

Emotions & Stress



How to manage them

K. Chandiramani

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KISHORE CHANDIRAMANI

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INTRODUCTION

This book brings together all the insights that I have come across in my life and found them helpful in dealing with my own stress and that of my clients. I see no major contradictions between modern psychiatric and psychological practices on one hand and the ancient traditions of mankind on the other. This book is an attempt to bring together all of those approaches under one umbrella and also to integrate them as far as possible.

I have found these approaches work for clients suffering from almost all forms of psychiatric problems, psychosomatic disorders, relationship issues, work-related stresses and also for individuals who do not suffer from any psychiatric problems, as some chapters address the existential issues that afflict all human beings, which may be in different proportions.

There are also spiritual elements that reduce stress, facilitate promotion of mental health and allow access to inner peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kishore Chandiramani has worked as a psychiatrist for more than thirty years across cultures and countries. He has tried to understand the mind from a number of different perspectives and this quest led him to study not just psychology and psychiatry but also philosophy and spiritual practices. He is currently in private practice in England and runs a stress management programme (Chandiramani, 2014) both for psychiatric patients as well as for psychologically healthy individuals who want to increase their immunity to stress.

CHAPTER 1

What Is Stress?

“People are not disturbed by things, but by the view they take of them”; this nearly 2000-year-old quote from Epictetus, a Greek philosopher, has received support from scientific research in recent years. Research suggests that individuals who do not perceive a stressful situation as stressful are very much less likely to experience the adverse effects and are able to cope better with stressful events. This does not mean that the actual quantum of the demand is immaterial; it does play a part if the demands cross a certain threshold for the individuals. It’s just that the scientific opinion supports the notion that the perception is more important than the actual quantum of the demands.

We see ourselves taking different views of the same thing at different times, at times just the opposite of each other. We see someone as friendly and caring in the morning and a few hours later realise that they have been very selfish, unhelpful and uncaring. How to know which of these two thoughts represents the reality?

Just because a thought is there in my mind does not mean that it represents the reality out there or my true feelings. It may be a random thought, a wild thought, an adopted thought, an induced thought; and, as opposed to all of those, a thought that truly represents my core identity and inner feelings.

Unfortunately, we become advocates of our thoughts as soon as they enter our minds, leaving very little room to challenge them. Different forms of therapies and meditative practices, including Vipassana, help us recognise our true feelings and thoughts and they also help us see the reality as it is and not as it appears to be. This can enable us to deal with situations more appropriately, thereby reducing our stress.

Stress is defined as the gap between one's perception of the demands placed upon the individual and one's ability to cope with it. It's a very popular term and almost everyone understands it. Almost all psychological problems, be it anxiety, depression, anger or relationship problems, are forms of stress and the use of this term does not help distinguish one from another. When discussing mental illness, the word stress often causes more confusion, as it fails to convey the precise nature of the problem.

Mental health professionals use the term "stress disorders" only when they fail to categorise the condition into the neat categories of anxiety disorder, depressive illness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc.

To simplify the matter one can say that stress is an overarching term and it manifests differently in different individuals depending upon their personalities and mental state. It is the cause and also the end result of psychological disorders. The same stress can cause eczema in one person and alcoholism in another, depending upon their mental makeup.

Stress can therefore be understood in terms of the following three ways:

- As a stimulus: Environmental events such as war, earthquake, famine and accidents can cause stress even when the coping abilities of the individual are good.
- As a response (mental and physiological reaction): A stress-prone person experiences high levels of stress even in situations considered normal by most individuals.
- As an interaction between the individual and the environment (e.g. relationship problems).

A washing machine for the mind: Most of our daily actions and interactions produce stress, as our psyche is mobilised from the resting state to a state of action in order to meet a demand. The pure mind gets exposed to the environment and picks up stress, very much like our clothes, which pick up

CHAPTER 2

What Causes Stress?

Poverty is stressful; being rich and famous is also stressful
Not having friends is stressful; having too many friends is also stressful
Living alone is stressful; being a householder is also stressful
Being unemployed is stressful; having a job is also stressful
Not having any children is stressful; having children is also stressful
Doing the right thing is stressful; not doing it is also stressful.

Nearly every situation is associated with some stress. Life without stress is inconceivable as stress cannot be avoided no matter what we do or choose not to do.

The opposite of it is also true, that almost every situation offers a set of opportunities, doing something offers opportunities and not doing it offers a different set of opportunities; being a householder offers opportunities and living a solitary life also offers opportunities. Keeping our focus on the opportunities can be a way of coping with stress.

Just as it is normal to feel stressed, it is only normal that one makes constant efforts to manage it more effectively. If left unmanaged, stress can lead to emotional, psychological and even physical illnesses, sometimes not known

even to the person themselves, and also to health professionals and scientists. Psychological stress affects us in more ways than we normally acknowledge.

Have I bitten off more than I can chew?

I hardly say anything more than a “hello” or “how are you” to my neighbours.

*I don't even know the personal and family details of
people I have worked closely with for years.*

I have got about twenty friends, but no time for intimate talk.

I multitask – watch television and read the newspaper whilst I am eating.

I receive texts/emails/phone calls at least once every ten minutes; is it too many?

I use my mobile phone even in my bedroom and bathroom; is it inappropriate?

I work six days a week and sometimes late nights preparing reports.

I go on holiday only once a year for a couple of weeks; is it too little time?

*I have no time for the books and movies of my interest
that have been released in recent months.*

*I hardly think about issues such as the purpose of life, the meaning in
relationships, my true calling and what will become of me after death.*

Is it all too much and too stressful for me?

Overwork can cause stress, but the perception of it plays a greater role. Stress is our response to a demanding situation that we feel unable to cope with.

People who have studied the human mind in greater depth tell us that a simple awareness of a situation does not cause stress. If that were so, then everyone who becomes aware of a difficult situation should be stressed. The fact that they don't indicates that our perception and judgements play a major role in the experience of stress.

CHAPTER 3

Understanding the Mind

Is my obsession with work an escape from the dreadful loneliness of my existence or am I truly actualising my full potential?

Is my desire to succeed and be powerful compensating for my feelings of being small and helpless or am I genuinely ambitious?

Is my indifference to you an attempt to hide my attraction for you or am I truly uninterested?

Is my attempt to please you just a way of overcoming my fear of you or am I a genuinely pleasant person?

Is my politeness covering up my indifference to this world?

Is my rigid moral value system protecting me from an adventurous streak in me or am I truly a person of high moral values?

Is my anger with you a reflection of my deep attachment and identification with you, and the helplessness that comes with it, or is it a sign of my separateness and lack of empathy?

Is my being judgemental with you a genuine desire for your success and growth?

Is it not normal to feel depressed in this apparently indifferent and unfriendly world?

Is my charity compensating for my guilt?

How can I say that I have understood my mind fully without understanding my dreams? Aren't my dreams more bizarre than the symptoms my clients come up with, even the ones with psychosis? We can't understand the mind without taking into account the existence of the unconscious mind. It will not be possible to explain dreams, symptoms of psychosis, panic disorder, phobias, etc. without acknowledging the existence of the unconscious mind.

In order to understand the psychological symptoms and deal with them it is very important that we understand how the normal mind works.

Functioning of the Mind

The mind can be understood in terms of two broad compartments: the conscious and the unconscious. The conscious mind is just the tip of an iceberg and the rest is the unconscious. According to a rough estimate only about 10% to 20% of our mind is conscious and the rest is unconscious. The psychological implication of this is that when we experience extreme emotions we have to say to ourselves that we are talking about only 10% to 20% of the mind and the rest is unknown to us. The remaining 80% to 90% contains joys and sorrows that may be several times greater than the joys and sorrows we have ever experienced in our lifetime. Jung (1959), a Swiss psychologist, has described confronting this unconscious as the central task of human life.

In modern times the unconscious mind has been popularised by Sigmund Freud (1915). According to his psychoanalytic theories, we can't access the

CHAPTER 5

Lifestyle and Stress

Everything that we do causes stress, but it gets worked on in the normal course, unless our natural ability to undo is impaired. It is easy to understand that doing too much can cause stress, but doing too little can also cause stress. If one has not realised one's potential to a reasonable extent, it can cause stress that comes with feelings of existential guilt.

Lifestyle can cause stress and changing it can result in recovery; there may not be any need for professional help if one can discover the links between one's symptoms and lifestyle, and has normal coping abilities.

I remember a client of mine who had suffered from anxiety associated with a number of physical symptoms, such as hyperacidity, tension headaches, tiredness, sleep problems, etc., and he reported a complete remission in his symptoms after attending just one therapy session, which involved a discussion on how his lifestyle was causing the symptoms.

Lifestyle can be understood in terms of a number of different aspects as described in the following sections.

Personality and stress

It is not difficult to understand that if we asked a poet to work as an accountant or a philosopher to fight a war, they would get stressed. It is therefore important to know one's own personality.

One man's meat is another man's poison. What is a coping mechanism for your friend might be a real stress for you. It is important to know what situations, people and things make you stressed and what helps you.

- Are you a reserved or a social person?
- Do you have an artistic or scientific mind?
- Are you a philosopher, rebel, warrior, teacher, preacher, healer, mystic, manager, worker, etc.?
- Do you like mathematics or music or philosophy?
- Do you prefer security over adventure? Do you stay within conventions or like being unconventional?

Answers to all these questions can help you understand why you get stressed doing certain tasks and in certain situations, and tailor your life in a way that reduces your stress and enhances your life satisfaction.

At the simplest level there are two types of people: introverts and extroverts. It is not uncommon to see introverts being jealous of extroverts and vice versa. The extroverts make friends very easily and appear very confident in social situations, making the introverts want to become like them.

However, the downside of being an extrovert is that they make enemies also too easily and have difficulty bringing intensity in their work. Introverts, on the other hand, have fewer enemies and they can be more focused in their work, the qualities extroverts want. This could be a source of stress as one struggles to imbibe the qualities of the other. The solution to this problem lies in an introvert trying to be a successful introvert and in an extrovert being a successful extrovert, by way of playing on their own strengths.

The second aspect worth mentioning here is that an introvert's batteries are charged in solitude whereas an extrovert finds social situations rejuvenating. This fact has important implications in coping with stress (i.e. introverts should find time for solitude at the end of a hectic day and extroverts should have social avenues available to them after finishing work).

CHAPTER 6

Love, Sex and Relationships

“It is not for the sake of the husband [or the wife] that the husband is loved, but for the sake of the Self that the husband is loved.”

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (1983)

If you think you haven't found true love or the right partner there is no need to worry too much; you are in the majority. It is my rough estimate that about 60% of the general population live with the thought that they haven't found true love or the right partner; another 20% suffer from delusion of love (i.e. believe they have found true love when they haven't) and it's only the remaining 20% who have truly found their soul mates and would still want to be with the same partner in their next life, if there is one.

You can't create the magic of love, nor can you make it disappear instantly. You can't choose to fall in love or fall out of it by will. It just happens to you. You can only create conditions to increase its likelihood of happening or fading away, but the results are not guaranteed.

However, you can certainly do the following:

- Make your love grow and mature
- Slowly destroy or cripple it
- Not see when it's there
- Imagine that it's there when it is not
- Know it's not real although in the beginning you thought it was
- Know it's real now although you first thought it wasn't

What is love?

It's a very straightforward question, but the answer is not that easy. There are couples who can't live without each other, but who still don't see the other person as their soul mate, and there are couples who can't live together, but who still see each other as their soul mate. There are individuals who have great physical and psychological intimacy, but who are still searching, and there are individuals who feel unfulfilled, but who consider themselves settled in relationships.

It's difficult to decide the core ingredients of true love – is it physical intimacy, friendship, companionship, commitment, fulfilment, exclusivity and being faithful or is it something more? – in the realms of spiritual or divine connections.

How to know whether you are truly in love or whether it's just infatuation? Reflection on the following might help:

- When you have butterfly feelings and feel on cloud nine all the time
- When you become obsessed with the person and can't free your mind
- When you want to spend the rest of your life with that person
- When the person makes you feel very special
- When you know that the person is completely honest and genuine with you and you want to be the same
- When you put the needs of your beloved above your needs or on a level with your needs
- When you want to be with the same person in your next life as well, if you believe in rebirth

CHAPTER 8

Coping with Stress

How do people cope normally? What is normal coping? And what is abnormal? Am I suffering from stress that needs management? Is it possible that normal individuals also use unhealthy coping mechanisms or need stress management? Can a normal person who doesn't suffer from any clinical symptoms also benefit from psychological approaches? How to know whether my coping style is healthy or unhealthy?

These questions come to mind quite normally, but generally people don't go to great lengths in trying to find answers to them. It seems appropriate to think deeply about these issues if one is looking for ways of improving one's well-being.

Psychoanalysis teaches us how to find meaning in our thoughts and feelings, and cognitive therapists help us find alternate and more rational thoughts that can replace our existing illogical thoughts. The experiential therapists, on the other hand, emphasise the need to undo our negative feelings without bothering about the thoughts.

Gautama the Buddha, on the other hand, suggested a totally different and unique solution to the problems, which is becoming very popular worldwide in modern times and the scientific community seems to have embraced it.

His approach discourages us from fighting with our thoughts and feelings, and explains how we can detach ourselves from them with the objective of managing them better. Every thought and every feeling dies its natural death if we don't make a judgement about it, join in with it, react to it, resist it, identify with it, etc. Instead if we can simply observe it with our emotionally neutral consciousness it loses its hold on us and we can manage it better. No matter how horrible or exciting a thought is, we don't question its coming to our mind and choose not to react to it emotionally during the time of reflection, and this helps us deal with it better.

An understanding of the normal healing mechanisms and how stress is produced is essential here before we can discuss coping mechanisms and specific strategies of coping with stress.

The following basic assumptions can help us understand stress and coping with it.

- The human body is largely self-renewing and so is the mind. Nature has given us all the ability to undo stress. There are no new lessons to be learned in managing stress; all we need is to unlearn the lessons of stress that we have learned so far. It is easy to understand that we all get stressed in difficult situations and we would reach a breaking point if we did not have the ability to neutralise this stress. The fact that we don't reach a breaking point proves that there must be inner healing mechanisms.
- This natural ability to undo stress operates through a homeostatic mechanism that works in our minds and is driven by biological processes that result in lowering of stress levels. These homeostatic mechanisms come into force only when we come into contact with our inner stress. These mechanisms are switched off if we cut ourselves off from the inner stress signals. The mechanism is similar to that of a thermostat – higher room temperature leads to switching off of the heating system and a lower temperature switches it on. Health professionals are aware that a similar mechanism governs our blood pressure, blood sugar, hormonal secretions and many other functions in the body.
- The mind heals itself best when it is not constantly receiving new experiences through the five senses. It may be that when we feel that

CHAPTER 9

Recovery Process

“Magical cures can disappear magically.”



*In the beginning there was an idea
And then an intention
And then a decision, followed by an action
And then there were problems and the experience of failure
Followed by loss of motivation
And then there was a phase of no action, and return to old habits
And then there was experience of more suffering
And then there was a renewed motivation and action
And then there was a small taste of success
And then there was more action, and perseverance
And then there was more success and some failures
And then there was much more success and very little failure*

*If I count the number of failures, they were greater than the number
of successes
But I have arrived at my destination and
I am happy*



Prochaska et al (1992) have described the above stages of change that a client goes through during recovery from addictive behaviours but their model seems to have a wider applicability. Recovery from a psychological problem is never smooth and predictable. There are a number of factors that play a role in reaching the goal of freedom from symptoms. Neither the client nor the therapist is fully aware of the obstacles in the way, as quite a few of them operate at the unconscious level. Secondly, it's difficult to judge the improvement by taking into consideration only the feeling state of a client at a given point in time. The intensity of feelings at a given point in time can be misleading.

Are You Inside an Emotion or Outside of It?

The same reality hurts very badly at one time, but we can put up with it at other times; why is this so? Perhaps we move in and out of the emotion without being aware or having an intention to do so.

A client came to me after attending a few therapy sessions and said that he was back to square one, as the night before he was feeling exactly the same as he felt when he started the therapy sessions. I asked him how long the feeling lasted. He said about an hour, which was slightly less than the duration he used to remain unwell for before. His worry was that the intensity of his feeling was the same. I asked him to visualise a journey between two cities, which involved crossing five tunnels. When one is crossing the last tunnel, maybe after driving a 100-mile stretch, the experience of being inside a tunnel can be exactly the same as when one is crossing the first tunnel. The darkness and the scariness of being inside a tunnel. Someone who is not mindful might think he is back to square one.

When you are inside a particular emotion you are likely to lose objectivity. Emotions make us think in absolutistic terms; things are black or white, there are no grey zones. When we deal with emotions the yardstick of progress in

CHAPTER 10

Spirituality: The Fourth Dimension of Life

*“He who considers himself free is free indeed;
he who considers himself bound remains bound.”*

Spiritual person: a definition

He is happy when he is with people and happy when he is alone.

He is happy when he is busy and happy when he has nothing much to do.

He is happy when others care about him and happy when they ignore him.

He doesn't wish he had a different set of friends, relatives and family.

He can enjoy all the pleasures of life knowing full well that this enjoyment will end one day.

He is neither afraid of dying, nor is he fed up of living.

He is not afraid of his superiors and doesn't try to please them.

He doesn't boss about his subordinates as he doesn't enjoy being a boss.

He neither lives in the past nor in the future.

He doesn't wish he had a different past, as he can see how much he has learnt from his mistakes and unpleasant experiences.

He is not afraid of his future as he knows that the best is yet to come, but doesn't resent his present circumstances.

He is happy when he is able to help people and happy when he has nothing to give.

He is happy when he sees people happy and compassionate when he sees them unhappy.

He has no desire to travel more and see more of this world, but at the same time doesn't mind it if the situation demands.

He isn't looking for miracles as he knows that everything in this world, including his own existence, is a miracle.

He is willing to wait for things until the time is right, as he knows that things happen only when the time is right.

He is willing to live with uncertainty and expects the unexpected, as he knows that this is what human life is about.

He doesn't feel guilty about not being able to give more than what he has got to his children.

His friendly feelings towards his fellow beings is unbroken and unbreakable.

He doesn't expect anything from anyone, but accepts help when offered.

Do we really need spirituality?

The answer to that question is “no” if we are talking of the short term, but in the longer term we can't live a happy life without bringing in elements of spirituality into our life. We may not be aware of the spiritual elements that are already there in our lives and just see them as requirements of a good life. Whereas many of us who call ourselves spiritual may, in fact, be worldly people seeking power, glory, fame, riches and other worldly things in the guise of spiritual growth.

We don't need spirituality if the external world as we see it was enough to bring about lasting happiness. Unfortunately, that is not the case; there is an element of unsatisfactoriness built into human life and that is why we live on hopes and not on what we already have.

CHAPTER 11

Excerpts from Audio Sessions

Session 1: Causes of Stress

The first and foremost cause is the judgement that we make, judgements about different situations – in terms of good/bad, right/wrong, beautiful/ugly, intelligent/stupid, nice/nasty – about ourselves and about others. There is nothing wrong about making those judgements if those judgements are based on a realistic appraisal of the situation, they are not disproportionate and don't last any longer than needed.



I ask clients to visualise their lives not in terms of something solid but in terms of something fluid that is constantly shifting, constantly moving; things are disappearing, things are constantly changing outside of ourselves and within ourselves as well.



“Thinking about death in a positive way can help us accept it and be desensitised to it, which can be a remedy for a lot of clinical anxiety and depression.



Life appears much more beautiful in contrast when we have thought about death; things give more pleasure when we think of their existence coming to an end eventually.



The suffering of a normal person who doesn't suffer from psychological problems is also enormous. Those of us who can't come to terms with it are more likely to develop psychiatric problems.



Just because a thought is there in your mind it does not mean that it represents your true self. When you Google a word on the internet you find a drop down menu that tells you everything that has an association with that key word. In the same way, when a thought arises in the mind automatically, dozens of situations, thoughts, places and people are activated in the mind and they may not be related to who you are.



Letting go of a desire to control each and every bit of our lives can be a very liberating experience, and being open to what comes our way intended or unintended can be helpful.



Every relationship no matter how close it is has its own boundaries and beyond those boundaries we are all alone. We all are following our own life trajectory, which is different from that of other people; and from that

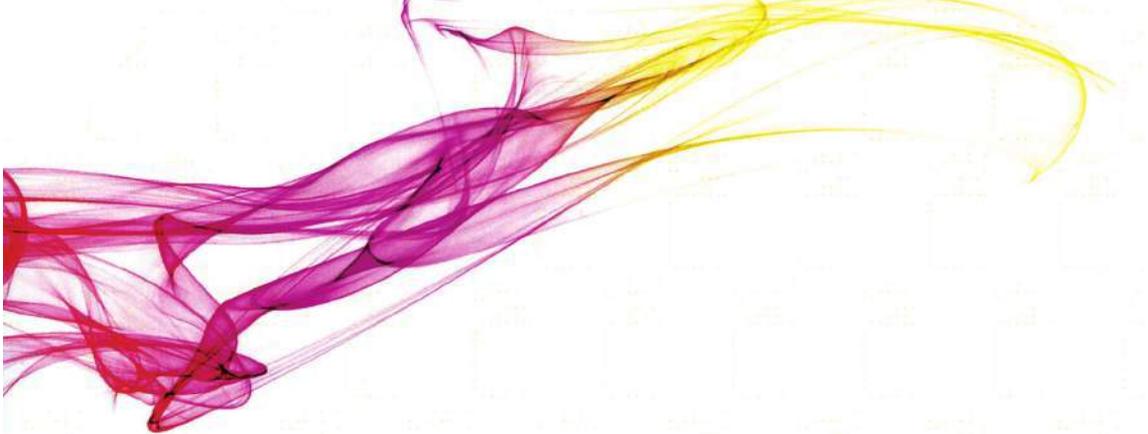
CHAPTER 12

Tweets on Stress Management

From
@Kishore_Chandi

- A good relationship should not be seen as a means to something, but an end in itself.
- Our relationships with fellow beings are much deeper than any problems we see in them.
- Some of our relationships may not appear to have an ultimate meaning, but they stop us from falling into the abyss of meaninglessness.
- What a strange thing that we reach out to people who are indifferent to us and are indifferent to people who reach out to us.
- I don't like people who don't like me; is this a fair emotion?
- I like certain people because they like me; is this a logical thought?
- Those who are angry with us need more attention, not less.
- Whatever can be achieved through anger can also be achieved without using it, perhaps more effectively.
- Normally we deal with negative emotions when confronted with them. Meditation encourages us to seek them out and kill them in their hideouts.

- Negative emotions can't be undone by positive ones; they have to be dealt with on their own terms with the help of a neutral consciousness.
- Positive emotions don't automatically undo the negative ones, but they do give us courage to face them and neutralise them.
- We must learn to be okay at times when nothing much is happening in our lives.
- This moment is not very much different from all the magical moments from history and our good old days, and our dreams fulfilled.
- To some, meditation may not give as much pleasure as the pleasures of the senses; but it does reduce the suffering related to them for sure.
- There is no need to worry about worldly losses or one's imperfections; our deeper consciousness has enough reserve to compensate for them.
- Less is more; talking less, wanting less, needing less, possessing less, reacting less, etc.
- A crisis in the external world may be the starting point for spiritual journey.
- No matter how horrible a thought is, don't question its presence in your mind; just question your emotional reaction to it.
- The best definition of wisdom that I have come across is the ability to foresee the consequences of one's actions.
- Acceptance has two components to it: letting go of the emotion and of the action. The first one is desirable, not the second one.
- The mind has two parts: observing self and experiencing self. Being an observer enables us to walk out of the experience of emotion.
- I can see that 80% of my bodily symptoms are linked to my unconscious emotions; these links become apparent during meditation.
- Psychiatry as it exists today doesn't address the root cause of suffering.
- Alcohol and illicit drugs create a wall between us and our stress; they don't make the stress go away.
- Feeling of loneliness can be seen as an emotion, like anger that comes and goes away and may not represent the core of our being.
- Spiritual experiences can make our feelings of loneliness go away and our aloneness enjoyable.



There is no need to slow down to de-stress yourself, just let go of your emotional baggage so that you can run faster. But before you do that you need to ask yourself “do I really need to run and am I running in the right direction?”

This book can help you deal with your negative emotions in a positive way and create positive emotions. It explains the science of emotions; how they are processed in our mind, how they influence our thoughts, opinions and actions, how to be free from them, and above all how to regulate them.

This book discusses the scientific approaches and the ones that have received widespread support from the scientific community.



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