

SECTION 4

PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCES

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THE PHENOMENON OF STRESS AND THE CAUSES OF ITS OCCURRENCE IN APPLICANTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Modern social and economic, political and educational transformations: urbanization, the ultra-fast pace of life, the need to be an active participant in the educational process while obtaining education, extremely high demands on the performance of job duties at work, the impact of war and other factors contribute to the emergence of stressful conditions in modern society, accompanied by a high level of uncertainty, creating numerous psychological challenges and stressful situations for people, including the applicants for higher education.

“*Stress*” is “a non-specific reaction of the body in response to an extremely strong stimulus / external action that exceeds the norm, as well as the corresponding reaction of the nervous system” [6].

The term “stress” began to be used in physiology, psychology and medicine at the beginning of the 20th century. The term was introduced into the scientific discourse by the American psychophysiological Walter Bradford Cannon in 1932. This is how, in his classic works, the universal reaction of the body “fight or flight” was derived [2].

The world-famous Canadian scientist, endocrinologist, pathophysiological, and biologist Hans Selye was the first to discover an uncharacteristic, universal response of the body to external influences that require change. Initially, the scientist called this reaction the “*general adaptation syndrome*” (1936), and later replaced it with the concept of “*stress*” (1946) [7, p. 159].

According to H. Selye’s point of view, *stress is “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it... .”* [5, p. 17]. So, there is a typical reaction of the body, which is always the same to different types of stimuli – stressors [4].

When a person face a stressor, the sympathetic nervous system is activated: the hypothalamus triggers the secretion of “stress hormones” from the adrenal cortex – adrenaline (particularly in situations of fear) and noradrenaline (characteristic of anger reactions). The main task of the body in such a situation is to “survive”, since in order to escape from danger or to fight it, instant mobilization of all physiological resources is necessary. Stress hormones cause a rapid heartbeat, dilated pupils, muscle tension, accelerated and shallow breathing – all the body’s reserve capabilities are mobilized, and the body enters a state of readiness to act: “fight or flight” [2]. However, such mobilization cannot be maintained for a long time, since the body’s energy reserves are depleted. At this stage, the parasympathetic nervous system is activated, which provides the opposite reaction – relaxation, slowing down of physiological processes and restoration of resources. It is during rest and sleep that the body returns to a state of equilibrium.

According to the hypothesis of H. Selye, the general adaptation syndrome (stress) is characteristic of all living organisms. The general uncharacteristic reaction to adaptation has the following signs: 1) adrenal hypertrophy; 2) atrophy of the thymus and lymph nodes; 3) erosions / ulcers of the gastric mucosa, which constitute a triad of physiological changes [4].

Student age is a period of intensive personality formation, accompanied by profound changes in the emotional, cognitive and social spheres. At this time, students determine their life and professional orientations, the values are transformed, self-identity is actively formed, and the mechanisms for overcoming stressful situations are improved. An important characteristic of this age stage is the desire for self-affirmation and finding one’s own place in society, which often causes internal contradictions and increased stress levels.

Student age, which covers approximately the period from 17 to 23 years, is characterized by intensive changes both in the body and in the psyche. Psychophysiologicaly, this stage is accompanied by active improvement of the nervous system and strengthening of adaptation mechanisms in response to increasing mental and emotional loads. The nervous system at this time reaches a high level of functional efficiency, which contributes to the rapid assimilation of a significant amount of information. At the same time, the incomplete development of the emotional and volitional sphere causes increased sensitivity to adverse external influences, in particular to stress factors [1].

Upon entering a higher education institution, a student acquires a new social status and gradually adapts to an unfamiliar circle of relationships and an educational environment. The second year marks the beginning of the professional specialization, which leads to an increase in interest in

scientific research work and increases the attention to scientific achievements as indicators of immersion in the professional field. The third year is characterized by the formation of clearer guidelines for future professional work; students gradually form new material and civic values related to financial independence, future employment and choice of a place of work. However, studying in the graduation year is also characterized by negative experiences of social and professional uncertainty, which is associated with the need to find employment in times of crisis (war, economic instability and high level of unemployment), which can naturally affect their mental health. The internal state of applicants for higher education is closely related to their academic work, their level of focus and ability to overcome difficult situations, especially during the exam period, since the exam session usually has the most pronounced traumatic effect on their psycho-emotional state, as the academic load increases significantly at this time.

Stress among applicants for higher education is most often caused by a number of *negative factors*, including:

- ✓ excessive study load;
- ✓ adverse physical conditions;
- ✓ drastic changes in lifestyle;
- ✓ health problems;
- ✓ financial difficulties;
- ✓ contradiction between reality and its subjective perception [8].
- ✓ chronic lack of sleep and disruption of rest routine;
- ✓ inability to effectively allocate study time and rest time;
- ✓ dissatisfaction with the marks received and the results of knowledge control;
- ✓ difficulties in mastering certain academic subjects, leading to a decline in academic progress;
- ✓ incomplete or poor-quality doing of homework, missing classes due to illness or other reasons, untimely completion of practical, laboratory work and projects;
- ✓ indifference or decreased motivation to study;
- ✓ conflict or tense situations in interaction with classmates or teachers, difficulties in communication;
- ✓ unfavorable physical learning conditions (excessive noise, poor lighting, inappropriate temperature in classrooms);
- ✓ loss of interest in the chosen specialty or feeling insecure about choosing a profession [3].

Therefore, the formation of stress resistance in students is influenced by a number of academic, social, and personal factors: *academic workloads* (characterized by a high level of requirements, the need to take exams, write and defend scientific projects, and tight deadlines; the need to quickly

process a significant amount of information; pressure to achieve high academic results); *social changes* (accompanied by a change of residence and adaptation to an unfamiliar social environment; characterized by the formation of new interpersonal relationships and the establishment of friendly relations; a feeling of distance from family and a decrease in the level of emotional support from loved ones); *personal challenges* (characterized by the process of self-determination and the search for one’s own identity; planning professional development and building a future career; the need to balance study, work, and personal life).

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