PDE INDUCTION WEEK

STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR TEACHERS

Dr Stephen James Minton AFBPss CPsychol
Room 3083, Arts Building, TCD
mintonst@tcd.ie
01 896 2216
About the Presenter

- Chartered Psychologist with the British Psychological Society.
- Full-time lecturer in the Psychology of Education at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin (since 2005).
- Graduate of the University of Glasgow (B.Sc. (Hons.) (1995)) and Trinity College Dublin (M.Sc. (Couns. Psychol.) (1997), Ph.D. (2007)).

I am interested in the following research areas:

- (i) The psychology of aggression (SBV, genocide)
- (ii) The psychology of prejudice (homophobia, alterophobia), and addressing prejudice in and through educational practice
- (iii) Applications of psychology (esp. psychodynamic and existential psychology) in educational practice
Stress and Stress Management for Teachers
Topics of Discussion

1 - The Physiology of Stress
2 - Understanding the Psychology of Stress
3 – Stress and the Workplace
4 – Coping with Stress
5 – Points for Thought and Discussion
1A - The Physiology of Stress (I)

- Emotional arousal is associated with the ‘alarm response’
- The alarm response is due to the activity of the autonomic nervous system
- About the Nervous System
  - Functionally, can be divided into the voluntary NS and the involuntary NS
  - The involuntary NS (aka the Autonomic NS) can be divided into two branches:
    - The Parasympathetic Branch
    - The Sympathetic Branch
1B – The Physiology of Stress (II)

♦ Major Sympathetic Responses:
  – Increase: diameter of pupil, heart rate, breathing rate, blood supply to the limbs, muscular tension, release of adrenalin
  – Decrease: blood supply to the viscera, capacity of bladder, rate of peristalsis

♦ The ‘Fight / Flight’ Response
  – This alarm response is seen in both carnivorous (hunting) and herbivorous (hopefully, escaping) animals; hence, it shows ‘biological utility’
  – Humans show the same alarm response when afraid, angry, stressed, excited – i.e., emotionally charged in ANY way
  – Humans are conscious animals, so we COGNITIVELY LABEL our emotions depending on context
  – Hence, we DON’T feel stress, then experience an alarm response; we DO experience an alarm response and interpret this as stress
A ‘medical’ approach - Hans Selye - ‘The Stress of Life’ (1956)
- Used Cannon’s work on homeostasis (1932) – the idea that the living organism has mechanisms which regulate its internal environment

‘General Adaption Syndrome’ (GAS) - a set of responses that exist when an organism is exposed to stress. Has three phases:
- Alarm (when we register the existence of a threat; here, adrenaline is released by the body in order to trigger and maintain the ‘fight / flight’ response);
- Resistance (if the threat remains, we attempt to adapt or act in order to cope with it); and,
- Exhaustion (as we cannot cope indefinitely, our body’s resources become depleted).
  - Leads to development of stress-related symptoms and illnesses.
- In 1975 – distinction between negative stress (‘distress’) and positive stress (‘eustress’), according to how we perceive a stressor.
2B – Understanding the Psychology of Stress

  - Internal (personality, life experience, coping-styles) and external factors (features of the stressor itself) are important in determining whether a stimulus will be appraised by an individual as a stressor or not (primary appraisal).
  - Secondary appraisal – an individual’s assessment of whether he or she has sufficient resources to cope, which then in turn may affect the primary appraisal.
  - The person will attempt different coping strategies; these may be revised according to his or her assessment of how effective they are.
2C – Understanding the Psychology of Stress


- Based originally on the medical records of 5,000 medical patients
- 43 stressful events that can contribute to illness are ranked in terms of ‘life change units’ from 100 downwards.
- Death of a spouse (100); divorce (73); marital separation (65); imprisonment (63); Christmas (12).
- One adds up the number of ‘life change units’ that has applied to an individual in the past twelve months.
  - Over 300 means that there is a definite risk of stress-induced illness;
  - 150 – 299 means that there is a moderate risk of stress-induced illness; and,
  - less than 150 means that there is a slight risk of stress-induced illness.

Appealing, but the problem is that what is stressful to person A at one point in time is not necessarily what is stressful to him or her at another point in time, or to person B at all!
2D – Understanding the Psychology of Stress

- A ‘psychophysiological’ / ‘cognitive’ approach - adapted from Hinton & Burton, 1994
3 – Stress and the Workplace

♦ Tonic versus Chronic Stress

♦ Workplace factors associated with chronic stress (Tiernan, 2000):
  – Task ambiguity;
  – Contradiction between formal and informal rules;
  – Poor time organisation;
  – Role conflict and role ambiguity.

♦ Hence, the following strategies can be helpful:
  – Goals: should be clear, reasonable, negotiable, one should have the appropriate training and resources to accomplish set goals; feedback should be given on completion of goals;
  – Written instructions (i.e., job / task description) can help clear up ambiguity;
  – Know the boundaries of your position and training;
  – Be a planner!
4A – Coping with Stress (I)

- Coping Strategies from Rational Emotive Therapy (Ellis, 1950s on)
  - Rational and Irrational Beliefs, and Self-Statements
  - The A, B, C of Emotions
    - A = Antecedent Event(s)  B = Beliefs
    - C = Consequences  D = Dispute
    - E = New philosophy of Life
  - ‘Stinking Thinking’
    - Dispute absolutistic thinking
    - Look out for words like ‘should’, ‘must’, ‘got to’, ‘have to’, always, never - replace with ‘can’, ‘could choose to’, etc.
    - Reaffirm freedom of choice and authorship of our own lives in a logical way
4B – Coping with Stress (II)

• Physical Methods of Relaxation
  – Rationale for Physical Relaxation
    • Remember, we cognitively label emotions
    • The alarm response works on homeostatic biofeedback loops, and as a whole, if left unchecked, is self-accelerating – hence, we can slow the whole alarm process down by relaxing
  – Progressive Muscular Relaxation
    • Relaxation Tapes
    • PMR Techniques
      – Awareness of breathing
      – Slowing down and control of breathing
      – Visualisation of tension leaving the system
      – Working up or down complete body system
5 – Points for Thought and Discussion

- Please think about, write short notes on, but above all, take the opportunity to discuss with colleagues the following pair of questions:

- (i) Using whichever of the models that have been mentioned in this session that you wish, work out the factors that cause you to experience stress in your working and personal life. Are these things likely to persist? Are there phases of one’s career and life that are more stressful than others? Does teaching get easier when we achieve a position that offers us financial and job security? Or acceptable levels of challenge and support? Or when we learn that ‘good teaching doesn’t necessarily bring good results’?

- (ii) Think about the perceptions of those outside the teaching profession about the work of those within it. What are the stressors that those outside the profession are NOT aware of? Is it important that educators are supported in their work by societies at large? If so, why? Would it be a desirable thing to educate the general public about the realities of education? If so, how might this be accomplished?