her repertoire. Thus, whatever was the level of stakes, her lack of internal locus of control and cognitive inability left her with the only option: using social support. Her tendency of resistance to change, limited social network and rigid style of coping resulted in failure of this coping strategy. The stress level of Nagaratnam and Sarat would have been relatively low, had they not received negative support. Because, by not receiving social support (not receiving pocket money), they failed to reduce the existing stress level. By receiving negative social support the stress level was raised.

Thus, resorting to coping through social support at a low stress situation positioned Sarat and Nagaratnam at a higher stress level. Indian culture is known for its informal social support. Support from family, neighbours, friends, colleagues and relatives are viewed positively, and accepted with grace and dignity. It is considered an intervention rather than interference. Such support pours in spontaneously in times of crises. It is also common that in a joint family system, the financial responsibilities and the household chores are distributed among the members. Any weak member is normally given all support by the members of the family and is even

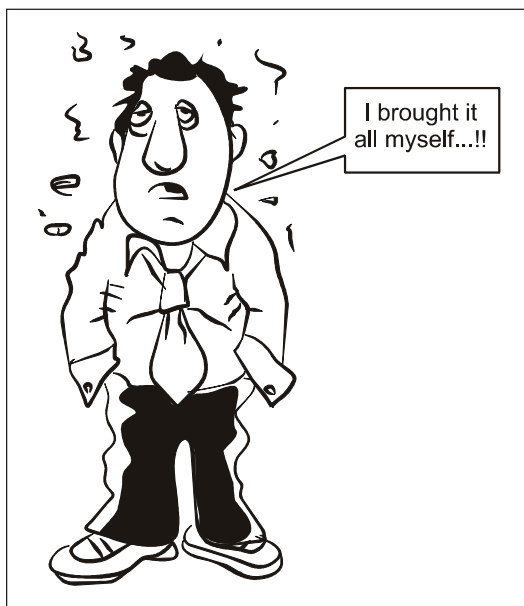
exempted from shouldering any responsibility. This is an informal substitute to the social security prevalent in Western society. However, such support system is also governed by some unwritten norms guided by the nature of the crisis and the duration of the support expected. The social support source is unlikely to expand the positive support zone when stress levels are not swollen up towards crisis. Nagaratnam and Sarat's coping strategy did not take this phenomenon into cognizance and over-tapped their resources in a situation that did not warrant seeking social support. This led the support source to a saturation level to operate from a negative support zone.

Accepting Responsibility

Coping through accepting responsibility refers to the kind of behaviour where one blames himself/herself for the state of affairs. Self-criticism, self-sermonising, and lecturing to oneself are examples of this type of coping.

Accepting responsibility as a method of coping is different from assuming responsibility or volunteering responsibility as a behavioural function. Many a times, we see parents blaming themselves and their child-rearing methods for the bad behaviour of the child, or a senior colleague blaming himself for equipping his junior with good social contacts, who in turn starts working against the senior. In the political field, a young man groomed well by a top political leader of a party learns the tricks of politics. On a later date, he forms a party of his own and fights election against his mentor. This is a stressful situation for the mentor. He copes with the

Illustration 3.4
Accepting responsibility



situation by saying, 'I brought this problem to myself. Who asked me to teach him all tricks of politics?' The strategy may be better understood with the analysis of the following case reports.

Case Report 7: Sameer under Suspicion

'My miseries are designed by my own self! I spelt my problems'—Sameer laments every day. Sameer is a 50-year-old

executive working as the Vice-president of a reputed company. He is married and has two sons, who have crossed their adolescence and are into their youth. His problem is constant nagging from his wife.

Sameer hails from a large middle-class family. He lost his father when he was in college. His mother put in a lot of struggle to educate all her children with her husband's pension and the salary of the eldest son. Sameer performed well in his academics as well as cricket. He was one of the most popular students in the university. During his university days, he developed friendship and love for a girl. Both of them grew close to each other and decided to get married after finishing their course. However, after a steady affair for about two years, a small conflict between them developed into a rift resulting in their breaking apart. Sameer was emotionally shaken when the girl left the university after the completion of her course. He felt lonely, frustrated and dejected. His family was not aware of these significant experiences of his life. It was around this time that Sameer's sister talked to him about the daughter of a close relative of theirs. The eldest daughter was yet to be married. Those days, in the early 1980s it was not easy to face the society and get good proposals for the daughter given the circumstances. Sameer's sister started persuading him to marry this girl. Given his emotional state, Sameer on an impulse, gave his consent at once. But he wished to talk to the girl in private. In all earnestness, Sameer confided in her about his love affair and its failure. He expressed his willingness to marry her. The girl remained silent but expressed her consent to her mother. Within a year they were married. Sameer's problems started very soon. His wife would resent any association of Sameer with women and gave mild reprimands when she found him

talking to women. This behaviour continued; however, he did not enter into arguments or fights with her on this issue because he perceived it as her possessiveness. He was very supportive to her and shared equal responsibilities in managing the house and child-rearing. He put in all efforts to keep her happy and cheerful. He never understood the reason for his failure in making her happy over the years. She always complained about his over-indulgence with office. She was also critical of many of his positive gestures such as his deep concern and offers of helping her in the kitchen. He started feeling a void when there was no word of appreciation for his efforts and no offer of support to his profession from his wife. Yet, he tried to maintain peace because of his concept of a harmonious family. As Sameer climbed up the ladder of his profession, his interactions expanded to a wide range of people. He being generally extrovert, interacted with people in friendly way. This made his wife irritable and grumpy. She even started questioning him if a telephone call was found to be from a female, if she happened to receive the phone call. She would not welcome any of his female colleagues home. She would always be reserved when she had to meet them in any official or social function.

Sameer started feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable when his wife passed uncharitable remarks on him in the presence of the children. With his colleagues he had to put up an excessive cordial behaviour to compensate his wife's indifference. All this started taking its toll on him gradually. He started to feel the cumulative stress of all these. Whenever any incident shot up his stress level beyond his threshold, Sameer would tell himself, 'Well it's all my making. It is me who sowed the seed of suspicion in her. Who asked me to confess my failed love affair to her before marriage? I

have buried it long back, but she would not. First of all, why did I have to decide a serious matter like marriage, on an impulse? I should not have put up with her tantrums in the initial stage itself. Well, I am wrong in being democratic, tolerant, and even on my views on gender equality. Things would not have been this bad, had I behaved in a chauvinistic way.' With such self-sermonising self-talk, Sameer resumed his professional responsibilities and marched ahead looking forward to a fresh day ahead.

In an identical conflict-situation of such prolonged duration, a Western couple perhaps would have opted for some professional marriage counselling or thought of other alternatives. But it is very unlikely for any one of the couple to continue in the same stressful situation by coping through accepting responsibility. One major difference between the Western and Indian situation is that the children continue to stay with the parents until—if not even after—their marriage. As a result, the parents feel responsible for the children's education and marriage. Hence, all efforts are made to retain the marriage intact, so that the children do not suffer. Contrarily, children in the Western society move out to lead an independent life after a certain age. There is no social demand on the parents to feel responsible to guide them through their education and marriage. Hence a Western couple in an identical situation has other coping options to sustain its psychological well-being. Sameer being from the Indian socio-cultural background could best sustain his psychological well-being through the strategy of coping through accepting responsibility.

It is the self-blaming behaviour that categorises Sameer to be coping through accepting responsibility. This is a coping strategy where Sameer is able to manage more than one

emotion. His wife's behaviour is potent enough to elicit the emotions of anger, frustration, helplessness, sorrow, disappointment and embarrassment. If Sameer chooses to ventilate all these, targeting his wife, the strategy would be Confrontive Coping. When the individual is targeted with confrontive coping triggered by strong multi-faceted emotions, the outcome may have a boomerang effect. If he targets his wife with these emotions, the consequence may be staking his marriage or furthering the degree of stress from the same source. If he displaces his emotions, it may cause dents in his interpersonal relations. So the best way to handle is to turn the emotions inwards and target himself by coping through accepting responsibility. Thus, coping strategy is rendered complex by its power of managing multiple emotions and also changing their direction.

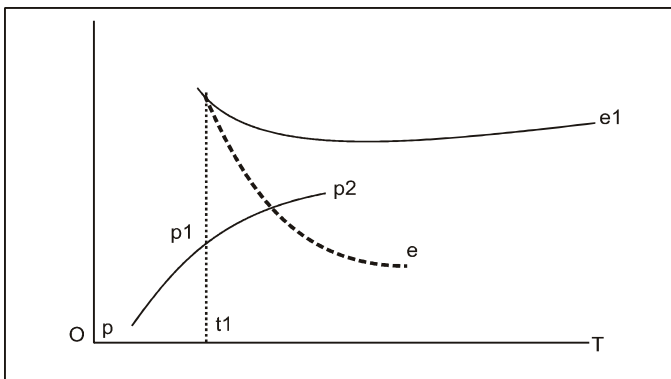
The coping function is active here because if one took the blame passively, it results in silent suffering, sometimes leading to depression. But the thin line of difference here lies in the nature of 'active blaming' with an undertone of 'I brought it all to myself', where the emphasis is on all the good things that one did despite which the situation turned against him/her. Sameer's process of accepting responsibility included self-talk like, 'Who asked me to confess about my failed love affair to her before the marriage?' Such statements are potent with the fact that he did it in good faith to start a new relationship afresh, to prevent any problems in future, and to demonstrate his transparency. Such a thought process helps in protecting one's self-esteem, particularly in situations where one feels that s/he is not receiving the treatment deserved.

Further, such coping by way of accepting responsibility shields one from getting into depression. Faced with such a

situation, the cognitive mediation gives the insight that coping through initiation of action would result in an undesirable strategy of confrontive coping and hence an active reaction should be suspended. When further actions from a stressed out individual are suspended, one activity that may provide satisfaction is enumeration of past action. This activity carried out actively with a load of emotions helps in an efficient management of the emotions, which is very essential.

Figure 3.3 explains Sameer's process of coping through Accepting Responsibility. Sameer, by opting for coping through accepting responsibility is preventing the situation from worsening. Since he had ignored the upward problem curve for long, any attempt at changing the target through confrontive coping may only result in precipitating his emotion. As indicated on the X-axis of the figure, he took O_t time to take the problem into his cognizance.

Figure 3.3
Effective Coping through Accepting Responsibility



By then, the problem had accumulated to pp_1 , which remained invisible to him, and the manifested problem showed the cumulative effect (p_1p_2). But with the experiencing of the problem, the emotional outcome remained at a peak of level t_1e on the emotional curve ee_1 . The only way of intersecting the two curves to reach the effective outcome is to slope down the emotion curve. This means managing the emotions adequately and appropriately. In such a situation, where the stressor is another individual with whom the relationship cannot be further staked, the most effective way is to release intense emotions by targeting oneself by coping through accepting responsibility, so that the equilibrium is restored to continue effective functioning. Hence, Sameer sloped his emotion curve (indicated by the sloping dotted curve) which enabled its intersection with the problem curve. This is how Sameer copes with his everyday stress at the age of 50.

Case Report 8: Uma's Self-infliction

This case report is a continuation of the case report of Uma discussed in Chapter 2 in the context of explaining the difference between adaptation and coping (Case Report on Adaptation, Chapter 2).

Uma decided to seek legal separation from her husband after 24 years of marriage. She could no more tolerate his greed for money and scant respect for women. This happened after she put an end to her adaptation with her husband and initiated proactive coping. She arrived at this decision after the children grew into adults and she settled down in a decent job. Around the same time, she had a

chance meeting with a businessman who showed a lot of affection and warmth for her. Her close friends—though supported her on the decision of divorce—advised her to go slow on this new acquaintance. Some of them learnt that he was in fact not a desirable character and was a known fraud, and advised her that she must sever her friendship with him. In her sheer innocence or overpowering emotions, Uma asked if he had some objectionable background. This offended him. He sulked and even advised Uma to comply with her friends' advice and keep away from him. This emotional blackmail evoked feelings of guilt in her. She thought that her lover was in fact a gentleman and was hurt by her friends' comments. Her love and respect for him increased and she conceded to his proposal of getting married to him at the earliest. She informed a couple of her close friends about her decision and introduced him to these friends. Thus, she entered into marriage with the man of her choice, going against her friends and well-wishers. She continued with her job, which fetched her a handsome salary. She lived in the same city with her new husband.

The first six months of her marriage were full of excitement. Gradually, her husband started having problems in his business. Uma stood behind him providing strong financial and moral support. She went to the extent of investing a portion of her inherited property in his business. On his advice, she took a loan from the bank where some of her colleagues signed as guarantors. Over a period of one year, she was financially broke. Her relationship with her colleagues was strained because she was unable to repay the hand loans. The bank notices spoiled her reputation in her workplace. She had already withdrawn herself from those close friends who had advised her against the marriage. Thus

she had no one to confide in and share her problems. Her husband who used to dote on her during their short courtship, turned irritable and critical of her. Her boss started pointing at her growing inefficiency. Unable to take all these pressures, she applied for a long leave to spend time in a holy place. On her return, things turned worse. Her husband went out on 'tours' for long durations. She realised that he was in fact an antisocial element and a confirmed womaniser. When confronted, he admitted to the various facts on which she questioned him.

Uma could do nothing about it because she had lost everything to him. So, she continued to live with him in sorrow and grief. He shifted houses frequently and changed the cars in short spans. She was not allowed to question him on any of these. She had to encounter unforeseen situations like receiving notices for unpaid telephone and electricity bills, visits by the house owners to retrieve unpaid rent, and notices and agents from banks and chit funds for non-payment of installments.

Around the same time, Uma was diagnosed as having a malignant tumour in her brain. She underwent a surgery and suffered the subsequent pains for the next three years. She became paralytic on her left side as a result of the second surgery. After her second surgery, her husband gradually increased his 'touring period' and even stopped visiting her. Uma appointed a nurse to look after herself.

Four years after her marriage to this lover, lying in a sick bed, Uma used to tell her nurse and the two friends who visited her, 'It is all my making. I deserve to suffer all this; because I was blinded by my emotions and never heeded to my well-wishers and friends. I should not have been so transparent with him to reveal my friends' detections about

his history. I was a fool to have done that. It is entirely my fault and I brought myself to this stage.' Uma died in the year 2002.

Uma's expressions to her nurse and friends indicate her coping through 'Accepting Responsibility'. But there is a striking difference between Sameer's coping and Uma's coping. While Sameer's coping through accepting responsibility helped him look forward to a fresh day and get back to his work, Uma's coping only resulted in making her more depressed. The reason is, while Sameer, in his coping strategy counted all his 'good actions' to prevent any impending problems, Uma was engaged in counting her 'inactions' or 'wrong actions'. Sameer's references to his proactive role helped in enhancing his self-esteem and protected him from getting into a depressive state, while Uma's references to her 'wrong' deeds only resulted in lowering her self-esteem and leading her into a state of depression. There is a striking contrast between the two cases of coping through accepting responsibility. Sameer's self-lecturing sounded as self-criticism; yet the undertone was, 'I did all these with all good intentions, which she never deserved, and I realise it now.' Thus, the sublime target is his wife whose immaturity and wayward thinking is being denounced. Contrarily, in case of Uma, the self-criticism like, 'I was blind and never heeded to my friends and well-wishers...', the target, in fact, is herself. She regretted to have shared with her lover what her friends found out about him. Uma was terminally ill and immobile, and her husband was not around. In her helpless state, when there was no other alternative, she adopted coping through accepting responsibility as a dead-end. But, this did not help to cheer her up. In her case, this turned into passive coping because there was no follow-up action to this. But in case of

Sameer, this was active coping with a positive follow-up action of looking forward to a fresh day.

What Uma needed perhaps was strong social support. Under normal circumstances, anyone in place of Uma in the Indian society would have received spontaneous support from friends, neighbours, colleagues and relatives. But this did not happen in case of Uma for two reasons. The first reason is that Uma's decision of divorce and remarriage was strange and unacceptable to the Indian culture. Hence Uma had to face silent disapproval and social boycott of her relatives and social circles soon after her remarriage. Second, she chose to use coping through seeking social support for all her financial stress caused by her husband. She almost indulged in this strategy of coping to meet the financial overburden, engulfing her on day-to day basis. In the process, she entered the zone of negative support of her colleagues at the workplace. As a consequence she could not use the strategy of seeking social support in times of dire need for emotional support, moral boost and financial help. The case of Uma also talks about the ineffectiveness of coping when cultural norms are not taken into consideration in coping with one's own stress.

Positive Reappraisal

Coping through positive reappraisal evolves as an aftermath stage in the process of coping, along the stress and coping spiral. This is a situation where an individual thinks, 'Well, it is all for my own good', 'God's wish was done', or 'I never knew it would bring-in such positive results'. 'Why did I not

Illustration 3.5

Positive reappraisal



accept it at the very beginning?’ or, ‘why didn’t I think of it earlier?’

Positive Reappraisal as a coping strategy may resemble the defence mechanism of ‘rationalisation’ on the surface, but is distinct from it. Rationalisation is unconscious in its origin while positive reappraisal is coping with complete knowledge and commitment. Rationalisation is a ‘sour grape attitude’ for an unattainable goal, while positive reappraisal

is preceded by active involvement in prevention of a specific direction of one goal, and attaining another goal through the other path, which was initially resisted.

Case Report 9: Pradeep's Paternal Pride

Pradeep has a business of his own in a small town. He has two daughters who did well academically. After they finished schooling, Pradeep never entertained the idea of sending them out to any metropolitan city for a better exposure. He felt that they could pursue their higher education in the local college. However, after completing her graduation, his elder daughter insisted on pursuing a professional course of her choice. Pradeep was not very keen to send her because the chosen college did not even have hostel accommodation. But he could not resist her decision strongly because she got through the tough selection process and was very certain about her decision. So finally he admitted her in the course of her choice. Within a year he could see her success and was very happy. When he saw her performance and many skills reflecting in her various works, he said, 'She did so well in her course. Why did I have to resist sending her out? Well, why did I not think about it earlier?'

Pradeep's strategy of coping involved a reappraisal of the situation. He did encounter stress when his daughter disagreed with his opinion that she must not leave home for higher studies. This difference was because of the mismatch between the apprehensions of a father, and the optimism and aspirations of his daughter. Both—the apprehensions and the difference of opinion with the daughter—were the cause of stress for Pradeep. But later when he had to concede to

her wishes, her good performance drove him to reappraise the entire situation in a positive way. This was healthy both for his self-esteem as well as a sustained and strong relationship with his daughter.

In developing societies like India, any deviation from the norm causes stress. But after going through the stress when the outcome proves to be positive, it is the positive reappraisal that helps in bringing about an attitudinal shift. When the incidence and frequencies of such coping behaviour on certain issues increase, that forms the base for a positive change in social norms. The change from the need to provide a cosy and protective environment for the girl child to that of granting her the autonomy of her choice of education and life partner, and coping with the stress of this change through positive reappraisal, holds the key to change in the social status of the girl child in the Indian society.

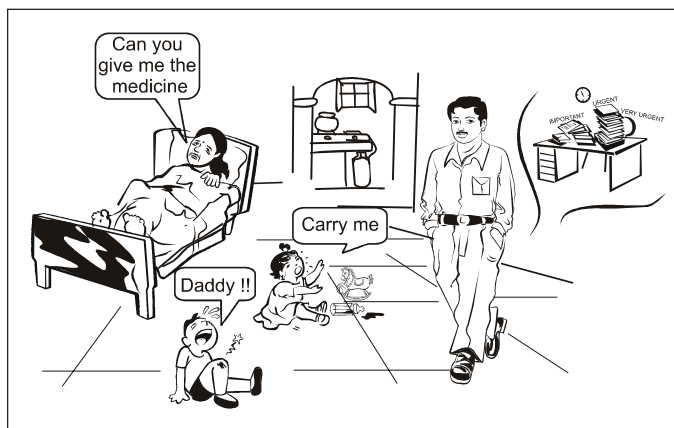
Distancing

Distancing refers to that strategy of coping where one tries to make light of the situation. Some of the typical examples are—refusing to get too serious about it; carrying-on as if nothing had happened; or refusing to think too much about it.

Such reactions automatically lead to a refusal or avoidance of talking about it. This strategy is adopted when the stakes involved are already lost and not retrievable. For example, one of the reactions after an estranged marriage resulting in divorce may be, 'Well, I would rather not talk about it'; or, one may even say playfully, 'Oh! That was just a child's play and we are now grown ups'. Similarly, a student who fails in his exam of the course in Chartered Accountancy (CA)

Illustration 3.6

Distancing



for the second or third time may say, 'Well, there is always a November after May (the CA exams are normally held twice in a calendar year)'. Or, the student may even say, 'Mohammad Gazni is my role model in appearing in exams' (Mohammad Gazni, as per history, invaded India 17 times). Similarly, if an employee has a conflict with his boss and his colleague tries to discuss it with him, 'Can you estimate the implication of your behaviour? If the boss is unhappy with you, your personnel file may have a negative entry', the person under stress may try to avoid him by saying, 'Well, I don't wish to make any such guess. The incident is over and is washed away. I have better things to do.' Thus, by and large, one opts for this strategy of coping when the locus of control is most definitely external, and this fact makes one feel uncomfortable.

There is a difference between coping through the strategy of Distancing and the defence mechanism of 'denial of reality'. In case of the defence mechanism, the origin of the behaviour is unconscious. The individual may not accept that s/he went through stress. The defence mechanism of denial of reality drives a person to turn away from the reality. Contrarily, in coping through Distancing, the individual tends to endorse the experience, but distances the self from the residual unpleasant feeling. The person while acknowledging the incident insulates himself/herself from the negative feelings at the behavioural level. Initiating the distancing response at the behavioural level may result in quarantining one from the possible consequences of a lowered self-esteem or depression. In case of an interpersonal conflict, coping through Distancing may have a better pay-off because it would be easy to rebuild the relationship with the person with whom one had a conflict. However, if one resorts to Distancing in situations where action is called for to resolve a concrete problem, the result will be undesirable.

Case Report 10: Conflict with the Colleague

Ramya and Mallikarjun worked in the same university in the departments of Education and Statistics, respectively. Ramya handled a project in education where she requested Mallikarjun's help. They worked together and arrived at an understanding that Mallikarjun would help her with the necessary statistical inputs and sampling techniques. Mallikarjun felt that it would be good for him to have a 'feel of the field' to be sure of the sampling procedure to be adopted.

They both went to the field to plan the sampling and data collection. There was an occasion when the issue of

training the field assistants cropped up. Both Ramya and Mallikarjun were found encroaching into each other's area. There was a long argument as they differed on several issues related to training aspects. There was a point where Mallikarjun opted to withdraw from the project and Ramya felt that she had nothing to lose by that. Finally, she allowed Mallikarjun to have his way. The third colleague who witnessed all this felt embarrassed and expected that the differences between them would adversely affect the execution of the project.

On their return to the headquarter, Ramya and Mallikarjun resumed their discussions and were found planning their analysis. The third colleague was intrigued and referred their fight to Ramya, and confessed that he never expected them to work as a team again. To this, she said 'That's OK. Why should I think and brood over it? That is over and washed out. There is no point discussing it repeatedly.' Ramya and Mallikarjun not only successfully completed the project but also continued to consult each other on many other academic issues.

Ramya's coping strategy was typically 'Distancing'. She did not want to think or talk about the conflict. According to her, it was all 'washed out'. The issue related to professional encroachment and the subsequent conflict, no doubt, was unpleasant and painful. But if either of them had carried the pain in their hearts, the consequence would have been a severed relationship that would have prevented any further productive collaboration. If Mallikarjun had not responded to Ramya's coping through distancing in a matching way, her coping through Distancing would have been a failure. But Ramya's manifestation of distancing at the behavioural level elicited a positive response from

Mallikarjun. Such consistent behaviour also helps in handling covert behaviour in a short time. The phenomenon can be explained with Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4
Productive Coping through 'Distancing'

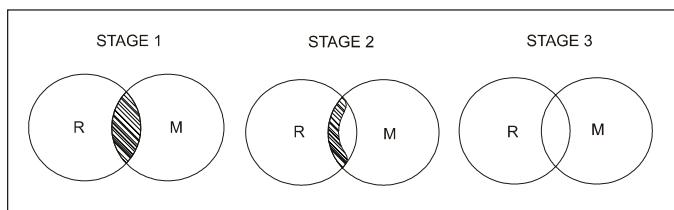


Figure 3.4 shows three diagrams. Stage 1 shows the stressful event of conflict between Ramya and Mallikarjun. Stage 2 shows their relative disposition after Ramya coped through Distancing. Stage 3 shows their interaction at the 'post-distancing' state. Stage 1 depicts Ramya and Mallikarjun, represented by two circles R and M. The conflicting interaction between them is the shaded area of the overlapping space of the two circles. This shaded area represents their raw and unpleasant feelings in their interaction. Stage 2 shows the situation after Ramya adopted coping through Distancing. Here, the overlapping space between the two circles is shaded only partially, towards Mallikarjun. This happened because Ramya 'distanced' herself from the incident and the hard feelings were pushed out of her mind, though Mallikarjun carried ahead the residual unpleasant feelings. This is the reason why we see Ramya's circle free of the shaded area while Mallikarjun's circle still continuing with it. In the third stage, both of them are seen to represent their circles without the shaded area. This is because when

Ramya started interacting with Mallikarjun without carrying any hard feelings of the incidence in the field, she behaved as if nothing had happened between them. He, too, responded by distancing from the unpleasant incident. They could carry on as if nothing had happened between them and continued to have productive academic interaction.

Distancing as a coping strategy can be practiced easily when the two individuals are not connected to each other through complex emotions.

Case Report 11: Parasuram's Perpetuation

Parasuram is married to Lavanya who is employed as a teacher in a government school. Parasuram works as a sales representative for a private company. Parasuram is the happy-go-lucky type, while Lavanya is known for her affection, warmth and sentiments. They have two children.

One afternoon when she returned from school, Lavanya found her husband at home. She thought that he must have returned home earlier and did not question him. But when she found that he was not getting ready for work on subsequent days, she asked him the reason. Parasuram replied playfully, saying that there was no specific reason, but he just wanted to stay back. She believed him and this continued for weeks. Then Lavanya became concerned and coaxed him to tell her the reason. He revealed that he had resigned from the job and that everything would be fine very soon. Lavanya reassured her support, but did not probe further because Parasuram did not want to discuss further on that. Months passed by but he did not go back to work. Lavanya suggested that he try for some other job. Every time she proposed that,

he would only say that things would be all right soon. He did nothing during the day except reading newspapers and dropping his wife and children at the bus stop. Lavanya used to complete all the household chores before leaving for work. Parasuram behaved very normally with Lavanya and their children, like any normal father and husband, demanding small help or joking with them. He never hesitated to ask his wife for money for his personal and family needs. As years rolled by, the children's needs progressively increased. Lavanya found it extremely difficult to pay their fees and meet other educational needs. Given her temperament, she could never be harsh with Parasuram. She struggled hard to make both ends meet. Though Parasuram cared for her a lot and showered his love on her, he never felt responsible to find some means of earning. Eight years passed by but Parasuram carried on with no change in his attitude. His only response to questions, confrontation or appeals from his brothers, Lavanya's family members or her coaxing was either a stoic silence or that things would be fine very soon. He refused to talk beyond this and continued to have a happy-go-lucky life.

It was very clearly observed that except ceasing to extend financial support to the family, Parasuram carried on his normal behaviour in every other respect. He talked to his wife and children lovingly and jovially, demanded to be looked after, entertained guests and visitors, attended family functions, took care of Lavanya, an asthma patient, whenever she had an attack. When cornered as to why he was not seriously trying for a job, he responded that he never considered it a problem.

By coping through Distancing, Parasuram failed to generate a productive outcome. This is precisely because Parasuram, in this case, was responding to a situation of

losing the job, which calls for a better focus on the problem. Instead, he has been distancing himself from the problem and allowing the problem to grow. After eight years of unemployment, it would be very difficult for Parasuram to find a placement. Because, even if he changes his strategy of coping now (which is unlikely because it is being reinforced by his wife's not being firm), he cannot satisfy the prospective employers in accounting for eight long years' of inactivity and non-productivity. The prolonged use of the strategy of coping through distancing set into a habit in him because of the absence of negative reinforcement. This must have already led him to a stage of 'learned helplessness'.

It is very difficult to say whether Parasuram had been using this strategy of coping through distancing as a defence against possible social audit. The Indian family norm expects the man of the house to be responsible to earn the livelihood and satisfy the material needs of the family. Parasuram failed to satisfy this major expectation. He had not been making any genuine efforts to resume this role. Yet he only seemed to be avoiding the uncomfortable social audit by evading discussing or answering any question related to this. This is evident from the responses he gave to casual social questions regarding his job. When anyone asked him where he worked, he answered them by saying 'I used to work in ...company'. Normally, the first time acquaintance did not question further. In case anyone questioned beyond this, he would tell them, 'Now I am on my own.'

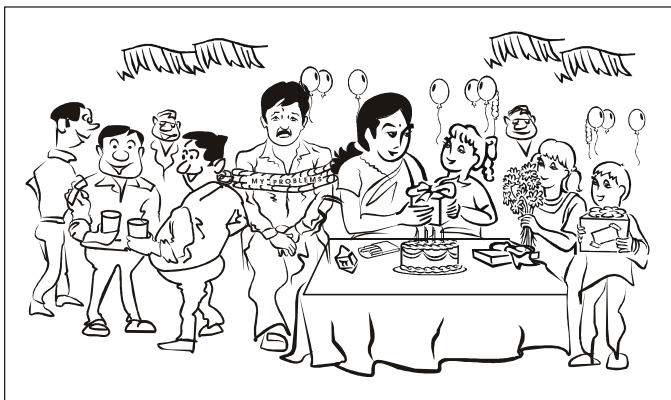
The contrast between Ramya's successful Distancing (Case Report 10), and Parasuram's ineffective and unproductive Distancing, as their coping strategies, goes back to their respective contexts. In case of Ramya, the situation involved a conflict with a colleague. Any other strategy—except

Distancing—would be counter-productive, therein adversely affecting a normal interpersonal relationship. Ramya could re-establish it only because of her coping strategy. Here, Distancing, as a coping strategy, promoted the academic interactions between them. But in case of Parasuram, coping through distancing blinded him to the problem situation. Coping through Distancing here promoted ‘inaction and inertia’ in Parasuram, resulting in contributing to the stress situation rather than ameliorating it.

Self-Control

When an individual experiences severe stress in a problem situation but keeps everything close to his/her heart, s/he is

Illustration 3.7
Self-Control



coping through 'Self-Control'. Typical expressions of self-control are—'I kept my feelings to myself', 'I kept others from knowing how bad things are' and so on. On the surface, it closely resembles suppression. But there is a thin line of demarcation. In suppression, the person tends to put a lid on the emotions, while in case of coping through self-control, the person repeatedly relives the stressful stage covertly. The consequence of this is either desensitisation or generating a concrete solution to the problem. This solution to the problem may be evolved unilaterally, with the person under stress as solely responsible for the execution and outcome of it. The underlying principle of self-control seems to be that 'It is *my* problem and only I am capable of tackling it'. The locus of control is internal but subtle.

Sometimes when the event is serious, it elicits emotional churning in a person with an internal locus of control. Though the person undergoing stress perceives internal control, the emotional rattling may not allow an efficient cognitive mediation. This demands an immediate need for emotional management. A person with an internal locus of control, takes his/her own time in managing the emotions until s/he finds the other end of the tunnel, either through desensitisation or evolution of a concrete solution.

Case Report 12: Shakeela's Self-Control

Shakeela worked as a scientist in a research organisation. She married the man she loved. As is the custom of the Indian culture, she moved into the husband's family after marriage. She lived with her husband's large family of old parents-in-law and two younger brothers-in-law. She played

a pivotal role in managing the family and attending to everybody's needs. Naturally, she won the hearts of everyone. She worked in her laboratory till late in the evening and used to catch up with household chores soon after reaching home.

Every evening when she returned from work after alighting from her bus on the main road, she had to walk about a distance of one kilometre into the bylanes to reach her residence. Shakeela encountered a peculiar situation. She observed that a young man waited at the main road and followed her to the end of the last lane she had to walk. When this came to her notice, first she was afraid that he would do her some harm. Contrary to her fears, he did nothing of that kind. Weeks passed by and Shakeela found that this man was unbelievably regular and punctual. She felt very disturbed; so much so that she started feeling stressful from the time she had to leave her laboratory. She found it too delicate to discuss with anyone. 'How can I discuss this with anyone? Only I can understand the anxiety value of the situation. Hence I am the only one who must handle it'. She suffered this situation for a month, experiencing the resultant anxiety and tension everyday.

One day, Shakeela faced this person squarely and asked, 'You have been following me for more than a month, both in morning and evening. Why are you doing so?' The stranger was caught unawares; yet the young man openly disclosed the reason by saying, 'I started to like you from the day I saw you at the bus stop. I think I am really in love with you, and want to marry you.' Shakeela asked what his name was and simply invited the young man to accompany her to her residence. After reaching home, she treated him with a hot cup of coffee, and then introduced her husband and in-laws to

him. She followed him to the door and said politely, 'I hope I won't see you from tomorrow onwards.' Shakeela's strange lover stopped following her.

In normal circumstances, an Indian woman's search for 'her man' ceases after her marriage. Her focus shifts to her family and children. This is also respected by the society. The marital status of a woman is normally a sense of security for her. It may not be an exaggeration that the Indian culture provides an elevated status to women with marital status. Expressing love and desire for a married woman is not considered favourably in the Indian society. Shakeela alone knew that this secret follower of hers was harmless and that, was perhaps unaware of her marital status. Discussion with anyone on the subject perhaps would only elicit the typical social response of disapproval and anger.

Shakeela opted to cope with the strategy of self-control, which proved effective. She perceived the situation as a 'threat' for more than a month. But the manifestation of the situation did not warrant the intervention of anyone because there was no specific 'event' that caused an intrusion into her privacy or dignity. Shakeela alone could understand the seriousness of the situation because of the persisting peculiar behaviour of the person. The situation that caused intense stress for her was so subtle in its manifest form that there was no scope for confrontation or social support with the involvement of others. The perception of threat for her was the outcome of the cumulative nature of the subtle outward situation, which is likely to be beyond the empathy of others. Alternatively, if she discussed it with her husband or other family members who doted on her, their reaction could be unpredictable, worsening the situation. Further, Shakeela, who efficiently managed her home and job, is a

person with a high internal locus of control, and felt comfortable handling her own problems. Hence she chose Self-Control. Her continued feelings of anxiety, tension and disgust went through the process of desensitisation. Only after she could achieve control over it that her coping through self-control took a behavioural form of initiating a dialogue with the stranger that culminated in the further course of action of inviting him home and introducing him to her family. This amounted to informing him that she was married, had a family to look after and that she detested his behaviour. The polite and firm dealings of Shakeela, without harming the self-esteem of the stranger, helped her circumvent her stress situation.

Case Report 13: Pavani's Expensive Protest

Pavani belongs to a large family of six sisters and one brother. She was academically brilliant and topped the university in her post-graduation. She, being the youngest was loved by everyone. Pavani too respected and cared for everybody. She always desired that she must marry such a person, who would equally love and respect her elder siblings. Pavani married an engineer, who worked in a multi-national company. He was the only son of his parents, who were highly possessive of him. The couple had a son within the first two years of marriage. Pavani's mother-in-law proved to be a tough lady, who did not give much importance to the daughter-in-law. Pavani's husband though was very respectful and loving towards his wife, had a soft corner for the mother and gave a lot of importance to her words. Besides this, he also had the habit of drinking heavily in the evenings. Pavani, with all

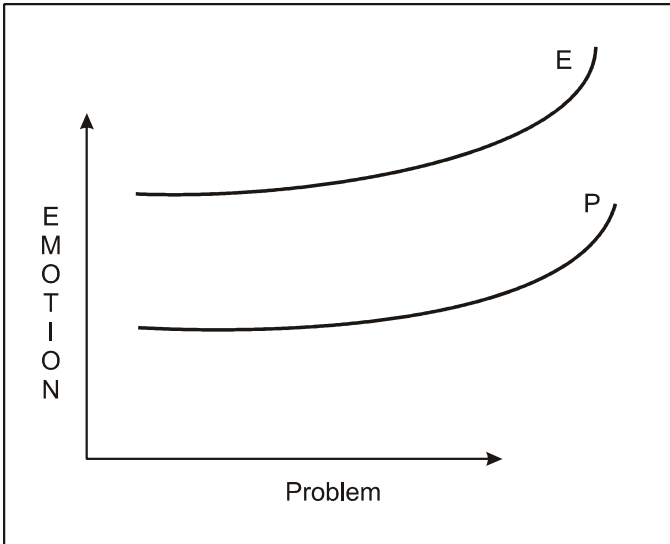
her academic laurels was not allowed by her mother-in-law to take up a job. With a husband who proved to be the 'mama's boy' and an unfriendly mother-in-law, she started feeling uncared for. Her mother-in-law's comments on her high academic calibre severely hurt her self-esteem. After delivering her son, Pavani suffered from severe depression. As reported to her close friend, whom she met 10 years after her marriage, Pavani started to experience some suffocation in the house after her husband left for office everyday. So, she spent hours sitting on the bench of a railway platform of a local station close to her house. Her suffering was so intense that she consulted a psychiatrist, who put her on antidepressants. However, she never disclosed her problems of harassment by the mother-in-law to any of her sisters or parents. She felt that each one of them had their hands full with their own family problems. Moreover, she felt that given their intense affection for her, she would only be disturbing their peace by disclosing her problem. When she saw her friend of college days after so many years, no doubt, Pavani was extremely happy. She revealed to her about her depression and treatment. Her friend, who stayed in the other part of the country, left her contact address and phone numbers with her and insisted that they stay in touch. She asked Pavani to continue her PhD and promised to extend all help if she chose a university in the city where she stayed. She invited Pavani with her family to come to her for a holiday. Pavani promised that she would keep in touch with her; but this was not done. Three years after this meeting, Pavani committed suicide. The reason was that Pavani learnt from her husband's friend that he had an affair with another woman. She waited for her husband to confide in her, which never happened. She was very unhappy and suffered silently. Once she tried

to casually discuss with her sisters about her husband's alleged affair with another woman. But the sister just brushed it aside saying that she must not give room to any suspicion on such hearsay. After this, she never tried to share her problems with anyone. Even with her friends, she only discussed about her depression but not about the marital problem. She held her stress close to herself. When it was beyond her to handle her emotions, she took the extreme step.

Pavani kept her problems close to her heart, but was not capable of handling them. Being highly sentimental, and having a low internal locus of control, the best alternative for Pavani would have been to cope through seeking social support, vent her extreme emotions, and solve her problem either with planful problem solving or with confrontive coping. Though there were a couple of attempts to cope through social support, her state of depression perhaps prevented her from being open and transparent. Further, the social stigma attached to the situation—where the husband takes another woman—would have prevented her from revealing it in detail to others. She needed a very strong emotional support at the stage of depression and feelings of loneliness in her married life. She was unable to seek it appropriately because she chose to cope through Self-Control for so long a duration that it caused depression. As a result, the curve of emotion took a progressive upward turn along the problem curve. Had she managed her emotions properly she could have arrived at a rational thinking to handle the problem.

Pavani's unmanageable stress is explained in Figure 3.5. It is found that both the problem and the emotion curves are sloping upwards.

Pavani's problem was mainly related to managing emotions to which she did not attend. Her emotional curve took

Figure 3.5**Raising Problem and Emotion Curves**

a deviant shape of rising up parallelly with the problem. This happened mainly because there was no attempt from Pavani to handle her emotions appropriately. The professional support of the psychiatrist perhaps was not sufficient in helping her ventilate her emotions. With the curve of emotions taking a progressive upward direction, she reached a stage of exhaustion and killed herself. At no point, the two parallel curves of emotion and problem could meet. This extreme situation rose because of her rigid style of coping where she simply stuck to the strategy of Self-Control.

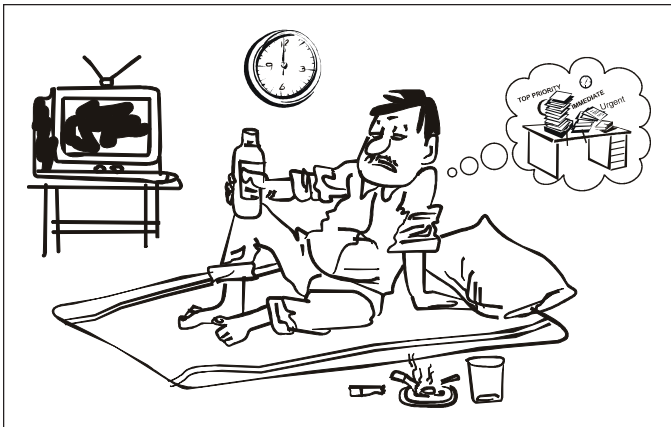
Self-Control produces desirable effects only when the person under stress has a high internal locus of control and

the situational complexity is such that only the person concerned appreciates the reality of it.

Escape–Avoidance

Coping through Escape–Avoidance refers to a situation when the individual runs away from a situation by turning to fantasy or other similar means. The common explanations are—‘I tried to make myself feel better by eating, drinking, smoking, taking drugs’. In a nutshell, here the focus is shifted away from the original problem and is fixed elsewhere. The individual feels that activities like smoking, drinking and fantasising would insulate him from the emotional pressure created by the problem. Thus the stressed person’s attention

Illustration 3.8
Escape–Avoidance



is consciously diverted from the crux of the problem to the periphery. This in turn does not resolve the problem, but the person finds a temporary escape from the pressures of managing the emotions.

Case Report 14: Wilson's Waywardness

Wilson is the only son of Paul and Jessica. Both of them are professors in a university and well-known for their academic contributions in the field of Physics. They brought up their only son creating an enriched intellectual environment around him. The type of toys, books and games that Wilson was provided were no match to what other children of his age had. Wilson loved his possessions and shared them with his friends. He grew into a highly independent sociable boy. He developed a vast social network and enjoyed socialising, as Paul and Jessica were busy with their research.

When Wilson reached his school final, Paul and Jessica started to worry about his low scores in all the subjects. Engaging tuitions or offering any other help to him proved futile. They also found that Wilson was not bothered about his low grades. He was keenly interested in Western music and was always found engaged in the music troupe. He played the guitar well and enjoyed giving performances with the group. He would sleep long hours when his other peers were busy preparing for exams and would go for practicing music in the evening when he was expected to prepare for the next morning's exam. With much difficulty, Wilson could barely pass with a first division and secured low grades. He opted for the science stream at the intermediate level. His parents cautioned him about the hard work that he must put

in but his interest was found to be more in music than in studies. His interest in music and socialising was not deterred even when the exams approached, not even during the days of his exams. Paul and Jessica found themselves in a highly stressful situation, as Wilson would not mend with any help extended.

Wilson's deviation of attention from academics to music could be explained as his Escape–Avoidance strategy of coping. He could not bear the weight of the academic pressure on him. Though intelligent, he was not ready to put in the hard work. The status that his parents enjoyed in the academic circles raised the social expectations of his performance. This was stress-inducing for him. He had no excuses for low performance. Hence he was clueless in reasoning logically to explain his low performance. Wilson apparently had an over-stimulation of intellectual environment right from his childhood. This possibly was responsible for him in reaching a saturation point. As a consequence, the academic stimulation with the dry curriculum failed to excite him. Perhaps it was frustrating to meet the high academic demands. Hence being unable to handle the academic demands and the impending emotions of subsequent under-performance, he found an escape route in music. He derived pleasure out of it and the appreciation from others helped compensate for his low self-esteem caused due to academic under-achievement.

However, Wilson's coping through Escape-Avoidance is ineffective. The high emphasis on academic performance in the middle-class Indian society ignores or undermines the achievements in other fields like music at the early stages. Perhaps it would give due recognition to it only after one proves his/her worth in the concerned field. The more he

avoided hard work in academics the farther he was from his career goals, unless his career goal was never academic pursuit but to become a pop singer.

Shifting the Burden to God/Religion

Coping through turning to God or religion is a typical strategy when the stressful event is irreparable in nature, or the loss one faces is irretrievable. Shifting the burden to God or

Illustration 3.9
Shifting the burden to God



religion pays off in managing acute emotions. This strategy is also adopted in other situations where the person's locus of control is external. Common expressions of this strategy of coping are, 'I prayed to God', 'I vowed to fast', 'I changed my religion', 'I joined the "Guru"', 'I read *Bhagavad Geeta*' (The Holy Book of Hindus), 'I visit the temple every day', or 'I vowed to do 108 "*pradakshina*"' (It is the ritual of going round the temple or the deity for a fixed number of times while chanting the prayers). Shifting the burden to God refers to involving oneself in rituals, joining the activities of a particular *ashram*, or involving oneself in spiritual activities such as meditation, *pooja* (the Hindu way of idol worship), or reading religious scriptures. Thus the common denominator is engaging oneself in any religious or spiritual activity. When the stress situation is severe, evoking intense emotions, and when the stakes are already lost, engaging in alternative activities based on faith, trust and involvement has a good therapeutic value. Hence the function of managing emotions can be successfully accomplished. In situations where the stakes are already lost, the problem curve does not hold significance, and sometimes, even merges with the emotion curve showing an upward slope. So, the main target of coping is left to managing one's emotional turmoil.

Case Report 15: Nirupama's Return to Normalcy

Nirupama is Sekhar's wife. She is in her mid-50s. They have two grown up children. The daughter is married and the son joined Sekhar in his business. Nirupama's has been a love marriage and Sekhar belonged to a different community. He was a highly demanding husband, who needed constant

attention and care from Nirupama. Thus Nirupama's life revolved around her husband and son.

One morning, Sekhar complained of discomfort in his chest, and not leaving time for any medical intervention, he lost his life. This was a terrible shock for Nirupama. Her entire life was woven around Sekhar. With his death, she had nothing to look forward to. No amount of emotional support from friends and relatives could console her. She continued to weep inconsolably for weeks and months and remained depressed.

One of her friends could successfully convince her to join a short course involving practices propagated by a guru. Nirupama joined the course along with her friend. Slowly, she got inducted into the faith and turned a devotee of this guru. She visited the *ashram* travelling to another city, attended the discourses of the guru and offered her services as a volunteer.

Now she is no more depressed and has developed friendship with a large number of people who are disciples of the guru. Now Nirupama even helps her son with the business. She has turned out to be more active and more supportive to her son, relatives and her friends, and is cheerful, active and uninhibited.

Nirupama's world revolved around her husband ever since her marriage. With the sudden demise of her husband, she suddenly found her world collapsing under her feet. The grief and the absence of meaningful activities pushed her into depression. She could not handle her loneliness, bereavement and idleness in combination. She had no concrete problem to resolve except managing her emotions. Turning to a guru handled all these negative aspects of her environment in one stroke. The association of others in

practicing Yoga, meditation, and *bhajan* (Chanting of hymns and songs in praise of God) rescued her from loneliness. The discourses of the guru and reading the literature inducted her into a philosophy that helped her accept the death of her husband. With music and rhythm, her participation in *bhajans* proved a good therapy in itself. The practice of Yoga had its scientifically proven positive effects on her mind and body. Her involvement in activities of the faith provided her the necessary physical and mental activities. In case of Nirupama, there was no concrete problem consequent to Sekhar's death—such as a financial crisis or caring for young children, a legal procedure, and so on. Hence, her shifting the burden on God related only to the 'burden of managing her emotions'. Hence, her coping proved effective by turning her into an optimally functioning individual and restoring her psychological well-being.

Case Report 16: Kaveri's Conversion

Kaveri is an illiterate woman in her late 50s. She had three sons and two daughters. Except for the youngest son and the youngest daughter, all the others are married. The rash behaviour of her eldest son resulted in her separation from him. She stayed with her husband, unmarried daughter and son, along with her second son and his family. The second son lived with his wife and two young children—one, aged six years, and the other, a 10-month-old toddler. Everybody in the family worked and brought their earnings. Kaveri was the dominant parent and she was the main decision-maker in the family. She effectively played this role of the 'family head'.

Kaveri's second son got electrocuted in a freak accident while at work. The family was inconsolable. Since Kaveri's social network was very strong, she received very good support from all around. People helped her in claiming the compensation. She played a significant role in fighting for compensation and investing the received amount for the future of the two young grandchildren.

She also played a major role in providing support to her young daughter-in-law and the rest of the family. It was found that two months after the death of her son, when everyone started returning to normalcy, Kaveri took a major decision of changing her religion. She became an ardent follower of a new religion. She attended prayer meetings and held special prayer gatherings at home too. Her new indulgence in religion appeared strange to everybody.

A careful analysis of Kaveri's post-bereavement response finds an answer to all these. The accidental death of her son brought with it an enormous problem of the loss of a major source of income to the family. While the loss of a continuous inflow of income was the immediate problem, the long-term question was the future of her son's family. These problems demanded immediate attention. Kaveri being the head of the family had to solve these problems. She had to compensate the loss of income of her deceased son, and also ensure future security of her daughter-in-law and grandchildren. This called for mobilising optimum social support. She could not lose any time in doing so. This demand for immediate attention, perhaps, required her to suppress her emotions and spring into action. Thus, the unattended emotional line remained tender and invisible at the peak. If left unattended, they may result in undesirable forms such as psychological or psychosomatic disorder. After a specific time

frame, when everyone else was returning to normalcy, Kaveri's normal course of emotional release through crying, weeping and sharing the grief with others was not possible and spontaneously elicited because of the loss of time. Nevertheless, Kaveri had to manage her suppressed emotions in some way so as to continue her efficient functioning. Thus, when there was an influencing agent who tried to indulge in conversion luring her that the God of their religion only would save her from her miseries, she felt convinced and embraced the new religion. This conversion and newfound faith helped her in rekindling 'hope' in life. Thus coping through shifting the burden of 'protecting the family' to her newly identified God proved effective for Kaveri.

We have discussed and analysed the coping strategies of 16 different individuals in a variety of stressful events. The cases analysed cut across gender, age, region, religion as well as personalities. The analyses and discussions mostly revolved around one isolated stressful situation. However, in real life situations, an event may present itself in a constellation of stressful situations, thus creating ambiguity for the person under stress. Hence guided by the initial appraisal, the individual may adopt a particular coping strategy. Then onwards, the subsequent marginal changes in the stress situation are normally reappraised before initiating any subsequent coping strategy. Thus when the stressful situation is complex, the long process of coping may demand strong perseverance involving a chain of appraisal, reappraisal and shift in the strategy of coping. This chain may sometimes result in a successive reduction of stress through effective coping, when the stressed individual shows some perseverance. More often than not, in such cases, the stakes involved are very high and the person's goal perception and

goal setting is very clear. The following case and analysis helps in gaining an insight into this aspect.

Case Report 17: Farida's Fight with Cancer

Farida was born as a precious child to her parents after 21 years of their marriage. After her birth, her mother conceived again and delivered a son. When Farida was 20 years old, she was diagnosed with cancer in her uterus. She had to be operated upon and the doctors removed a tumour that weighed around four kilograms. The doctors were not hopeful of good prognosis.

On hearing about her cancer, Farida was totally disturbed and went through the stages of alarm, disbelief, resistance and acceptance. As described by Farida herself, somewhere she believed that she would survive; though the medical opinion did not subscribe to it. This positive thought in her that she could successfully fight the cancer resulted in a battery of behaviour that supported the belief.

The news about her illness spread among her relatives. A stream of visitors used to line up to their place, extending their social support. Almost all of them shared their sorrows and concerns that the precious child of the family was pronounced as suffering with cancer. Many expressed their sympathy. Few of them advised her to go spiritual and pray to God. However, very few encouraged her and reinforced her with a courage that she could overcome.

Farida decided to screen her visitors. She requested her parents to quarantine her from those she identified as discouragers. She showed interest and looked forward to meeting and spending time with those who subscribed to her

positive thinking and optimism. She felt that this was very essential to maintain a positive stand.

Farida had to take several sittings of radiation and chemotherapy as part of her treatment. She appeared for her university exams in between her treatment sessions. She felt that she could write well. Convinced about her will power, she requested her doctors to allow her to have breaks between her chemotherapy sessions so that she could go to the adjacent market to buy fruits for herself. The doctors were shocked and refused any such permission. But Farida persisted and won them with her unrelenting requests and reasoning. With the butterfly needle on her wrist, she would go and complete her shopping. The doctors were amazed at her stamina and self-confidence. Farida completed her radiation and chemotherapy carrying out an active lifestyle. The prognosis was found to be very good. She completed her post-graduation in law and stood first in the university. She also did a diploma course in human rights from a reputed university through distance mode.

The doctors were surprised to see that Farida had no trace of cancer for the successive nine years. They called her 'the miracle patient', and discussed her case in their academic conferences. She impressed them so much, both with the prognosis and her general behaviour, that they started requesting her to counsel their patients so as to provide them with mental stamina. Thus Farida slowly engaged herself in patient and family counselling in the field of oncology. The doctors used her as a role model for their patients.

Farida had to face another major trauma when her mother was diagnosed as having cancer in her lungs. She looked after her mother and maintained her mother's physical strength with a meticulously planned nutritious diet and provided the

mental strength with her philosophy and positive approach. When Farida was writing her exams for the diploma course, her mother passed away. That did not deter her from completing her exams. She planned to pursue her PhD in a university in the UK and followed her goal with determination. Farida confided in a psychologist that she found counselling the cancer patients very rewarding, but she progressively found it difficult when she encountered terminal patients. She told the psychologist that it triggered apprehensions in her about her own future (though it was more than 13 years since she was treated and the doctors found no trace of cancer cells ever since). Hence she said that she would follow up her clients and continue counselling only up to a stage and she tended to avoid visits once they reached the terminal stage of their illness. It has been more than 13 years since Farida was operated for cancer. The doctors never expected her to survive beyond a year. Farida—in her optimal productive stage—disproved the medical science.

Farida is found to have coped with a flexible style. She adopted different strategies of coping at different stages. The diagnosis of cancer did take her through the stages of alarm and resistance. But once she accepted the reality, she started her process of coping. Though she appraised the situation as very serious, her positive outlook turned her appraisal into a 'challenge'. Her hardy personality involved a commitment to herself. She was determined to fight effectively and win positively. Her high internal locus of control is responsible for her confrontive coping from the outset. She could win the doctors with her logical reasoning and transformed herself from the expected 'sick role behaviour' to that of a normal behaviour. This was essential to reinforce her positive approach and restore psychological well-being. Simultaneously,

she also adopted the coping strategy by seeking social support. Her wisdom enabled her to sieve the entire social support network and identify the sources of positive support. She optimised on drawing from these sources in order to reinforce and strengthen her positive approach. Once this was done, she went a step forward in coping with planful problem solving strategy. She went ahead with a systematic plan of pursuing a career, wrote exams and achieved high standards. This was very essential to sustain her self-confidence and psychological well-being. Farida also adopted the Escape–Avoidance strategy when she discontinued counselling once her clients reached the terminal stage of illness.

Thus, Farida went through the process of coping after she set her goal of fighting her illness and achieving the state of well-being. Her concept of ‘well-being’ aptly included the mental and physical dimensions. Hence, all her strategies revolved around these, so as to make her coping a successful process that effectively and efficiently managed her emotions and handled the problem, too, with equal vigour and effectiveness.

Similar to Farida is Vijaya’s coping with life in raising a son, on whom the medical experts in the field had given up. Vijaya encountered multiple problems associated with it. Her stressors can be traced back to her family and society, besides the major problem of bringing up the child. The common denominator for Farida and Vijaya is their perseverance.

Case Report 18: Vijaya’s Victory

Vijaya is the only daughter of her parents who, besides her, had two sons. She completed her PhD and joined as a lecturer in a college. Her parents arranged her marriage with

a doctor, who was the only son of his parents. Vijaya had to stay with her in-laws after marriage. She perceived a huge cultural gap between her parents' and her husband's family. She had to face problems in adjustments; particularly where differences in values were involved. Right from the beginning, she had to adjust to certain peculiar sexual demands from her husband, for whom everything else in life took a backseat.

Vijaya conceived after her marriage. But her first conception ended in a miscarriage. She conceived for the second time and there were problems during the pregnancy. She delivered a baby boy after a complicated labour. The child was a 'blue baby' because of asphyxia and other complications. He was put in the incubator for several days. Vijaya's condition was also bad. She could not see her baby for the first few days. The doctors told her that it would be difficult for the baby to survive, and even if he did, he would not be normal. Her husband started persuading her to give up on the baby and allow him to die. This request from her husband was in clear conflict with her values. Vijaya put her foot down and said that she wanted to have the child and wanted to save the child at any cost. This infused arguments and misunderstanding between her and her husband with her in-laws supporting him. She finally brought the child home, against the wishes of the rest of the family. She consulted doctors and experts from several fields—pediatricians, neurologists, psychiatrists and psychologists. They all gave their independent opinions that the child would have delayed milestones, and would not talk, walk or carry on the normal functions.

Vijaya was determined to give her child a normal life to the extent possible. She concentrated all her time, energy,

emotions and intelligence on the child. She planned his nutrition, talked to him, played with him, carried him around and did everything that a normal mother would do, with manifold vigour and exaggeration. Her indulgence with the child deprived others of some of her usual 'services'. This gave rise to several conflicts between her and the others. No one else from the family participated in the child-rearing. Moreover, her husband positioned himself as a strong competitor to his son in getting Vijaya's attention. Vijaya started to extend a similar nutrition plan for her husband to satisfy his ego. There were instances when she would adapt; she argued with him on certain grounds, ignored certain other situations, but continued to pursue her goal of providing the best to her son. Her son's milestones were delayed. He also had problems with his vision. She consulted an ophthalmologist and got the vision corrected with a series of operations. The child was diagnosed as a retarded child. But she decided not to label him as one or admit him in any special school. She put him in a normal school after he started walking steadily. Compared to others, he was over-aged for the class and also below average in performance. She coached him at home relentlessly, encouraged him to speak and express himself and trained him in all self-help skills.

The family, perhaps, found the child as a social embarrassment, and therefore, could never give him the affection of a father or grandparents. The child naturally maintained a distance from them. As the child grew, his needs started to increase, demanding more time from Vijaya. This resulted in constant fights between the couple, and the situation worsened with the unsolicited interference from her in-laws. When things started taking the shape of violence on her from her husband, Vijaya walked out to her parents along with the

child, who by then, had reached sixth standard in a normal school. She received support from her parents and the family of her married brother. A series of attempts from her husband to convince her for compromise failed to instil any faith that she could give her son a good life if she returned to her husband. Finally, the marriage ended in divorce. Vijaya went through the trauma of divorce, slipped into depression, and took counselling from a psychologist during the period of preparation for divorce. She also consulted the psychologist to handle certain behavioural aspects of her son. The process took about a year, during which she stayed with her parents. Her parents and brother encouraged the child who had to appear in board exams in class seven. He could just manage to scrape through. Yet that was a great achievement. Vijaya inculcated in her son the value of hard work; the idea that hard work is the only way that can help him achieve anything in life. It was only after passing the board exams that Vijaya's estranged husband and in-laws started owning him up. As part of the divorce settlement, Vijaya asked for a flat to be in her son's name as a security for his future, and she was able to achieve that for her son.

Once the divorce was sanctioned, Vijaya moved out from her parents to live independently with her son. She never announced her divorce to her colleagues. Only a very close circle was aware of it. With others, she behaved very normally as if there was no change in her life—mainly to avoid the trauma of the inevitable informal social audit that would add to her trauma. Now she could devote more time to her son. She took help from some of her associates to coach him in specific subjects. She put him under a homeopathy doctor who was willing to treat some of his abnormalities in behaviour. Vijaya teamed up with her son in climbing up

the normal academic ladder. She was careful in choosing his school and college where he would have at least one known peer to smoothen the path. She helped him become independent and travel by public transport. She taught him to be warm and affectionate towards people. This helped him in winning over the hearts of his teachers and friends. She tactfully made him understand his limitations while encouraging him to put in his optimum effort to attain the best possible heights. Her constant encouragement to her son to express himself made him proficient in three languages. His relentless hard work and social skills in drawing academic and emotional support from appropriate sources could fetch him a post-graduate degree. As a 25-year-old adult, he can be considered a very good human being with an amicable disposition and a good set of values.

Vijaya adopted a flexible coping style. Her choice of coping was to dissipate her avoidable stress so as to concentrate on the main stress of having a retarded child. Further in her process of coping she was careful not to deviate from the expected social norms that were beyond the essential level. Vijaya understood the cultural importance attached to retaining the marriage intact. That is the reason she adapted to her unhappy marital life for nearly two decades. The Indian society attaches a lot of significance to proper nurturing of children. So when it came to giving the best environment for her son, Vijaya chose to estrange her marriage. This decision would not come under severe social scrutiny since the cause of such a decision was the welfare of the child. Thus Vijaya took care of her goal and the social expectation at the same time.

Initially, she chose the method of adaptation and adjusted to the environment of her husband's family. This was very

predominant prior to having her son. Her active coping strategies seem to have started after her son was born. She adopted confrontive coping in handling her husband's view on the condition of their son. She stood her ground and brought up her son with dedication and determination. The process of bringing up her son involved the planful problem solving strategy of coping. Her consultation with the experts, fixing up a goal to give him the best to make him optimally normal followed by her decisions on his schooling, coaching, nutrition plan and the homeopathy treatment form parts of the reality of his limited intelligence and the importance of hard work as a compensation. He climbed the academic ladder with unmatched hard work, sometimes taking more number of chances to clear an exam.

Vijaya can be proud of being the mother of a post-graduate son, who turned out to be a very good human being with good values. His language abilities and sense of humour are found to be more than average. No doubt, he still carries some traces of childlike innocence and abnormality in his gestures and behaviour. But his positive outlook to the world and the general amicable disposition more than compensate the traces of abnormality. His achievement in life can be called Vijaya's victory. Though Vijaya endorses her son's achievement, she is still not totally satisfied with it.

The important aspect of Vijaya's coping is her strong motivation reflected in her perseverance for several years. She apparently could succeed in segregating her son's problem with its offshoots and dealt with each of them independently. The main goal that she set for herself was to give her best to her son and bring him up in the best possible way. Vijaya's decision to separate from her husband again indicates confrontive coping. She adopted the strategy of

Distancing in handling the social reactions to her divorce. This enabled her to avoid the emotional dimension related to the stress. The social stigma or sympathy from social circles would have distracted her attention from the main goal to that of managing her emotions. So, her normal social interactions facilitated by Distancing helped her pursuit of the main goal. Vijaya also showed her effectiveness in tapping appropriate resources from her social network. She coped by seeking social support in coaching her son; she sought social support to have an emotional cushion for herself by sharing and seeking counselling from a psychologist. Thus Vijaya's goal-setting was very clear and definite. Rest of her coping strategies revolved around this goal. She adopted different types of coping, demanded by the context and directed by the goal. It is the clarity of her goal that occupied a pivotal position in determining the coping style that proved to be flexible. Vijaya seems to have coped productively because her stakes were high and the problems had more than one origin, namely, the incompatible husband, the in-laws and the abnormal child. Considering the efforts she put in to bring up her child to be close to his normal counterparts, her achievement is certainly praiseworthy. Her achievement may be attributed to her hardy personality. Her internal locus of control, commitment to the goal and the perceptions of the challenge in the situation resulted in a coping style that proved to be effective.

The case reports and analyses discussed so far provide a global insight into the causes of effective and ineffective coping. One may look at three broad aspects, namely, the situation or the stressor, the appraisal of the situation, and the stress response or the coping strategy adopted. Out of these three, the situation or the stressor is something that is

presented to the individual. The goal of the individual under stress is to cope in such a way so as to bring about a desirable change in the situation by minimising the stress. It logically follows that a positive change in the situation can be brought in, either with a change in the appraisal of the situation or with a changed strategy of coping or both.

The coping process involves cognitive meditation and behavioural applications too. Cognitive and behavioural dimensions of an individual are dynamic processes and are amenable to change with appropriate intervention. There are three ways in which coping with stress can improve.

1. The individual's experiences of effective and ineffective coping themselves organise into a reinforcement process to strengthen effective coping strategies and eliminate unproductive techniques.
2. Through keen observation of effective coping styles of others, one can emulate and practice those styles found to bring about desirable outcome. While practicing such styles, one can refine and modify the intricate aspects of coping behaviour to suit the specific situation and personalities involved in the stressful condition. By continuously doing so, one evolves a coping style that is unique to him/her.
3. An individual who finds his/her coping style ineffective or inadequate and desires to bring in a positive change but is unable to change on one's own, can choose to be formally trained in effective coping styles.

What precedes the coping intervention is to diagnose and be aware whether one's existing coping style is effective and productive. Please respond to the exercise below for a self-assessment of the effectiveness of your coping:

Exercise 3.1

Check your Coping style

The instrument consists of 10 simple situations that an average human being faces in the course of life. You might have experienced an identical stressful event. In such a case, your response must be based on your recall of the event. If you have not faced such a situation in real life, respond by choosing the most likely way you would react, given your own resources and temperament.

For every question, you will have to choose a response from among the descriptive alternatives from 'a' to 'i' given below. Mention the alphabet a, b, c... or i correspondingly to the alternative against each situation described.

Response Alternatives

- a) Talk/discuss with the person concerned about the situation and try to convince or change him/her. Will stand my ground and try to change others involved.
- b) Take the help of someone (family members, relations, colleagues, neighbours or any others).
- c) Chalk out a definite plan to solve the problem. Will have an alternative plan just in case the first one fails.
- d) Blame myself for the situation. Feel that I brought it on myself.

(Exercise 3.1 contd)

- e) Shall not take it seriously and shall wait for it to be solved on its own.
- f) Shall suffer silently. Because I feel it is my problem and hence only I can handle it.
- g) Will look at it as a plan of God or Destiny, and will consider it as if it is for my own good.
- h) Feel stressed and would take recourse to or indulge in more than normal smoking, drinking, eating or sleeping.
- i) Would leave everything to God and pray.
- j) Respond in ways other than what is mentioned above.

Please read the following statements. Imagine yourself in each of these situations. Find out the way you respond. Fit your response into one of the alternatives mentioned above. Record your responses against each situation.

Now read on the stress situation you have or are likely to face. Read them carefully and choose your response(s) from the suggested alternatives.

Stress situations

1. There is a financial crisis.
2. Pressure in the workplace and home front compete in their demand for your attention.
3. A family member discourages/prevents you from doing something you very much like to do in order to achieve your goal.

(Exercise 3.1 contd)

4. You are entrusted with a heavy responsibility that is beyond your intellectual capability.
5. Your sexual needs remain unsatisfied.
6. You feel physically exhausted but still have too much work to complete within a time line.
7. The close friends/colleagues you had counted upon in accomplishing the teamwork leave you high and dry as the team leader.
8. You enter into a conflict with a person who is emotionally close to you.
9. You are not receiving the importance you deserve.
10. An official in a public office denies you a basic privilege.

Scoring

If your responses have a spread of four or more categories from 'a' to 'g', you have a flexible coping style.

If your response categories from 'a' to 'g' are less than four, you have a rigid coping style.

If you have four or more responses distributed among the categories from 'a' to 'd', you have a Proactive Coping Style.

If you have four or more responses falling under the categories of alternatives from 'e' to 'i', you have Avoidant Coping Style.

Interpretation

A flexible coping style is more effective than a rigid coping style.

(Exercise 3.1 contd)

A proactive coping style is more productive than an avoidant coping style.

Check under which of the combination of styles you fall:

1. Flexible Proactive Style – Very effective and productive.
2. Rigid Proactive Style – Moderately effective and productive.
3. Flexible Avoidant Style – Unproductive.
4. Rigid Avoidant Style – Unproductive.

If you find your coping style falling under the first category, you can just go ahead strengthening your style. On the other hand, if you fall anywhere between the second and fourth category, you need intervention to improve your stress responses.

Stress Management and Effective Coping

4

Stress and coping are packed into our day-to-day life. Encountering stress and coping with it becomes so common and frequent that sometimes it passes as a part of our daily routine. In the busy urban life, the fact that the stress levels overshoot the optimum stress level (OSL) goes unnoticed by the individual experiencing it. The consequences of a prolonged experience of stress may have their own impact on the physical, psychological and behavioural dimensions of the individual. The outcome of these may also have their influence on the professional and social life of the individual. The reason for advocating effective stress management is to prevent and overcome the adverse impacts of stress and restore well-being.

The studies in the combined area of psychoneuroimmunology, by psychologists, biologists and neurologists attempted to address the research question of the

relationship between stress and the immune system. The study of physiological responses to stress proved that the secretion of corticosteroids accentuates physical and mental energy. While this is one dimension of the functioning of corticosteroids, the other dimension is its capacity to suppress the immune system. Such suppression may have only negligible effect if the secretion is limited in frequency and duration. However, persistent secretion of steroids is found to interfere with the formation of antibodies. Antibodies are essential in identifying and destroying the foreign agents such as bacteria, virus and fungi in the human body. Interference in the formation of antibodies results in the weakening of their function of attacking the unwanted disease-inducing agents in the body. This makes the individual vulnerable to various illnesses including common cold (Cohen et al. 1993). In a study conducted in the United Kingdom (Cohen et al. 1991) and reported in the American Family Physician (December 1991) with 420 healthy volunteers in the age group of 18–54 years, the relationship between stress and common cold was tested. The stress level of volunteers was measured through a questionnaire. Then they were administered nasal drops of respiratory viruses. A close relation between clinical cold and degree of stress was observed. Leserman et al. (2000) inferred that with the weakening of the immune system, stress is also connected with a more rapid progression of HIV infection to AIDS. Rita Agrawal (2001) reported a study of Missouri University that distinguished the speed of restoration of cortisol level in instances of accentuated secretion during sports activity and stress experience. The study reported that the cortisol level after a game of football returned to normal after a few hours while the secretion persisted several days after a child was punished.

When one remains in the arousal zone for a long duration, the bio-psychological system sends several signals. It is desirable that one takes a conscious note of these signals and initiates action to manage stress more efficiently, so that homeostasis is restored and the individual's optimal efficiency level of functioning is reinstated. These warning signals can reflect at the physical or psychological level, or it may even show in the form of changes in human relationship.

The symptoms of high stress are summarised under four broad heads as mentioned in Table 4.1. The list—though not exhaustive—includes the common major symptoms of an average person under stress.

These symptoms are broadly discussed under physical and mental level.

Physical Level

Fatigue

When you feel inexplicable fatigue and the physician rules out any pathological reasons for that, it can be attributed to stress. Some of the symptoms of fatigue are feeling a lack of energy, feeling sleepy and general tiredness.

Losing Body Shape

If you hear frequent comments that you have lost weight suddenly, it should ring an alarm. Exercise, diet and good

Table 4.1
Symptoms of Stress on Four Dimensions of an Individual's Functioning

Physical Symptoms

(Impact of stress on body)

- Headaches
- Digestive disorders
- Muscle tension and pain
- Fatigue and lack of energy
- Chest pain and irregular heartbeats
- High blood pressure
- Weight gain or loss
- Hair loss
- Asthma
- Skin problems
- Periodontal disease
- Reproductive problems
- Immune system suppression
- Sweatiness
- Dizziness/light-headedness
- Weakness
- Chills
- Fever
- Fainting or feeling of fainting

Intellectual Symptoms

(Impact of stress on mind)

- Problems with memory
- Difficulty in decision making
- Inability to concentrate
- Shortened attention span
- Confusion
- Repetitive thoughts
- Misunderstanding of others' communication
- Poor judgment
- Inability to slow down thought process
- Loss of objectivity
- Lack/loss of interest in things



Emotional Symptoms

(Impact of stress on feelings)

- Sudden mood-shifts
- Frustration
- Anger and resentment
- Lowered interest in fun and hobby
- Unwarranted jealousy

Behavioural Symptoms

(Impact of stress on behaviour)

- Eating more or less
- Sleeping more or less
- Isolating oneself from others
- Staying away from workplace
- Stay at workplace for extended hours

sleep tend to be the first three casualties under stress. These activities are either excessively done or neglected. The common explanation to neglecting them is lack of time. The neglect of these three vital areas results in one's losing the normal body shape.

Frequent/Prolonged Illness

When our mental and physical defences are down, we get sick more easily, more often, and more seriously. This is because the immune system is weak, increasing the vulnerability to illness. For example, an otherwise healthy nine-year-old child who is admitted in a residential school because of his parents' inevitable assignment abroad, fell sick many times during the academic year. The health problems varied from skin infection to viral fever and tooth infection. He did not manifest any health problems a few days after the reunion with his parents who returned to the country. Though the parents attributed it to the change in the food and environment of the residential school, stress as a factor cannot be ruled out.

Developing or Worsening Bad Habits

Some people tend to have an irresistible urge to combat stress by smoking or drinking. They enjoy the temporary relief brought by the chemicals of nicotine or alcohol. Onset of such habits or increase in the intake of alcohol or nicotine may be perceived as a signal of being under stress.

Mental Level

Certain beliefs, obsessions or thought processes may have the potential of inducing stress. It may not be an exaggeration if we call them self-inflicting. It is essential that one examines them in the light of reality and reconstructs them to restore psychological well-being.

Exaggerated Self-importance

Sometimes giving oneself undue importance provides the satisfaction of pampering one's ego-ideal. However, thinking that the fate of an entire organisation, project or the family lies solely in your lap also causes tremendous pressure. This type of thinking is usually unrealistic and erroneous as well. A thorough re-examination and timely corrections in such beliefs may pay good dividends in the form of psychological well-being.

Negative Thinking

When the duration or intensity of stress is high, it may take the shape of depression. Once this happens, the individual tends to focus attention more on the negative side of the events. Expecting the worst, complaining constantly and only seeing the downside of every situation are a few examples. This point of view negates the good things that happen in life. Negative thinking at the very least can rob your life of pleasure, and at the very most, can lead to serious depression.

Displaced Emotional Reactions

This is closely related to negative thinking. When we overreact **emotionally to minor situations**, there is usually another cause for that emotion that we have not acknowledged. That emotion could be anger, defeat, frustration or any range of other negative feelings. A bad experience at the workplace may stress you out. As a result, minor events such as water in the refrigerator not being cold may throw you into fits of anger. We can displace these emotions at work, at home, or in the car—just about anywhere.

Getting Mentally Glued

This is an outcome related to exaggerated self-importance. Prolonged neglect of such a warning may finally end up in the **burn-out syndrome** (A stage of driving oneself to the dead-end. When one tends to indulge in the work and the consequent stress, its effects on mental and physical well-being is negative. By prolonging this state one may reach the end of the career. This is called **Burn-Out Stress Syndrome, or BOSS**). It is a matter of great concern for your well-being if you are always thinking of or talking about your work, irrespective of where you are and what you are doing. The warning sign related to this is that you are not able to relax and just spend time doing something you enjoy because you can't get work off your mind. In such cases, sometimes the weekend immune system may take control by forcing you to rest and relax by making you sick. To avoid this, it may be advisable to recognise the signal and reorient yourself.

Forgetfulness and Loss of Concentration

When you take-in too many tasks—tasks that are beyond your ability or set unrealistic timelines—you may feel the pressure of the responsibility. Some of the common experiences are that you have difficulty in concentrating, losing things, forgetting and bumping into things more often.

Lost Passion for Work and Office

There may be a sudden change in your attitude towards work and office. The significance attached to your work and workplace is suddenly lost. As a contrast, you may have indifference or disinterest for the same. You used to love and care about your work. You had a passion for your cause and believed that you could make a difference. Now the problems that you face seem insurmountable. You feel ineffective and receive no enjoyment from your work. Your focus is just you getting through the day and the week. Such sudden change may call for a close scrutiny of any cause. If no reasonable cause is traceable, the changed attitude may be seen as a clear signal of stress.

One need not experience all of the symptoms listed above. When one observes a few symptoms it should be realised that it is time to manage the stress more efficiently and choose coping strategies that are more effective. It is not possible to live a stress-free life. However, one can aspire for optimising on the experiences of stress (by aiming to remain at the OSL) and aim for minimising the damaging impact of stress to maintain well-being.

Table 4.1 enlists the impact of stress on four dimensions of functioning. On this basis, the intervention strategies intended at stress management should also aim at:

1. Prevention of stress
2. Overcoming stress
3. Learning effective coping strategies

These can be achieved through learning the best practices of:

1. Physical skills
2. Mental skills
3. Behavioural skills

Managing Stress Through Physical Skills

The very purpose of coping is to bring about quiescence or homeostasis that is attained after alleviating stress. This is possible only when physical and physiological health is maintained. The concept of 'a sound mind in a sound body' is valid and proved by research. Physiological reactions can be tuned through various methods and measures, so that the mind sustains its equilibrium. Regular exercise of the body is a proactive style in averting/preventing or minimising the impact of stress. Often it is seen that stress has one of the two dominant results on physical and psychological well-being. Depending on the synthesis between personality variables, and nature and duration of stress, one may experience anxiety or may suffer from feelings of depression. The physical

and physiological responses of these two extreme reactions need two different ways of therapy. Depression is characterised by inactivity, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Exercise is the opposite of inactivity. Rathus (2002) feels that exercise might also help in the alleviation of feelings of helplessness. Babyak et al. (2000) studied 156 adult depressed volunteers. They were randomly assigned to four months of either aerobic exercise, antidepressants or a combination of the two. All the groups showed comparable relief from depression. A further six-month follow up showed that the volunteers of exercise group who continued to exercise showed the greatest improvement. Norvell and Belles (1993) found that exercise has been found to reduce anxiety and feelings of hostility, and also enhances the self-esteem.

The second type of therapy advocated with an objective to manage the physical responses to stress refers to reducing activity in the stressed individual. This is the reversal of Selye's physiological theory of stress. The concomitant physiological response of anxiety, tension and agitation on perception of stress (due to activation of sympathetic adrenal response and the pituitary adrenal response) is an increase in heartbeat, breathing, blood pressure and sweating, and stimulating the mind to experience stress. The argument is that if the mind is triggered to experience stress by these physiological changes, then why should we not learn to manipulate these physiological changes through learning so that the mind experiences the reverse of stress or a state of quiet? A number of experimental studies including bio-feedback methods followed this and proved that it is possible to reach a state of desirable quietness by consciously manipulating the physiological responses.

When the locus of control is external, either because of the inevitable physical nature or because of certain socio-cultural obligations, proactive coping becomes futile in its goal of stress-reduction. The examples of environmental factors beyond our control are over-crowded buses and trains, oppressive heat, heavy industrial pollution and so on. Apart from these, certain socio-cultural demands are endured by us, as we do not have much control over such factors. Certain family customs in orthodox conventional families where the lady of the house will have to wait for her meal until she serves food to every member in the house, or the tradition of *Saaligram Pooja* (worship of a holy stone believed to be highly powerful) can be highly stress-inducing. In south Indian culture, the *Saaligram* handed down to the family has to be worshipped ritualistically everyday with a separately cooked meal. Families that inherit *Saaligram* have to ensure this worship daily. This makes it difficult for them to lock the house and go on holidays, or skip the rituals for any reason.

Any exercise like walking, jogging, swimming or aerobics, involving the whole body, is a valuable outlet of stress (Anshel 1995). Physical exercise constitutes a very good measure of proactive coping style that dissipates and prevents impulsive stress reaction such as irritability, anger and depression. In the Indian society, which is basically agrarian, men and women are quite used to physical work. Prior to the advancement in technology, the manual labour that people were involved in, perhaps, enabled them to encounter stress positively and cope productively. Dissemination of information across the globe brought about a paradigm shift in the attitude of youth towards technology. This resulted in applying technology in every possible field. This shift involves almost an extinction of demand on physical

work. In addition to that, the global culture brought with it a disturbance in the rhythm of the biological clock. These two combined with the increasing competition in the field, setting unrealistic time lines, and resulted in the sudden shoot-up in stress levels to an unmanageable state. Under such circumstances, the psycho-physiological responses can best be prevented or brought to have minimum impact through practicing stress-reducing physical skills. To sustain psychological well-being amidst all these, it is imperative to follow some simple physical exercises or revive the practice of Yoga and meditation that are typically Indian.

Following are some techniques that proved to have a positive impact in overcoming, reducing or preventing the impact of stress on body and mind.

Simple Breathing Exercises

This can be practised just by following the instructions. Breathing is useful in the prevention and control of physical symptoms of stress. It may be desirable to earmark about 15–20 minutes in a day to relax your body through one or a combination of these exercises.

Deep Breathing

This can be done anywhere and anytime. If you feel over-worked in the office, stop for a while and practise this. You may practise this while watching television, travelling in a bus or train, or waiting for your turn at a counter. Deep breathing provides extra oxygen to the blood. This in turn re-energises the body and promotes relaxation.

Exercise 4.1

Simple steps in Deep Breathing

1. Slowly inhale through your nose, expanding your abdomen before allowing air to fill your lungs.
2. Reverse the process while exhaling. Contract your abdomen before allowing air out of your lungs.

Exhalation Breathing

This technique slows your breathing and calms you down. By practising this, you are likely to attain a slow rhythm in your natural breathing. This in turn helps you to remain calm.

Exercise 4.2

Simple steps in Exhalation Breathing

1. Spread a carpet or mat on the floor.
2. Lie down on your back with your arms at your sides.
3. Begin to breathe in slowly. As you do so, raise your arms towards the ceiling. Move them all the way up and over your head to the floor. Complete your inhalation.
4. Reverse the order. Breathe out slowly and smoothly. As you do so, return your arms to the original position, that is, to your sides.
5. After practising this several times, try to inhale and exhale without moving your arms.

Stretching Exercise

This exercise is effective for those involved in long hours of a sedentary job. The long rigid postures assumed while working on computers, doing deskwork or assembly line work creates tension in certain muscular points. Doing stretching exercises intermittently helps release muscular tension and rigidity. If done correctly, this helps in reducing stress and promoting relaxation. One should be careful not to bounce while stretching, so as not to injure the muscles.

Exercise 4.3

Steps in Stretching Exercise

Identify the muscles suffering tension. One may start from the neck and move downward or vice-versa.

1. Breathe in slowly and do not hold your breath.
2. Stretch your neck to the back, and exhale as you stretch.
3. Imagine tension leaving as you exhale.
4. Inhale as you release the stretch.
5. Close your eyes for better awareness of your body's response.
6. Take other areas of the body where you feel muscular tension and repeat the process. Take these areas to their comfortable limit.

Walking

2000 years ago, Hippocrates, the father of medicine stated that walking is man's best medicine. It is found that stress

and strain can be countered and even prevented by regular vigorous walking; it is a natural antidote (Pestonjee 1992).

Walking provides good exercise that not only tones up the body muscles and cardio vascular system, but also helps in refreshing the mind. Walking should continue only until the time one can walk without strain. It should not be stretched beyond this. The pace of walking should be smooth with energy being put in every step. One may notice a natural rhythm emerging after some time. Walking is expected to bring a pleasant relaxation where one enjoys every bit including the pace, the rhythm, the environment and also the awareness of the sensation at physical and psychological planes. Such enjoyment would be disrupted if one carries a mobile phone while going for a walk. It is advisable to avoid it and enjoy either solitude or the real company of a good companion, who would not discuss serious issues with you during walking.

Restful Sleep

Sleep is essential for the rejuvenation of body cells and metabolic functioning. There must have been at least one occasion when each one of us experienced the anxiety of sleeplessness. When sleep eludes us for some reason, hours are spent tossing in the bed. This awareness of not being able to sleep itself adds to the anxiety, making it all the more difficult to fall asleep. One golden rule to fight sleeplessness is 'do not even try to sleep'. The best thing is to get out of the bed and sit in a comfortable chair. One may choose to read a book, watch television, play solitaire or take up some simple relaxing activity like filling water into bottles, or filing and

painting your nails. Stay awake as late as you like. Before you realise you would find yourself dozing, if not falling asleep. The idea is to divert your body and mind from the anxiety of not being able to sleep. If you have a chronic problem of insomnia, it is advisable to seek professional help.

Now we move on to more indigenous methods with better therapeutic and preventive value.

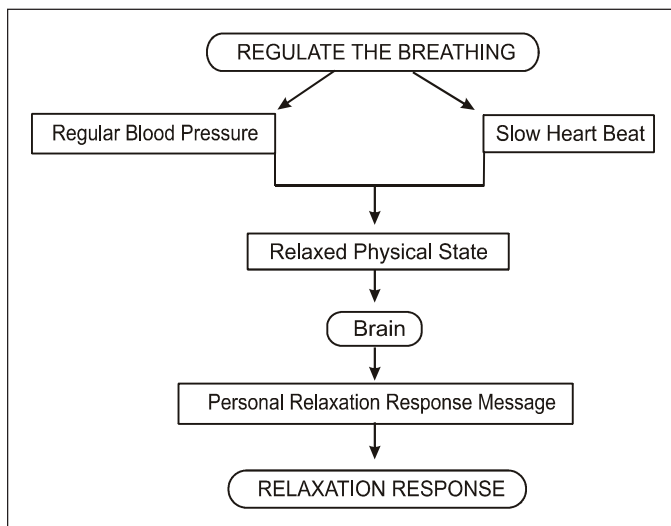
Pranayama and Yoga

India discovered the natural link between the breath (*Pranayama*), the body and the mind. It was mainly Patanjali and his school of thought that advocated Yoga and *Pranayama*. According to them, conditions under which the body is over-worked or the mind is stressed, the breath becomes faster or constricted. When the body is in rest and the mind is calm, the breath is slow and calm. The research question here is that if the body and mind are controlling the breath, can we not expect the breath to control the body and mind? The scientific explanation of bringing quiescence to body and mind is depicted in Figure 4.1.

Regulation of breathing lowers the heartbeat and moderates blood pressure. This control on the physiological state results in physical relaxation. The message of this relaxation reaches the mind. The brain in turn sends the message of relaxation to different parts of the body. This enables the person to experience the state of relaxation.

Training in *Pranayama* teaches one to deliberately manipulate the breath to slow down. By doing so, the mind gets the message that the state of calm and peace prevails. As a result, the mind relaxes and peace takes over. This process dissipates stressful thoughts and anxiety provoking

Figure 4.1
Physical and Psychological Response to Pranayama



feelings. *Pranayama* is a very simple exercise that can be practised by all. Almost all spiritual organisations in India advocate it and many of them even offer *Pranayama* training for relaxation.

The Indian Yogic terminology explains the term, *Pranayama* (*prana* + *ayama*). Here, *prana* refers to the vital life force, and *ayama* refers to control or regulation. Thus, the term connotes the function of control and regulation of vital life form through breathing. The simplest form of *Pranayama* refers to inhaling and exhaling in a way that cleanses the sensitive nerves. The following simple steps are to be followed for simple *Pranayama*.

Exercise 4.4

Practice of Pranayama

Illustration 4.1
Pranayama



1. Hold your right hand up. Curl your index and middle fingers towards your palm.
2. Close the left nostril by pressing gently against it with your ring finger.
3. Inhale through the right nostril. The breath should be *slow, steady and full*.
4. Now, close the right nostril by pressing against it gently with your thumb. Open your left nostril by relaxing your ring finger. Exhale fully with slow and steady breath.
5. Now, inhale through the left nostril, close it and exhale through the right nostril.

This is one complete round.

You can begin with 5–10 rounds and increase it gradually. You must remember to maintain your breath slow, steady and full. This can be practised anytime and anywhere. This practice soothes your anxiety and brings down your tension levels. This works both for the prevention of devastating impact of stress, and also in enhancing the effectiveness of coping. Practised at the time when one encounters stress, it helps in lowering the anxiety level. Once the anxiety and tension levels are lowered, there is a better scope for realistic appraisal of the situation, which further leads to effective coping.

Meditation

It refers to the mental technique for quieting the body and mind. Ancient Indian scriptures have heavy reference to the practice of meditation. Starting from the epics to the recent modern gurus, all have described the positive effects of meditation for physical, mental and spiritual well-being. However, scientific research on the benefits of meditation was initiated by Maharshi Mahesh Yogi and popularised by Western scientists.

Coon (2000) claimed that any enjoyable hobby such as listening or playing music or taking nature walks can be meditation of sorts. Meditation techniques are increasingly used for relaxation and therapeutic purposes. Transcendental Meditation (TM) of Maharshi Mahesh Yogi gained popularity in 1970s. It is a very simple form of calming the mind. You can practise it in the morning and evening for 15–20 minutes.

Sit comfortably with the eyes closed. Initially, the mind wanders and fluctuates wildly. Gradually, it turns still and

you can experience a state of 'restful awareness'. Your body relaxes completely. Your mind transcends all mental activity and experiences a state of 'consciousness'. Research in the area of TM claims that by practising this, an individual can dissolve all accumulated stress and fatigue. It is also found to bring out the individual's latent creative talents, dynamism, orderliness and organising power. All these form essential ingredients for productive coping.

Rathus (2002) stressed that it is important to know what should not be done in meditation while understanding what should be done.

- Adopt a passive attitude of 'What happens, happens'.
- Select a quiet non-disruptive environment (For example, do not have the phone in the room, do not face a light directly).
- Do not eat an hour prior to meditating and avoid caffeine and nicotine two hours before meditation.
- Take a comfortable posture. It is alright to change positions, stretch or yawn.
- Select a device to facilitate your concentration (For example, you can have a low level lamp normally lit before a deity, a plant or a burning incense stick).
- Perceive a word or sound (Like 'Om' or a word like 'one') as you breathe in and breathe out. The idea is to perceive rather than say it. If you perceive a word like 'one', you may do so every time you inhale and exhale. If you have chosen a word like 'Om' you may choose to say it by stretching its sound. If you feel like chanting it aloud, you may do so several times and enjoy it. Gradually say it more and more softly. Close

your eyes and 'perceive' the word you have been chanting aloud.

- It may go louder and softer or disappear for some-time. Do not worry. Adopt a passive attitude and let it take its course.
- If disruptive thoughts disturb you, let them pass through. Do not try to avoid them or handle them. That may take you to the arousal level.
- If necessary, allow yourself to drift with an attitude of 'Let things happen the way they do'.
- Accept what you get. You cannot force relaxation effects on meditation.

The practice of meditation has been made simple and popular by a number of spiritual organisations in India. They train individuals in the practice of meditation in simple forms in any environment to suit their needs of the moment.

Progressive Relaxation

The learning process of increasing relaxation to a new level is facilitated by progressive relaxation. Those who have not had an exposure to the exercise may be unfamiliar with the feelings of relaxation of these heights. This not only helps in managing the physical symptoms of stress like headaches and hypertension, but also reduces anxiety, irritability and depression.

It is desirable to practise progressive relaxation exercise in a quiet room with no interruptions during the process. One must wear loose and comfortable clothes during the exercise. The dos and don'ts during relaxation are listed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2
Dos and Don'ts of Relaxation

<i>DOs</i>	<i>DON'Ts</i>
Wear loose clothing. Have back support	Put yourself in a position to fall asleep
Quiet down. If tense thoughts enter the mind, allow them to pass out of your head	Think your way into tension. (If you cannot clear your mind, take a long deep breath and let it out slowly)
Stay alert and conscious while relaxing. Pay attention and note changes in your body	Allow yourself to feel groggy or sleepy. (If you start feeling asleep open your eyes and sit up. When you are ready return to relaxation position)
Go at your own pace and let go of your muscles as your body decides to give up tension	Expect yourself to relax all at once. Like any other physical exercise you must practise letting go step by step
Give your body messages of appreciation for relaxation as you notice feelings going through your body	Reprimand yourself for not relaxing. Trust your body to go at its own pace
Stay aware of your breathing. Observe how much air you are taking in full breaths at regular rhythms	Smoke before, during or after relaxation as it tightens lung tissues and blood vessels. Let your body breathe.

Relaxation exercise closely resembles the technique of meditation. This is a technique of relaxing one's body and mind gradually and systematically by choice. Jacobson's relaxation method, *Yoganidra* and progressive muscular relaxation exercise are the various approaches to relax the body and mind. This is a very simple yet very useful method. People who have been practising this method report that this exercise has had a tremendous impact in controlling their blood pressure and other psychosomatic disorders. The philosophy

behind this exercise is that the tension experienced is more of a physical state than a mental state. Tense muscles that make you feel uncomfortable cause the stress. If you learn how to relax these tense muscles systematically, you will not feel the discomfort. Hence, you can be calm instead of being anxious. Once you learn the technique of giving autosuggestion, you will be able to practise it whenever you begin to feel tense. The method requires alternatively tensing and relaxing a particular muscle or a set of muscles.

You may follow the steps given in Exercise 4.5 to practise progressive muscular exercise. Until you gain expertise in giving autosuggestion, you may record these suggestions in an audio cassette and play it in the initial stages of learning the exercises. The audio recording in a melodious voice will be very effective. Once you catch the steps and process, you can practise it yourself. It takes about 15–30 minutes for one to go through the process. By the end, you will find yourself in a state of total relaxation, with a feeling of weightlessness in the body. You can do this exercise by sitting in a chair.

Exercise 4.5

Progressive Muscular Relaxation

(Sitting posture)

1. Please close your eyes and concentrate on the instructions.
2. Now, tense your fists...Relax...Repeat it. Tense your fists...Relax.
3. Now, please extend your fingers...Relax...Repeat it. Extend your fingers again...Relax...

(Exercise 4.5 contd)

4. Now, do some exercises with eyes. Open your eyes as wide as possible and then look towards your right but without turning your head...Relax by getting back your eyes to the normal position...Again without turning your head look towards your right...Relax...
5. Now again, without turning your head look towards your left...Relax while getting back your eyes to the normal position...Again look to your left... Relax...Now open your eyes as wide as possible and look towards the top without lifting your head. Do not lift your head. Relax...get back your eyes to the normal position...Again concentrate on the roof without lifting your head...Relax...
6. Now, concentrate on the floor keeping your head in the normal position... relax while getting back your eyes to the normal position...Again concentrate on the floor...Relax...
7. Now, close your eyes and do the rest of the exercise step by step.
8. Now, tense your biceps...Relax...Again tense your biceps...Relax...
9. Now, pull back your shoulders...Relax...Again pull back your shoulders...Relax...
10. Now, push forward your shoulders...Relax...Again push forward your shoulders...Relax...
11. Straighten your shoulders and turn your head slowly to the right but to an extreme position... Now, get back your head to the normal position

(Exercise 4.5 contd)

- and Relax...Again straighten your shoulders and turn your head slowly to the right...Get back your head to normal position and relax...
12. Now, keep your shoulders straight but this time turn your head to left... Get your head to normal position and relax...Again straighten your shoulder, turn your head to left...Get back your head to the normal position and relax...
 13. Now, bring forward your head until the chin digs into your chest...Get your head to normal position and relax...Now repeat the action. Bring forward your head until the chin digs into the chest... Get your head to normal position and relax...
 14. Now, open your mouth as wide as possible...Close your mouth and relax...Again open your mouth as wide as possible...Relax by closing your mouth...
 15. Now, press your tongue against the roof of the mouth as hard as possible...Relax by getting back the tongue to the normal position...Again press your tongue against the roof of the mouth...Relax...
 16. Now, to do the opposite, press your tongue to the floor of the mouth as hard as possible...Relax by getting back your tongue to the normal position... Repeat this by pressing your tongue into the floor of the mouth as hard as possible...Relax...
 17. Now, do some breathing exercises. Breathe in as much as you can. Now, breathe in...Relax...that is you can have a normal breathing...Again breathe in slowly...Relax...Again breathe in...Relax...

(Exercise 4.5 contd)

Now, breathe out your air, breathe out... Relax...
breathe out... Relax...

18. Now, we will do some exercises with the back of your body. Keep your shoulders resting against the chair and push forward the trunk of the body so as to arch the entire back of the body...Relax while getting back to your normal position...Again, rest your shoulders against the chair and push forward the trunk of the body...Relax...
19. Now, we will go to the middle part of the body. Tense your buttock muscles and then raise the middle part of your body...Relax...Get back to your normal position...Again tense your buttock muscles and raise the middle part...Relax...
20. Now, press your buttock muscles into the seat of the chair and lower the middle part of the body slightly...Relax...Repeat. Relax...
21. Now, we will do some exercises with your thighs. Extend your legs and raise approximately six inches above the floor...Relax, get back your legs to the normal position...That is you can keep your legs on the floor. Now you do it again. Extend your legs and raise approximately six inches above the floor...Relax...
22. Now, we will do some exercises with your stomach. Pull your stomach in as hard as possible... Relax and get back your stomach to the normal position...Again pull in your stomach as hard as possible...Relax...Now try to extend your stomach...Relax...Again extend your stomach...Relax.

(Exercise 4.5 contd)

23. Now, let us do some exercises with your feet. Bend your feet so that the toes are pointed towards the head...Now relax, and get back the toes to normal position...Again bend your feet so that the toes are pointed towards the head...Now relax...do the same thing in the opposite direction, that is bend your toes pointing to the floor...Relax...do it again...Relax...
24. Now, the last exercise will be with your toes. Relax your feet and then dig in your toes into the bottom of the shoes...relax by getting back your toes to the normal position...Again dig in your toes into the bottom of your shoes...Relax...Now bend your toes pointing to the top of the toe area of the shoes...Relax and get back your toes to the normal position...Again bend your toes...Relax...
25. Now, I want you to imagine and actually experience, if you can, a wave of warm comfortable, pleasant relaxation. A wave of relaxation that is going to permeate and engulf your entire body so that when it reaches any part of your body, it would be a signal to relax even further. Totally relax that part of your body where the wave touches. Now feel the wave of relaxation engulfing your feet and now your thighs...so completely...totally... perfectly relaxed, and now your buttocks and the middle part of your body...warm relaxation making all the muscles loose and flaccid. Now, in your middle part and up your back and chest... and in your hands and arms, so that if any tension was

(Exercise 4.5 contd)

there it is now draining away...gradually draining away. And a wonderful wave of relaxation is now reaching your...chest...neck...and the head. Now this feeling of relaxation is covering your face...your mouth...your tongue...they feel completely relaxed. Now your eyes are being permeated by this calm, wonderful wave of relaxation. Now your forehead feels so relaxed. It is such a pleasant and a wonderful experience. You feel a weightlessness in your body...as if the body is so light...you experience a floating sensation. Enjoy the pleasure of this weightlessness. Now gradually come back to normalcy. Count down from five to one in your mind. Slowly open your eyes...as slowly as possible.

There are variations in the progressive relaxation exercise. One variation is the posture in which you can do it. You may lie down on the floor and do the relaxation. Exercise 4.6 is a variation in progressive relaxation.

Exercise 4.6

Progressive Relaxation

(Lying down posture)

Settle back as comfortably as you can and close your eyes. Relax to the best of your ability. As you relax, clench your right fist. Just clench your fist tighter and tighter, and study the tension as you do so. Keep it

(Exercise 4.6 contd)

clenched and feel the tension in your right fist, hand and forearm. Now relax. Let the fingers of your right hand become loose, and observe the contrast in your feelings. Now, let yourself go and try to become more relaxed all over. Once more, clench your right fist really tight. You hold it, and notice the tension again. Now let go; relax. Your fingers straighten out and you notice the difference once more. Repeat that with your left fist. Clench your left fist while the rest of your body relaxes; clench that fist tighter and feel the tension. Now relax. Again, enjoy the contrast. Repeat that once more. Clench the left fist, tight and tense. Now, do the opposite of tension: relax and feel the difference. Continue relaxing like that for a while. Clench both fists tighter and tighter, both fists tense, forearms tense. Study the sensations. Relax; straighten out your fingers and feel the relaxation. Continue relaxing your hands and forearms more and more.

Now, bend your elbows and tense your biceps; tense them harder and study the tension feelings. Straighten out your arms, let them relax and feel that difference again. Let the relaxation develop. Once more, tense your biceps; hold the tension and observe it carefully. Straighten the arms and relax; relax to the best of your ability. Each time, pay close attention to your feelings when you tense up and when you relax.

Now, straighten your arms. Straighten them so that you feel the most tension in the triceps muscles along the back of your arms; stretch your arms and feel that

(Exercise 4.6 contd)

tension. Now relax. Get your arms back into a comfortable position. Let the relaxation proceed on its own. The arms should feel comfortably heavy as you allow them to relax. Straighten the arms once more so that you feel the tension in the triceps muscles; straighten them. Feel that tension. Now, concentrate on pure relaxation in the arms without any tension. Get your arms comfortable and let them relax further and further. Continue relaxing your arms even further. Even when your arms seem to be fully relaxed, try and go that extra bit; try to achieve deeper and deeper levels of relaxation.

Let all your muscles go loose and heavy. Just settle back quietly and comfortably. Wrinkle up your forehead now; wrinkle it tighter. Now, stop wrinkling your forehead; relax and smooth it out. Picture the entire forehead and scalp becoming smoother as the relaxation increased. Now, frown and crease your brows and study the tension. Let go of the tension again. Smooth out the forehead once more. Now, close your eyes tighter and tighter. Feel the tension. Relax your eyes. Keep your eyes closed, gently and comfortably, and notice the relaxation. Now, clench your jaws, bite your teeth together; study the tension throughout the jaws. Relax your jaws now. Let your lips part slightly. Appreciate the relaxation. Now, press your tongue hard against the roof of your mouth. Look for the tension. Let your tongue return to a comfortable and relaxed position. Now, purse your lips. Press your lips together tighter and tighter. Relax the lips. Note the contrast

(Exercise 4.6 contd)

between tension and relaxation. Feel the relaxation all over your face, all over your forehead and scalp, eyes, jaws, lips, tongue and throat. The relaxation progresses further and further.

Now, attend to your neck muscles. Press your head back as far as it can go and feel the tension in the neck now roll it to the left. Straighten your head and bring it forward. Press your chin against your chest. Let your head return to a comfortable position and study the relaxation. Let the relaxation develop. Shrug your shoulders. Hold the tension. Drop your shoulders and feel the relaxation. Neck and shoulders relaxed. Shrug your shoulders again and move them around. Bring your shoulders up and forward and back. Feel the tension in your shoulders and in your upper back. Drop your shoulders once more and relax. Let the relaxation spread deep into the shoulders, right into your back muscles; relax your neck and throat, and your jaws and other facial areas as pure relaxation takes over and grows deeper, deeper, and ever deeper.

Relax your entire body to the best of your ability. Feel that comfortable heaviness that accompanies relaxation. Breathe easily and freely in and out. Notice how the relaxation increases as you exhale. As you breathe out, just feel that relaxation. Now, breathe right in and fill your lungs: inhale deeply and hold your breath. Study the tension. Now exhale, let the walls of your chest grow loose and push out the air automatically. Continue relaxing, and breathe freely

(Exercise 4.6 contd)

and gently. Feel the relaxation and enjoy it. With the rest of your body as relaxed as possible, fill your lungs again. Breathe in deeply and hold it again. Breathe out and appreciate the relief. Just breathe normally. Continue relaxing your chest and let the relaxation spread to your back, shoulders, neck and arms. Merely let go. Enjoy the relaxation.

Now, let's pay attention to your abdominal muscles; your stomach area. Tighten your stomach muscles, make your abdomen hard. Notice the tension. And relax. Let the muscles loosen and notice the contrast. Once more, press and tighten your stomach muscles, make your abdomen hard. Notice the tension. And relax. Let the muscles loosen and notice the contrast. Once more, press and tighten your stomach muscles. Hold the tension and study it; relax. Notice the general well-being that comes with relaxing your stomach. Now, draw your stomach in, pull the muscles in and feel the tension this way. Relax again. Let your stomach out. Continue breathing normally and easily. Feel the gentle massaging action all over your chest and stomach. Now, pull your stomach in again and hold the tension. Push out and tense; hold the tension. Once more, pull in and feel the tension.

Now, relax your stomach fully. Let the tension dissolve as the relaxation grows deeper. Each time you breathe out, notice the rhythmic relaxation both in your lungs and in your stomach. Try and let go of all contractions anywhere in your body. Now, direct your

(Exercise 4.6 contd)

attention to your lower back. Arch your back, making your lower back quite hollow, and feel the tension along your spine. Settle down comfortably again, relaxing the lower back. Just arch your back and feel the tension as you do so. Try to keep your body as relaxed as possible. Try to localise the tension throughout your lower back area. Relax once more, relaxing further and further. Relax your lower back: relax your upper back. Spread the relaxation to your stomach, chest, shoulders, arms and facial area; these parts relaxing further and ever deeper.

Let go of all the tensions and relax. Now, flex your buttocks and thighs. Flex your thighs by pressing down your heels as hard as you can. Relax and note the difference. Straighten your knees and flex your thigh muscles again. Hold the tension. Relax your hips and thighs. Allow the relaxation to proceed on its own. Press your feet and toes downward, away from your face, so that your calf muscles become tense. Study the tension. Relax your feet and calves. This time, bend your feet towards your face so that you feel tension along your shins. Bring your toes right up. Relax again. Keep relaxing for a while.

Now, let yourself relax further all over. Relax your feet, ankles, calves and knees, thighs, buttocks and hips. Feel the heaviness of your lower body as you relax still further. Now, spread the relaxation to your stomach, waist and lower back. Let go more and more. Feel that relaxation all over. Let it proceed to your upper back,

(Exercise 4.6 contd)

chest, shoulders and arms, right to the tips of your fingers. Keep relaxing more and more deeply. Make sure that no tension has crept into your throat; relax your neck and your jaws, and all your facial muscles. Keep relaxing your whole body like that for a while. Let yourself relax all over.

Now, you can become twice as relaxed as you are, merely by taking in a deep breath and exhaling slowly. With your eyes closed you become less aware of objects and movements around you, thus preventing any surface tensions from developing. Breathe in deeply and feel yourself becoming heavier. Take in a long, deep breath and let it out very slowly. Feel how heavy and relaxed you have become.

In a state of perfect relaxation you should feel unwilling to move a single muscle in your body. Think about the effort that would be required to raise your right arm. As you think about raising your right arm, see if you can notice any tensions that might have crept into your shoulder and arm. You decide not to lift the arm but to continue relaxing. Observe the relief and the disappearance of tension.

Just carry on relaxing like that. When you wish to get up, count backward from four to one. You should then feel fine, refreshed, wide awake and calm.

Yoganidra

Yoganidra has a typical Indian origin. This is a method of relaxation. The practice of Yoganidra is so relaxing that

it becomes almost impossible to remain awake. But you must not sleep during Yoganidra. At the end of it, you come out feeling more rested than you do after a good night's sleep.

Yoganidra is practised while lying prone. One must follow the spoken instructions of a teacher or record instructions in an audio cassette and play it during the exercise. The first phase of the session draws one's attention to different parts of the body, thus creating awareness and providing relaxation. This is followed by an awakening of the sensations of pairs of polar opposites, such as heaviness and lightness. It concludes with rapid visualisation of some images and abstract symbols.

Study of neurophysiology has found that each part of the body has a different control centre in the brain. It is claimed that the movement of awareness through different parts of the body not only relaxes them, but also clears nerve pathways to the brain.

Instructions to experience the opposite sensations such as heat and cold, heaviness and lightness, is assumed to help in improving the body's ability to regain balance and bring the related involuntary functions under conscious control. The following instruction to Yoganidra is prescribed by Bihar School of Yoga (BSY).

Instructions for Yoganidra

Lie down in *Savasana*, with the body stretched out, the head in straight line with the body, feet apart, arms beside the body and palms of the hands turned

(Contd)

upwards. Make yourself comfortable. After this, there should be no body movement. Close your eyes and keep them closed till the end of the session. Make a promise to yourself: 'I will not sleep, I will remain awake'.

Take a deep breath and as you breathe in, feel the coolness and calmness spreading throughout the body. As you breathe out, feel your cares and worries flowing out of you. Become aware of the body and relax completely. Relax your body mentally. Become aware of the breath as it moves between the navel and the throat. Do not try to breathe long and deep.

Repeat your resolve mentally three times with feeling and awareness. We now begin to rotate the awareness from one part of the body to the next. Repeat the name of the part in your mind and simultaneously become aware of it. Try to remain alert, but do not concentrate.

Become aware of the right side of the body. Take your awareness to the right thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, little finger, palm, back of the hand, wrist, arm, elbow, shoulder, armpit, waist, hip, thigh, kneecap, calf muscle, ankle, heel, sole of the foot, the top of the foot, toes.

Now, repeat the previous step but this time with the left side.

Bring the awareness to the back. Become aware of the shoulder blades, the buttocks, the spine, the whole back together.

(Contd)

Now, go to the top of the head, the forehead, temples, the eyebrows, the space between the eyebrows, eyelids, eyes, ears, cheeks, nose, the tip of the nose, lips, chin, throat, right chest, left chest, navel, abdomen... the whole front.

The whole of the right leg, the left leg, both legs together. The whole of the right arm, the left arm, both arms.

Do not sleep. Say to yourself: 'I am awake, I am practising Yoganidra'.

Become aware of the meeting points between the body and the floor—the sharp meeting points.

Now, concentrate on your body, as if seeing it from the outside. Look at your body lying on the floor as an object, a reflection in an imaginary mirror.

Now, imagine a well, dark and deep. Look into it. There is a bucket on a chain; you lower it into the well. It moves into the darkness of the well. You cannot see it. Now, pull the bucket up, out of the darkness, into the light. Ask yourself: 'What am I thinking?' Do not think, but become aware of the thought process, become a witness.

Now, awaken the feeling of lightness—as if the body is made of cotton. Your body seems to be floating away from the floor. Next, awaken the feeling of heaviness, as if the body is made of lead.

Awaken the sensation of heat, the experience of heat. The whole body is hot. Now, experience bitter cold in the body.

(Contd)

Try to remember the experience of pain—mental or physical. And the feeling of pleasure—relive it, make it vivid.

Now, try to visualise some images—on the level of feeling, awareness and emotion. Let each one appear like a slide on your mental screen. Flickering candle... tall palm tree, a car moving on the road, yellow clouds, blue clouds, starlit night, full moon, standing dog, reposing cat, moving elephant, racing horse, rising sun behind the mountains, setting sun behind the mountains, setting sun behind the ocean, ocean with waves, a big lake with crystal clear water, blue lotus, white lotus, pink lotus, a boat sailing on the water—see the ripples, chimney smoke rising from an old house, the dawn of the day, a yogi in deep meditation.

Become a witness of your awareness—not the body, not the senses, not the mind. Nothing but awareness. Become aware that you are observing yourself. Look within and try to be aware of the one who is looking.

Go into *chidakasa* (the space behind the forehead). In the *chidakasa*, there is a flaming light. Find that light and you will see a golden egg in the centre of that light. A small golden egg, very bright, shimmering. Repeat your resolve again, thrice.

Relax all efforts, draw your mind outside and become aware of your breathing. Become aware of your surroundings, the room you are in. Lie quietly for some time and keep your eyes closed. Start moving and stretching your body. When you are sure that you are wide awake, sit up slowly and open your eyes.

Whatever be the method discussed above, the objective of it is to train the body and mind in a disciplined way so that the impulsive reactions and emotional over-reactions are curbed to the minimum. Such practices are highly helpful in tuning oneself to productive coping where the emotional reactions would not disrupt or interrupt the realistic appraisal of the situation.

Training and disciplining of the body is one approach to handling stress. The other approach is to tune yourself mentally to insulate your feelings and emotions from the ill effects of stress, so that you can cope effectively. Thus, disciplining the mind involves two approaches—

1. Training yourself to create an internal immune system that can resist the adverse effects of stress.
2. Training your cognitive system to take a realistic and positive approach in handling stressful events.

Both the approaches involve your perception and thinking. In other words, you may discipline your cognitive system in such a way that it either condones or effectively fights the debilitating effects of stress and prevents you from the adverse reactions such as anxiety, tension and depression. There are several ways to train oneself for this.

Managing Stress through Mental Skills

Stress and coping processes involve cognitive and emotional dimensions. The cognitive dimension is pronounced in the

stage of appraisal of the stress. The emotional response is the reaction to the experienced stress. The mental skills for managing stress involve training in realistic appraisal of the stressor as well as the skills of managing the emotions effectively so that the external problem is attended to and handled productively. This requires a positive psychological disposition on the part of the individual. The following techniques are useful in imbibing and sustaining adequate positive disposition in us so as to effectively manage the cognitive mediation and emotional outcome appropriately.

Guided Imagery

This is a technique wherein people are trained to visualise images that are pleasant and relaxing. You may sit quietly and imagine the experience of pleasant solitude on the seashore, the green trees and chirps of birds in a deep forest you visited in your childhood. You can visualise the serene sunrise you enjoyed during boating on a calm river. You can 'see' the tranquil water, feel the cold breeze, and feel the warmth of the sun from above. You can smell the plants in the water and you can hear the chirps of the birds. Thus you imagine not only the visuals of the place but also feel every sensation. Try to make the image as vivid as possible. When you recall such pleasant imagery, the associated pleasant feelings also come in automatically, soothing the mind from any tension or anxiety. Thus the experience of stress is substituted with the experience of quiet and peace.

To use imagery to reduce stress, find a quiet place to sit without any distractions. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Concentrate on the chosen relaxing image. It does

not matter what that image is as long as you picture yourself in the image.

Ventilate Your Feelings

Most of the time the wrong choice of coping strategy can be traced to suppression of feelings. The feelings of anxiety and fear, if bottled up, will have the potential block which in turn would adversely affect the appraisal of the situation. Sometimes, the suppressed negative feelings may land you in appraising the situation in the most unrealistic and irrational fashion. This, in turn, may influence the coping strategy you choose, which will be unsuitable to the situation. The result would be unproductive. Hence, it is very important that there is timely and adequate let-out for the negative feelings. Indian society is known for its strong and informal social relations, and deep family bonds. The changing times and demands, though has resulted in influencing this. The social bonds in Indian culture are still characterised by a high degree of emotionality and sentiments. Most of the people have, at least, one confidante to whom they can talk and release all feelings. This 'letting the steam off the chest' is a good strategy to prevent oneself from strong emotional behaviour, anxiety or depression.

In case you happen to be one of those highly private persons, who does not wish to or cannot confide in others, it is advisable to write down your feelings. Several studies have proved that writing down the feelings results in better coping (Esterling et al. 1999; Pennebaker and Francis 1996). A recent study by Klest and Freyd (2006) found out that writing of trauma experiences improved physical and mental health.

Exercise 4.7**Ventilate feelings on a paper**

Write down your feelings, following the guidelines mentioned below for a better effect.

1. You must write it down in the form of narration of a story that has a beginning and an end.
2. The writing has to be lucid and spontaneous as if you are telling someone about an event, incident or conflict.
3. There need not be any editing between the feeling, thought and writing. You can allow the written paper to reflect all your feelings. There need not be any filtering or classification on silly ideas, mean feelings, and so on.
4. While writing down, if you are caught with a feeling that something you are writing is silly, you may mention so. Thus, transparency is the key word.

Once you release all your feelings, if you feel that you are ready for a plan of action through choice of a strategy to cope, you may do so. You may find that while writing down the feelings and the event causing the feelings, you are already reappraising the situation.

Irrational Thought Control

It is often observed that we tend to build pressure from within. Our own thought process may sometimes be a source of

stress, or it accentuates stress. The examples are, when a student enters the exam hall and reads the questions, s/he finds the first question very tough. On seeing the difficulty level of the first question, s/he may quickly feel that it is a lost exam. Such conclusions are irrational. There may be occasions when you want to express your idea in a meeting, yet you restrain from doing so because you are afraid that it may be rejected. Such unrealistic fears may induce stress. Such thoughts are action inhibitors. They adversely affect our psychological well-being. How do we change these thoughts? To this Rathus (2002) says, 'We just change them. However this may require work.' Marks and Dar (2000) outlined a multi-step procedure for controlling such irrational thoughts. The most important step in this procedure is to be aware of these thoughts. Following are the steps for controlling irrational thoughts—

- When you suffer from anxiety or frustration, closely examine your thoughts. Find out if your thoughts are making you feel miserable and inhibiting action.
- Evaluate the accuracy of these thoughts. Assess their contribution to your problem solving. Are they guiding you towards a solution or are they compounding your problem? Also examine the extent of their reality. Are they real or are they blowing things out of proportion? Are they misplacing the blame for failure, inadequacies or source of the problem?
- Prepare thoughts that are incompatible with the irrational thoughts and say them to yourself. For example, if the irrational thought after reading the first question in the exam is 'Questions are tough; I am going to fail in this exam', then replace it with the thought, 'I may

not be able to answer the first question. But let me read through the question paper. I have wide options in choosing the questions.' If the inhibiting thought is, 'I will not speak out my idea; others may ridicule it', substitute it with a more practical thought, 'Let me share my idea; everyone may not like it, but there may be some who would give it a thought.' If nobody is around you may even say it aloud.

- Reward yourself for making effective changes in the thought.

Handling Upsetting Thoughts

When you encounter a stressful situation, what you say to yourself makes all the difference between 'coping' and 'collapsing' (Matheny et al. 1996). If you are keen on coping effectively, you must avoid upsetting thoughts. But it is easier said than done. Thoughts can prove very tricky; the harder you try to avoid, faster they come back to you with a doubled force. There are two ways to avoid upsetting thoughts.

Reaching the Point of Satiation

In this method, you may allow upsetting thoughts to creep in quietly and peacefully. Indulge yourself in imagining the dreadful consequences of the event. Allow a free flow of imagination, where you travel from bad to worse and the worst. Do it in a single sitting. Before you realise, you will find yourself reaching a point where your imagination of the worst possible consequence stops. By now, it is likely that the disturbing thoughts automatically stop. From this point,

take a detour into a rational analysis of the possibility of each of the imagined consequence. In that process, you will go on to discard and dismiss some of your negative thoughts as irrational and improbable. You are now left with a few possible consequences of the stressful event. Reappraise these possibilities you are left with at the end of the sequence before you opt for a strategy of coping.

The Method of Thought Substitution

The second way of avoiding upsetting thoughts is to substitute the negative thought either with a positive one or at least a neutral thought. A negative and upsetting thought cannot be pushed out. This will create a vacuum. You must try to fill the vacuum with a substitute. Tell yourself that there are other possible outcomes of the stressful event. Some of them can be harmless, if not beneficial. Think of those neutral, harmless or less harmful possible effects of the event. Continuous thought substitution may train the mind and body to be resistant to stress. However, this must be practised carefully by using discretion. Situations calling for emergency response cannot afford such reactions.

Very closely associated with thought substitution is stress inoculation technique.

Stress Inoculation Technique When you are under stress, this technique helps you in fighting the anxiety and tension by using an internal monologue of positive coping statements.

For example, before going for a meeting with your tyrant boss to argue for your project, if you are burdened with anxiety provoking thoughts such as, 'I may fumble, I may not be

logical, I will expose my limited knowledge in spoken English', you must replace them with coping statements such as, 'I will take deep breath before entering his room; I will study his responses before responding; if I feel nervous, I will request for a glass of water. In case, he is not convinced, I will propose to send him a written plan, which he can examine leisurely'.

Anxiety thoughts are negative, and are inhibiting in action while coping statements are reassuring, action-oriented and positive. They orient you to a plan of action in micro steps. Meichenbaum (1985) described three phases of stress inoculation. These may be termed as activities to prevent distress in situations of stress.

Education The first phase involves educating yourself. In this phase, you must collect specific information about what to expect while encountering the upcoming event. For example, before going to have a meeting with the boss, find out about his biases, preferences and knowledge level on the project that you are going to discuss. This will equip you with appropriate responses to his likely queries and objections.

Rehearsal You must practise your planned or expected responses in the threatening event in a safe environment. For example, if you are going to deliver a public speech for an audience comprising the country's intelligentsia, you must rehearse the speech at home.

Implementation You will actually implement the plan of your coping statements. Here, you can allow some variations to suit the situation.

Emotional first-aids Living to avoid excessive stress is the ideal but sometimes we all need a little emotional first-aid. Emotional first-aid is self-intervention by the person under stress. Similar to the medical first-aid, even emotional first-aid has only a temporary value. Hence it should not be considered as an adequate intervention by itself. Emotional first-aid helps as a good intervention at the stage of cognitive appraisal.

Before you decide which coping skill to use in a situation, ask yourself the following three questions:

Is this an appropriate thing to do in this situation?

For example, meditating by chanting *mantras* (the Hindu of chanting the name of God) may help you calm down, but may not be the best choice if you are in an interview.

Is this a positive way of coping?

This will help evaluate the chosen coping strategy. Some times when one is emotionally unstable in a stressful condition, s/he may not be competent to choose the right strategy. In such cases a verifying query directed at self provides an opportunity for reviewing the choice of one's coping response. For example, when a father gets the news that his son was caught by the college authority in a case of ragging, the first reaction may be either to thrash up the son or take a defensive stand that his son was not the culprit but has been victimised. Under such a stressful situation, it may really pay if one applies emotional first-aid and examines if the chosen course of action would be the appropriate one.

Is this going to help in the long run?

We do not always need a long-term solution. However, if you choose a short-term solution, then it is important to decide whether that will be enough. Sometimes it may form a habitual pattern to turn to smoking or drinking immediately on encountering stress. Not everything that we do to take the stress away is good for us. Drugs and alcohol are obviously coping strategies that will cause problems. Also, if you use anything to excess, even if it appears positive, it can have long-term negative effects (e.g. excessive exercising or dieting).

Apart from reappraisal of the situation and managing emotions, intervention to improve coping can happen through learning different strategies of coping through appropriate behaviour modification.

If the main reason of taking recourse to ineffective or unproductive coping style lies in the appraisal of the stressful situation, the choice of intervention must focus on attempts at cognitive change. If the cause indicates a problem at the behavioural level, one must focus on coping by managing the behaviour.

Stress Management at Behavioural Level

The logic of managing stress at behavioural level goes back to the physiological theory of emotion. It has been experimentally proved that changes at the physiological level cause certain emotional behaviour. This triggered a question

whether the reverse can also be true. There have been studies on theatre actors that proved that acting out emotional scenes brought about concurrent physiological changes. If manipulated, overt behaviour of theatre artists could bring about changes in their emotions. The same logic should hold good for bringing positive changes in physiological functioning through behaviour that prevents or helps in overcoming stress. This calls for identifying, training and practising of behaviour that dissipates stress. The first step towards this is to assess and modify the behaviour at the appraisal level. It may be helpful to examine the pattern of our appraisal of the stress situation in Exercise 4.8.

Exercise 4.8

How do you appraise the stressful situation?

Identify three recent situations that caused stress for you. Write them down on a piece of paper. Answer the following questions for each of the stress situations identified.

1. Is the situation (a) challenging (b) threatening (c) harmful.
2. Who is in control of the situation? (a) self (b) others (c) God /luck/fate.
3. How is the situation likely to affect my life?
 - (a) Specific area of my life
 - (b) All aspects of my life
 - (c) The lives of others around, along with my life.

(Exercise 4.8 contd)

4. What resources are available with me to handle it?

- (a) My own capability and effort
- (b) Help from others
- (c) Neither

Score your Appraisal

Interpretation If your answers to the above questions are 'a', then your appraisal is positive. On the other hand, if the responses are 'c', the appraisal is negative with the response of 'b' positioned in between.

Coping behaviour of an individual is decided on the following aspects. An individual tends to choose a particular coping strategy on the basis of the following questions—

1. What response options are available to me in view of the typical situation?
2. What is the likelihood of the chosen strategy to bring down the stress level?
3. What is the likely reaction to this coping behaviour?
4. Would the outcome be positive so as to stop the cycle of stress and coping process?

The individual mentally weighs the pros and cons of the various coping options available and chooses the one that is assessed as optimally productive. However, sometimes it may so happen that if the impending emotion is severe and intense, it may result in a sharp coping response, much before answering the above questions. If such instances are very

frequent, the individual must systematically train oneself in weighing responses to these questions before reacting overtly.

Let us explain it with a situation where a college student is shocked to see the marks procured for his project work. He scored much less than expected, while the others whose performance is rated far below have scored high. What options are available for the student?

1. He can confront the concerned teacher, accuse him/her of unfair evaluation and release his emotions of anger and frustration.
2. He can check if there is an error in the data entry.
3. He can appeal for a revaluation.
4. He can request the concerned teacher for time and discuss the shortcomings (if any) in the project.
5. He can take the help of the peer group and make an issue out of it.
6. He can take the help of a friend or another teacher to talk to the concerned teacher.
7. He can make light of the whole thing.
8. He can withdraw from the course.
9. He can suffer silently.

When the coping options are identified, the student must set himself to answer the three subsequent questions for each of the answers. Would the chosen option bring down the stress level? Would it put an end to the stress-coping cycle to restore the psychological well-being? What is the likely reaction to this initiative from the other side? After answering these questions, one would choose that strategy, which is more probable to reduce the stress and restore homeostasis. Exercising the right choice is very important here. Because

the very nature of 'stress game' is such that once it begins with a wrong choice, you lose—unless you take the right action to break it.

The behavioural disposition of an individual plays a significant role in making one vulnerable or resilient to stress. Certain behavioural practices function as good insulation or cushion to prevent or absorb stress. If practised carefully, they may fetch effective result in sustaining the psychological well-being of the individual.

Easy Practices to Prevent Stress

There are certain basic practices at the behavioural level that help in preventing or toning down the stress. These are behavioural practices to be followed in day-to-day activities. Some of the practices help in preventing stress, while some other are useful buffers in recovering from the negative impact of stress. Some of them, if practised religiously, may bring in positive changes in personality. The practices discussed below are trainable and found to be effective. One may choose one or a combination of the suggested practices for effective stress management and coping. Some of the easy practices are discussed below.

Set SMART Goals

Many a time we experience stress because of unrealistic goals, either set by others or by ourselves. In order to avoid a wide gap between the aspired and the achieved goal, it is imperative to consider one's own abilities in attaining the goal. The rule of the thumb is to take the SMART path. SMART

refers to set a goal that is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, and Realistic with a Timeline.

Setting a general goal like, 'I will be a changed person' is non-specific. Instead, a goal such as, 'I will not shout at my wife' is specific and hence verifiable.

The decision of a research scholar, 'I will improve my knowledge base' is not only general but also not measurable. The alternative measurable goal would be, 'I will read at least two research articles on my topic everyday.'

The goals that are set too high cannot be achieved. This may become the main source of frustration and stress. An achievable goal necessarily estimates one's own internal and external resources. A school student who failed in the exam cannot achieve the goal of obtaining the first rank in the next exam. The achievability increases if he aims at acquiring more than 50 per cent marks in the next exam.

Whether the goal is realistically set is a matter of subjective judgment. The resolve of a confirmed alcoholic not to touch liquor from the next day is highly unrealistic. The simple reason is that he has no control over his addiction that has reached a pathological level. Such resolves and the subsequent failure to comply with it only compound the stress in him and also others around. A more realistic goal here would be to seek professional help and join a deaddiction centre.

Goals without any time lines are found to be non-specific and not measurable. Further, setting goals without time lines has a high probability of promoting procrastination, which has a great potential to induce tremendous stress when there is pressure to complete the task by the target timeframe. A goal such as, 'I must submit the accounts as soon as possible' does not help in reducing stress. On the other hand, a slightly

different goal that says, 'I must submit the account before 15 March', is more action driven because of the time line.

It is also helpful to form sub-goals for every goal. For example the goal, 'I must submit the account by 15 March', can have the following sub-goals—

- I will study the whole picture of finance this afternoon.
- I will start preparing accounts tomorrow evening.
- I will finish the data entry in the computer by 10 March.
- I will cross-check and tally the figures with the finance department by 12 March.

Fragmenting the goal into several sub-goals provides a good scope for assessment of the workload, and mental organisation of work plan. Once this is done, the scope for stress due to last-minute rush is prevented.

Develop Positive, Realistic Disposition

It is often found that efficient and competent people break under pressure. One major reason for this is a tendency to over-estimate one's own capacity and assume a 'superman' or 'superwoman' role in executing every bit of the task. It is necessary to shed this image or role to avoid stress. Doing one thing at a time enhances the efficiency and quality of work while reducing stress.

Delegating work is an art based on trust in others and willingness to take and correct minor mistakes. Those who develop this art can carry-out pleasant and effective team-work maintaining a good OSL for themselves as well as other team members.

No doubt that the real task-masters can ensure work execution, but sometimes giving-in also pays good dividends in terms of psychological well-being.

A highly task-oriented person may set high standards and be critical of those who tend to commit mistakes. By doing so, the stress levels shoot up not only for those who receive criticism, but also for those who criticise. Hence it is wise to realise and endorse the individual differences and the uniqueness of every individual, and go easy on criticism. This would save one a lot of stress and help in building a pleasant working and living environment.

Re-orientation to Work

Demands from various sources, pressure of time lines and conflicts cause a high degree of stress. There may be times when professional demands, family problems and social obligations independently call your undivided attention. The result could be feelings of constriction, conflict and severe stress. Time management techniques are most crucial here. It is essential to set clear priorities and be assertive about postponing the low priority tasks. Though everybody believes that s/he prioritises his/her tasks, more often than not, we give-in to 'pressure' rather than 'priority'. For example, when you are in the middle of preparing a project report, and a colleague just barges into your room to 'spend time' because s/he is ten minutes early for a meeting in the conference hall of your floor, you feel hesitant to communicate to the colleague that you cannot pay attention to him/her. Similarly, a phone-call that starts with a pleasantry and turns into a long conversation may damage your work plan. Such inabilities

on our part are prone to hamper schedules and induce stress. Assertiveness training is helpful in circumventing such circumstances. We should tell ourselves several times that we will effectively communicate our priorities to the intruders. Interruptions and intrusions should be handled with rehearsed assertiveness.

Countering the Stress of Indecisiveness

Decision-making is very difficult when one is under stress. The indecisiveness in turn precipitates stress. These problems of decision-making and stress are mutually contributing factors. Their mutual nurturance normally results in enhancing the state of confusion and anxiety. The best way to break this vicious cycle is through directed behaviour. Take a piece of paper and a pencil. Write down the full narration of the problem. Divide the plain paper into four columns with sub-headings, description, stakes involved, alternate decisions and consequences.

1. Under the description, record the degree of seriousness of the problem, varying from 'extremely serious' to 'serious'.
2. Enlist the stakes involved in the situation; the stakes may be material stakes like 'losing money/property', social stakes like 'spoiling or staining a relationship with a particular person' or professional stakes like 'losing professional/institutional reputation' or stakes related to self-esteem such as 'foregoing power or position' or 'compromising on long held values'.
3. Write down as many possible decisions (in the form of your response alternatives), as possible.

4. Also enlist all possible consequences to each of the possible decision.

At the end of it you will see the initial ambiguity taking the shape of clarity. You will find the decision-making easier now. Even if you choose none of the options listed in your alternatives, that itself will be a decision to bring down your stress.

Challenging Procrastination

Procrastination refers to a tendency to put off work without any convincing reason. A common tendency to procrastinate culminates in a last minute rush and severe stress. Procrastination could be the outcome of either a casual attitude or an unsurfaced lurking fear of the magnitude of work demanding effort and time. Procrastination is only a manifestation. Since the original cause is wrapped up in manifestation, a concealed attack on procrastination can be expected to bring a desirable result.

The first step in the fight is identifying the problem. If you see that you have put off an activity for the third time, you may identify it as a problem.

It is very difficult to bring yourself to follow the command of 'do it' from 'I will do it later'. So, begin by sticking to your decisions of 'doing it later' but bring yourself to the curiosity of 'just browsing through' or 'seeing it' now. If the activity involves any paper work, just browse through it, casually scanning through any page that you open randomly. Wherever your attention falls read the side-headings, figures, tables, contents and illustrations. Feel the texture of

the paper, weight of the bulk, perceive the font size, type and colour. Do not have any intention of starting the work. Yet, if not immediately, at least after a few hours or the next day you will be motivated to begin the work. This is because, when you casually browse or see the work, the mind incidentally perceives and registers the extent of work involved. It starts organising the work internally. As a result, the unrest building internally would drive you to begin the work.

Identification and Monitoring of Stress

There is a chance that individuals remain stressed for long periods. Before the stress induced by one incident slopes down, another related or unrelated incident might trigger further stress. Continuation of such major or minor incidents fixes an individual in a stressed condition for a long duration, without a pointed awareness of stress-inducers. For effective monitoring and management of stress, it is necessary that one identifies the stressors and is aware of the thoughts and feelings associated with it.

An easily monitored form of stress management is maintaining a stress diary. Each date on the calendar may be divided into five columns, such as, the incident, seriousness, people involved, stakes involved and the action taken up. Briefly describe the incident in column one. Assess the degree of seriousness of the incident in the second column. Identify and record the people immediately and remotely involved in the incident, naming them separately under 'direct and indirect involvement'. Record your response in the last column. Cultivate the habit of reading this diary once a week or fortnightly. This helps in identifying your major events

or people as sources of stress. Further, it also provides you an opportunity to evaluate your post-coping strategies in a 'non-stress' situation. Such a close monitoring of stress helps as a good diagnostic technique, kindling the motivation in you to change your strategies for a productive outcome.

Derive Therapeutic Effects from Laughter

A commonplace belief is that a happy person is not a stressed person. Research evidence has proved that positive affect and feelings of happiness have beneficial effects on the immune system (Salovey et al. 2000). In a systematic study by Martin and Lefcourt (1983), students were taken as subjects. They established a significant relationship between negative life events and stress levels. One of the findings of the study relevant to the context here is that students who had a better sense of humour, and produced humour in difficult situations were less affected by negative life events. Clay (1997) quoted the studies that found that watching humorous videotapes raised the levels of immunoglobulin A in the saliva of students. This is a measure of the functioning of immune system. The speculated reason for the better functioning of the immune system is that laughter stimulates the output of endorphins, the hormone that contributes to a better functioning of the immune system. The findings indicated that watching humorous videotapes enhanced the functioning of immune system. In another Indian social experiment, Hariharan (1990) studied the behavioural outcome of the disadvantaged in simulated stress condition. She found that among the disadvantaged school children, the invulnerable used humour in stressful situation.

The sense of humour and laughter has two-fold benefits—physiological and psychological. The physiological benefits, apart from a heightened functioning of immune system, include the exercise that the lungs receive. When a person laughs, s/he breathes deeply from the diaphragm, inhaling more oxygen. This improves the blood circulation in the body. The psychological benefits of laughter are sudden cognitive shifts and the accompanying emotional changes it brings along.

McCelland and Cheriff (1997) found that the ability to laugh at life's ups and downs is associated with a better immunity against diseases. You should be able to laugh at yourself if you discover that your wrong choice of coping strategy messed up the situation and resulted in an unproductive outcome. Because, once things are out of tune because of ineffective coping, the diagnosis of faults is likely to create frustration and depression in you. With such a serious offshoot, a reappraisal and resumption of coping cycle may become difficult. On the other hand, if you are not afraid of laughing at yourself, you may be making things difficult for yourselves. Lefcourt and Thomas (1998) found that a good sense of humour could lower your stress and distress reactions to difficult events.

All the reasons mentioned above are strong enough for one to join a laughter club, watch comedy shows, enjoy the company of a friend with an excellent sense of humour, and more than anything, at least share jokes with others. Practising these steps may help in inculcating a sense of humour in ourselves.

One must follow certain basic principles at the behavioural level while coping with stress. Following are a few guidelines to that—

1. Slow Down

When you experience physical and mental fatigue, it becomes imperative for you to slow down. Even if you push yourself hard, the quality of your inputs will not be good. Instead, after an adequate rest, you will be able to contribute both in quantity and quality. This is the time you must tell yourself—‘My goal is the distance, not the speed’.

2. Organise

When the situation is complex and complicated, it is better to organise and reorganise the whole perception into meaningful units. Once that is done, you may set priorities after weighing the stakes, and the control that can be exercised. By doing so, you automatically follow the principle of keeping it simple (KIS). Setting priorities can be real stress fighters. While prioritising, you must remember that the final goal is the quality but not the quantity of life. Wheeler and Frank (1988) aptly advocated that to maintain the quality, one must strike an effective balance between challenging good stress and relaxation. Though one has to be prepared to cope with a chain of stressful events in life, one can prepare better only if it is packed with some intermittent relaxation.

3. Seek Social Support

Seeking support does not lower your self-esteem if you do so by exercising your discretion. There are a number of studies, which proved the positive effects of having a strong support network on physical and mental health. Strong and deep

relations with others ensure timely help in times of trouble. Before seeking support, examine the following aspects—

- Is the situation beyond my direct control?
- Who can help me out?
- In what ways s/he can help?
- Would it be better to find out if s/he is in a position to help (i.e. able to invest time, material, etc.)?
- Would the intervention from others reduce my stress?

You can seek support from others in terms of information, material or emotional support. However, remember not to tap the same source of support too frequently.

4. Handle Frustration and Conflicts

The first step to this is assessing yourself. Identify and accept your weaknesses. When dealing with frustration, you must know when to quit and seek new directions. Coon (2000) named the following few methods to handle frustration and conflict:

- Identify the source of frustration. Examine whether the block to set goal is located externally or is it from within.
- Can the situation be changed? If so, how hard should you work for it? Is it under your direct control?
- Are the necessary efforts to change worth it?

The answers to the above questions suggest whether you should persist or quit. But here, you must be very objective in identifying the real and imaginary barriers.

Apart from all these, it is very essential to earmark time for oneself to enjoy the luxury of leisure and relaxation. Such private time for self also helps in enhancing self-esteem of individuals. The effects of relaxation and self-esteem together have a therapeutic value in reducing stress.

It may be a good idea to take short breaks from one's stressful routine to indulge in self-care and relaxation. After such breaks one can resume work with feelings of rejuvenation.

Massage is one of the oldest methods of reducing tension. Body massage in any system such as *panchakarma* of Ayurveda, naturopathy or any other Asian approach helps in reducing stress. Even the normal traditional South Indian practice of 'weekly oil baths' helps in stress-reduction and inducing good restful sleep. The facial massage in beauty parlours or steam-baths produce similar effects of relaxation. The massage is not only helpful in reducing the muscular tension, but also includes a psychological therapeutic value. The sensation of touch carries an emotional communication with it. The professional strokes during the massage communicates to the receiver the feeling of being loved and cared. The pleasant sensation during massage induces a euphoric effect and generates a sense of well-being.

Listening to soothing music also has proven therapeutic effect. While involved in a busy mental activity, pleasing instrumental music at low volume may provide the much-needed 'masking effect' and filter the assorted noises from the environment. If one is working in an absolutely silent environment, the music provides a good auditory background. In either case, it helps in better concentration and relaxation. Reading a book may also be a good diversion by shifting one's cognitive focus away from work stress.

It may be necessary to conclude that 'stress' is not a negative term. In fact, it is a force that sustains your action; it is an opportunity to unfold your potential; it is a situation when the real personality of the individual unfolds itself. Stress forms an essential part of our life. It is like a shadow, which sometimes spreads long in front of you and occupies the path ahead of you when you walk; sometimes, it takes a long spread behind you when you walk ahead, and sometimes, it is dwarfed and is camouflaged. Nevertheless, it is always around you. Thus the wisdom lies in accepting it as a challenging force in life rather than avoiding it. However, whether you allow it to occupy a space ahead of you or behind you in your march towards progress, success rests on the coping style you embrace. It is never too late to change the coping styles. It can be emulated by studying the successes of others; it can also be learnt from an objective analysis of the failure of others or can be regularly practised in bits and pieces or in sync with the only motto of maintaining psychological well-being.

Epilogue

So far we have discussed the techniques that are useful in stress-reduction and effective coping. While such knowledge is extremely important, an understanding of reactions and responses to be avoided is equally important. It is not uncommon to find ourselves initiating actions that provide instant relief to our stress. Should one take refuge in such behaviour?

The Avoidable ‘Quick Fixes’

While it is very important to know and practise the behavioural skills for effective coping and productive results, it is equally important to be aware of the behaviour that has a debilitating effect on the well-being. While under stress, people are often seen seeking quick remedies. These are termed as ‘quick fixes’. Although these remedies may be useful in providing immediate relief, they are found ineffective in sustaining the relief. Some of them may even be counter-productive (Constable 1992).

Alcohol

Alcohol is believed to induce relaxation for a normal social drinker. However, the very definition of 'social drinking' seems to vary from culture to culture. It is scientifically proven that for a normal social drinker, the gradual tolerance of alcohol progressively diminishes the feelings of relaxation and elation. As a result, one may either increase the frequency or quantity of intake of alcohol. Continued use of alcohol has a devastating effect on liver, heart and brain. It also causes permanent sleep-disorders. All the above in the long run are counter-productive to relaxation.

Tobacco

Tobacco stimulates the production of adrenaline. Many a times, it is observed that a habitual smoker involved in serious work takes frequent smoke breaks for increasing alertness while working. Smoking tobacco gives a feeling of instant energy and relief from anxiety.

Prolonged use of tobacco impairs the respiratory and cardiovascular system. It also enhances the risk of different types of cancer. In the long run it is found to have a negative impact on sleep patterns.

Coffee

Coffee is considered to be a stimulant. Caffeine in coffee improves alertness and reaction time. It is also found to enhance concentration and dexterity. Though these can be the immediate effects of coffee, many cups of coffee in a day

may cause digestive upsets and increase the heartbeat. Dependence on coffee may develop gradual tolerance to coffee. This decreases its power to stimulate. Increased intake of caffeine can cause muscle tension, irritability and insomnia. All these responses are associated with stress. Thus coffee, though it might provide instant relief from stress, may prove counter-productive in the long run.

Sleeping Pills

In many urban areas, sleeping pills are available over the counter at chemist shops. Hence they are also being used without medical advice. Sleeping pills give a feeling of relaxation and act on the brain to induce sleep. The pattern of such induced sleep closely resembles natural sleep. There is a chance of developing dependence on them over a period of time. They can disturb the natural pattern of sleep. Further, continuous use of sleeping pills may result in lethargy and adverse effects on the performance of day-to-day activities, which in turn may form the basis for stress.

Tranquilisers

Normally, they are expected to be used only on medical prescription. Tranquilisers relieve anxiety and provide relaxation. They slow down respiration and nervous functioning. They have dangerous effects when taken in large doses or in combination with alcohol. If anybody takes tranquilisers continuously for more than three days, it may interrupt work during waking hours. It may also cause insomnia, change the sleep rhythm, reducing the periods of deep sleep, and

may also cause nightmares. Hence it should be avoided unless medically prescribed.

Thus all 'quick fixes' are found to have an adverse effect in the long run, and hence are not positive contributors to psychological well-being.

After an extensive reading on stress, coping and stress management techniques, while one would certainly acquire knowledge on the subject, and skills of managing stress, the reading may also trigger a few questions related to the whole phenomena. This could happen either because of some gaps in the reading, or because some of the facts discussed either contradict or remain silent on certain common beliefs. Few such questions are raised and answers to them are provided.

Few Questions on Stress and their Answers

Is the Impact of Stress Same for Men and Women?

According to a study reported by Constable (1992), among the male and female executives, men responded to stress with more physical symptoms such as illnesses like ulcers and cardiovascular disorders. Women, on the other hand, manifested more mental symptoms such as excessive anxiety, obsession and depression. But among those executives with stress related illnesses, both the genders had similarities in certain behavioural aspect such as sedentary lifestyle, alcohol abuse and work habits that showed compulsive tendencies.

Is Stress One of the Causes of Heart Attack?

What triggers this question is the research evidence that Type 'A' personalities are highly prone to heart attacks. Type 'A' personalities are those who tend to be aggressive, competitive and ambitious. They handle many things simultaneously. Above all, they are also found to harbour hostility. All these characteristics are closely linked to stress. Since Type 'A' personalities are found to be vulnerable to heart attacks, it is assumed that stress is associated with heart attacks.

The biochemistry of stress is not yet understood. Yet there is evidence that stress can increase the blood cholesterol level. High cholesterol levels in turn increase the risk of heart attack.

Can Type 'A' Personalities Change their Behaviour?

It is not only possible but also necessary for Type 'A' personalities to change their behaviour. At the outset, Type 'A' personalities must be aware of their behaviour and the circumstances that nurture such behaviour. Once aware of these details, they would be motivated to change. Techniques of fragmenting the large goal, the time management technique, behaviour modification approach and biofeedback approach are a few alternatives that can bring successful behavioural change.

Does Stress Cause Cancer?

Researchers have uncovered links between stress and cancer (Azar 1996b; Salovey et al. 2000). There have been

experiments with rats that established a close link between stress and cancer. Cancer cells were implanted in the rats. They were grouped under three categories, namely, those which would be exposed to high stress (inescapable shock), moderate stress (escapable shock) and no stress (no shock). Results revealed that the likelihood of rejecting the cancer cells was more in case of rats with no stress or moderate stress, while the vulnerability and fatality of the high stress rats was twice higher than the other rats with low or moderate stress. The explanation for this is that the intermittent electric shocks can inhibit the formation and effectiveness of Natural Killer (NK) cells. The NK cells are effective in the identification and destruction of cancer cells; when their functioning is inhibited, cancers can develop rapidly, leading to fatal consequences. This indicates that there is a positive relationship between stress and vulnerability to cancer.

Can Physical Exercise Repair the Damage Already done by Stress?

Some of the physical impacts of stress are found to have restored the status of well-being. For example, it has been proved that stress increases the cholesterol level in blood. Regular vigorous exercises like jogging and cycling have been shown to restore the cholesterol to normal level. The common observation is that the muscular tension caused by stress is alleviated by physical exercise. Hence physical exercises have the capacity to repair the adverse impact of stress through tension releasing function.

Does Crying Reduce Stress?

Feedback from a number of people and also personal experience of many confirm the belief that crying releases a lot of stress. After bouts of weeping and crying, people have reported experiencing a 'lightness in the heart' or a sense of relief. Constable (1992) reports a survey where 73 per cent of men and 85 per cent of women asserted that they felt better after crying.

In an experiment, chemical analysis was carried on the tears shed by people watching emotionally upsetting movie and tears of people exposed to onion vapour. It was found that emotional tears shed by the people watching the movie contained significantly higher levels of protein compared to tears induced by onion vapours. Theoretically it is said that tears are helpful in removing chemicals that build-up during emotionally stressful situations. This is assumed to restore the body to a state of homeostatic balance. This awareness perhaps must remove the cultural barriers on men to respond to stress by crying.

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