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how to manage stress and improve well-being by using sophrology by dr michèle pisani



About stress

We all know what stress is, don't we? Stress is probably one of the most widely overused words in current western societies. Entering the word stress into Google returns about 323 million results and somehow this does not surprise us. Have we not all felt stressed at one time in our lives?

The word stress is estimated to have been used for the first time in the 14th century (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) and is short for distress. According to the Penguin Dictionary of Psychology (Reber, 1995), stress is defined as: "a state of psychological tension produced by physical, psychological and social forces and pressures [...] stress in this sense is an effect; stress is the result of other pressures. [...] the term stressor is typically used for the causal agent." Significantly, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary used "job-related stress" as an illustration for the concept. While the vast majority of the stress humans in western cultures are submitted to, is work-related, other factors like personal, family or health issues can cause significant stress.

In this perspective the Holmes and Rahe (1967) social readjustment scale gives an indication of the type of life events which can potentiate and accelerate the occurrence of illness caused by stressors. Stress can hence be defined as a reaction of the organism to an aggression or a change in the external environment. In this context, Hans Selye (1936) developed a theory of stress, referred to as the general adaptation syndrome (Figure 1). The latter describes the different stages generated as a result of exposure to stress-inducing situations, the last being exhaustion. This stage is characterised by the appearance of physical symptoms ultimately followed by a burnout syndrome and in extreme cases by death or suicide, depending on the type of stress and the physical, mental and psychological consequences it entails.

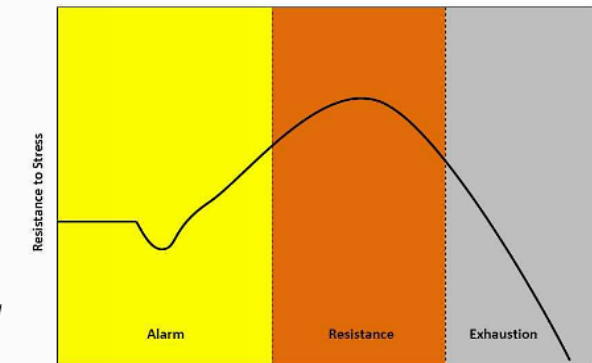


Figure 1 - A diagram of the General Adaptation Syndrome model.

If the state of stress persists for too long physical symptoms will start appearing. Amongst those we count recurrent headaches, stomach ulcers, cardio-vascular diseases (Mennechet & Rodet, 2011), backaches and musculo-skeletal disorders, including repetitive strain injury. In addition to the physical damage caused by stress, the cognitive consequences like attentional and memory deficits (Smith & Kosslyn, 2007) as well as impoverished decision making skills are not to be neglected and can cause severe impairment to everyday functioning. In most cases stress also has psychological effects, like increased anxiety and irritability, addictive behaviours (nicotine, alcohol, drugs, medication) and insomnia or related sleep disorders.

Over and above, the physical, mental and psychological effects of stress are highly interdependent. As a consequence, physical ailments can cause or worsen psychological and cognitive effects and vice versa, hence creating a vicious circle.

The sympathetic nervous system

The sympathetic nervous system (SNS), which is – amongst others – implicated in the stress response and in a large part responsible for the adverse side-effects reported in Seyle's GAS (Figure 1 Page 13), is part of the autonomic nervous system. This system is entirely automatic, as its name suggests, and not controlled by volition. The SNS controls heart-rate, respiratory rate, pupil dilation, blood pressure, stimulates glycogenolysis (the conversion from glycogen to glucose to release usable energy for the fight or flight response), inhibition of sphincter contraction, increases blood flow to skeletal muscles,... Its activity is complementary to that of the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) and together they regulate the function of the internal organs under the control of the hypothalamus. Under so-called normal circumstances the SNS would for instance lead to pupil dilation when someone enters a darker room, so as to allow more light to hit the retina and to improve vision. The narrowing of blood vessels can be useful when standing up from a previously horizontal position.

The SNS is however mainly known for being involved in the fight or flight response, which from an evolutionary point of view helped us cope with dangerous situations by either facing the danger or by running away. In a typical fight or flight situation, our ancestors used to be confronted with, blood gets pushed through to the skeletal muscles, heart beat and respiratory rate increase, glycogen is converted to glucose in order to release energy, to prepare for action. While this reaction used to be very effective; in our current western societies, where in most situations neither fight nor flight is appropriate, the response – if held up over a prolonged time frame - leads to the adverse side-effects listed earlier, by the release of unused cortisol (the stress hormone).



Relaxation has been shown to counter and reduce the stress response in certain situations. A study reported in the Harvard Health Publications has shown it to decrease systolic blood pressure. In this frame sophrology, a dynamic relaxation technique, is of a certain interest.

About sophrology

Sophrology, from the Greek SOS meaning "free from disease, balance,

harmony", PHREN for "mind or consciousness" and LOGOS for "science", can be defined as the science of a balanced, harmonious mind or consciousness. It was created by Dr. Alfonso Caycedo a psychiatrist, in 1960, and has been progressively developed since. Sophrology is a dynamic relaxation technique based on the integration of eastern relaxation techniques like Yoga and Zen and western relaxation techniques like progressive muscle relaxation (developed by E. Jacobson in the 1920s) and autogenic training (developed by German psychiatrist J.H. Schultz in the 1930s).

Whilst the most well-known western relaxation techniques are rather static, which means that the subject usually sits or lies down with hardly any movement for the whole duration of the exercise (abdominal breathing, autogenic training, progressive muscle relaxation...), Sophrology is characterised by its dynamic aspects which allow it to relieve physical tensions and hence totally relax the body whilst simultaneously relaxing the mind.

Now, why would sophrology be in any way superior to the more static relaxation techniques generally used? Particularly anxious or stressed subjects tend to find it difficult to stay still for a prolonged period of time, which is why in some cases classical relaxation techniques increase their nervousness

and generate a certain unease. This is understandable in light of the heightened SNS activity they are subjected to (see previous paragraph). Sophrology allows them to move and to use up the energy accumulated in their body to a certain extent, but in a controlled manner, more efficiently relieves stress and associated tensions, therefore allowing them to reach the sought-after state of relaxation and to bring their autonomic nervous system back to a more balanced functioning.

Sophrology distinguishes 5 systems which are listed below:

System 1 : the head;

System 2 : the neck and shoulders;

System 3 : the thorax and sternum;

System 4 : the stomach and lumbar areas;

System 5 : lower abdomen and legs.

Sometimes a sixth system, the mega-system is added. The latter is centred on the navel and integrates the whole body.

In a standard sophrology session the person starts off by being seated in a comfortable position and emphasis is put on deep breathing with a long outbreath so as to decrease the activity of the sympathetic nervous system. Each region is then activated by touch. Later on the whole body or isolated regions (referred to as systems) can be

put under tension through specific movements and/or muscular contraction to then be released and give rise to a sense of relaxation of the concerned area(s). The person then focusses on feeling the difference in the previously activated body part and the state of released tension felt after the exercise.

Positive words, like "harmony" or "serenity" can be repeated whilst breathing in and out. A sophrology session generally includes a visualisation, which in a basic session is a relaxing scene in nature that the person



then tries to perceive with all their senses (audition, smell, taste, vision and touch) so as to be completely immersed in the scene and attain a deep state of relaxation, however staying awake. Associated techniques can be used to help subjects prepare for anxiety-provoking events like giving presentations, writing exams, giving birth and so on. In such cases the use of Sophrological techniques allows the person to face the situation with more calm and significantly less distress.

Sophrology and stress

Sophrology, when practised regularly aids the individual to decrease the activity of the SNS to a healthy functioning, which quite often is not the case in individuals which are highly stressed as can be seen by the

amount of physical, psychological and mental issues people tend to encounter when subjected to stress over a long time period. By relaxing the body to then relax the mind the person practicing Sophrology does progressively attend a certain level of serenity which persists outside of the setting in which they practise. In addition an experienced sophrology practitioner will be able to use abbreviated versions of a session to detach from stressful situations and respond in a more appropriate way, which then tends to deescalate stressful situations. The breathing techniques used during the sessions can also be used on their own before facing an anxiety-generating-situation and hence allow the person to face an upcoming challenge in a more serene way and to control their heart- and breathing rate as well as sweat secretion. Since anxiety, stress and nervousness work through feedback loops (Figure 2) in such a way that increased heart-rate, for instance, will mostly be interpreted as anxiety by the person themselves, the anxiety then increasing the heart-rate even more and so on, a real vicious circle can be created. This can be prevented by modulating heart-rate and other activations generated by increased activity of the sympathetic nervous system - by the use of techniques like Sophrology - hence interrupting or even reversing the vicious circle.

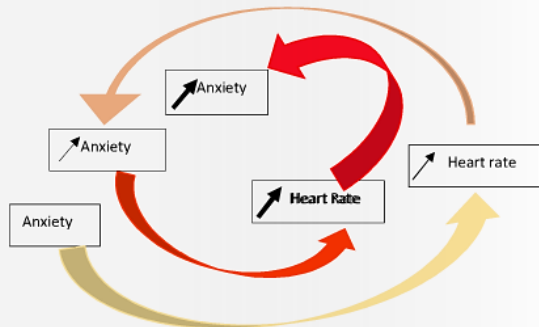


Figure 2: Vicious circle generated by the interpretation of increased sympathetic nervous system activity as anxiety. The example used here is heart rate.
Figure created by Dr. Michèle Pisani (2013)

Conclusion

The regular use of Sophrology can, by decreasing hyper activation of the sympathetic nervous system and by raising awareness of unnecessary physical and mental tension, help practitioners gain a more balanced outlook on life and develop a certain calm in their day to day lives.

The punctual use of exercises derived from Sophrology can help the experienced user cope with specific situations when required. This decreases the individual's level of perceived stress and increases their well-being, hence improving their physical, mental and psychological health.

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Biography - Dr Michèle Pisani

Dr Michèle Pisani is a qualified, published psychologist, specialised in clinical neuropsychology and holding a doctorate in cognitive neuroscience (psychology). In order to develop her skills and gain new knowledge she is constantly developing her skills via further education and conferences and completed her education in the field of psychology with an MA in human resources, which allowed her to further understand issues relating to work-related stress. She also trained in relaxation techniques, sophrology and EFT (emotional freedom technique). Formerly a university lecturer in Psychology at Kingston University and Buckinghamshire New University (UK), she has now refocused her career on helping others.

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