
Life Skills in Human Development

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ABSTRACT

The very term and concept of life skills invokes many reactions. Commonest of them being a feeling of excitement and thrill of understanding a unique skill and ability to make our lives and those around us better. Human development is a complex phenomenon extending over a long period. Through infancy to old age the person is faced with many challenging situations, needs to deal with conflicting emotions, take decisions, and so forth and so on. Every situation tends to add on to the stress levels. Our day-to-day experience reveals that some people are able to handle conflicting situation better than others. In the psychological terminology we can say that the life skills at the disposal of an individual are responsible for adjustment in the changing situations.

Stress is defined as the non specific response of the body to any demand made upon it. For eg. Going out when one is not willing to go out can cause stress. There is ample research evidence that negative changes take place in organic functioning under stress. All the body systems like digestive, respiratory, cardio-vascular, endocrine and skin tissues are adversely affected under prolonged states of stress. A person who has a high level of stress and anxiety is more vulnerable to invite infections. Along with predisposing an individual to health risks and diseases stress also reduces the life span of cells, memory and working efficiency. Dr. Pradeep Chadha a fellow of the American institute of stress and a practicing psycho-therapist has described stress as "a gift that nature has given to us to deal with threatening situations" Imagine life some hundred years ago when there were no machines, factories/offices to be attended with no electronic devices to accompany individuals. Life must have been much simpler with few needs. Wild animals, illness/death or natural calamities must have been the possible stressors. But in today's modern day life getting late for work, or not receiving an important call, or the child not performing as per parental expectations and so forth and so on can be a reason enough to ring the stress bells. In the recent times there is much higher level of sensory stimulation in terms of noise, (traffic, machines, ringing door bells, telephones and mobiles) imageries (television, computers, etc) with lots of available options (dresses, food items, careers etc). This means today there are many stimulations in our environment and our nervous system perceives these stimulations as threat to internal peace. When internal peace is disturbed our nervous system perceives it as threat. This perceived threat is what we call stress. Stress can either be physical or mental in nature.

The earliest contributions to stress research was Walter Cannon's (1932) description of the fight or flight response. It was proposed that when an organism perceives a threat, the body is rapidly aroused and motivated via the sympathetic nervous system and the endocrine system. Heart rate speeds up, blood pressure, blood sugar, and respiration increases, circulation of blood to the skin is reduced and the circulation to the muscles is increased.

INTRODUCTION

The very term and concept of **life skills** invokes many reactions. Commonest of them being a feeling of excitement and thrill of understanding a unique skill and ability to make our lives and those around us better. Human development is a complex phenomenon extending over a long period. Through infancy to old age the person is faced with many challenging situations, needs to deal with conflicting emotions, take decisions, and so forth and so on. Every situation tends to add on to the stress levels. Our day-to-day experience reveals that some people are able to handle conflicting situation better than others. In the psychological terminology we can say that the life skills at the disposal of an individual are responsible for adjustment in the changing situations.

STRESS AND ITS EFFECTS

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WHAT ARE LIFE SKILLS

Various organizations and researchers have defined life skills differently. WHO (1997) defines life skills as abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individual to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.

According to Elias (1993) “life skills are ----to carry out effective interpersonal relationship and social role, responsibilities and to make choices and resolve conflicts without resorting to action that will harm oneself or others”.

Life skill is an ability that makes a difference in daily living and helps a person to respond to significant life events in such a manner so as to enable him\her to live and function in an interdependent society. The person is enabled and empowered to be self-directing and productive thus is able to function effectively in the changing world. The person displaying these characteristics leads a satisfying life and contributing positively to the society.

Life skills include feelings about oneself, self-esteem and skills for coping. These are interpersonal and personal in nature as these are based on the experiences of an individual and their relationships with others along with their problem solving abilities. This aspect makes **life skills** a unique ability of every individual to deal with different situations.

The most crucial and significant question one needs to understand is how to develop this skill so that human beings can be better adjusted through their different developmental stages.

The study of life skills and its acquisition is one of the most recent research arena in the field of Psycho-social development. This trend has been witnessed globally because of modern day to day life style which tends to induce tension and stress leading to social and emotional maladjustment. This, coupled with a highly competitive society where individuals are judged not by their merit but by their social and material achievements can play havoc with an individual if he or she is repeatedly faced with negative encounters. Repeated negative events tend to produce mental health and adjustment problems. In order to deal effectively with these negative forces the life skills can prove to be of great help in making the individual better able to manage and handle the stress inducing factors, in the process making oneself mentally more resistant to stressors. The readers must be very keenly interested to know more about the life skills and their acquisition.

Life skills

- These are abilities that make a difference in daily living
- Life skills help a person to perceive and respond to significant life events
- Competence that enables a person to live and function in an interdependent society
- Equips a person to be self directing and productive to lead a satisfying life and contribute to the society
- To function effectively in changing world

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Bono (1986) states “life skills are those skills that are needed by an individual to operate effectively in society in an active and constructive Way”.

The definitions seem to be focusing on the psycho-social and adjustment abilities which are vital to human relationships. The adjustment in the social group and conflict resolution are important aspects of life skills. These abilities by themselves are dependent on the cognitive abilities of the person, which implies that life skills are to a great extent dependent on the mental faculties of an individual.

LIFE SKILLS CAN BE LEARNED

Life skills require thinking or reasoning and use of one's mind. This ability also means that the individual can express feelings and emotions. Life skills are generally expressed in the form of behavior in which thoughts, feelings and attitudes find a unified expression. This requires learning certain coping skills and maintaining mental health. This can be learned through training and practice. Ten core skills have been identified by WHO (2001) which are essential for positive behavior;

- SELF –AWARENESS
- EMPATHY
- EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION
- INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIP
- PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS
- DECISION MAKING SKILLS
- CRITICAL THINKING
- CREATIVE THINKING
- COPING WITH EMOTIONS
- COPING WITH STRESS

These core set of life skills have been categorized into three components:

Thinking skills, social skills and negotiation skills.

- Thinking skills: It includes self awareness, social awareness and decision making abilities. To be able to think critically requires that proper information is gathered in order to make informed decisions and choices.
- Social skills: This includes appreciating and validating others, working with others and understanding their role; building positive relationships with friends and family , communicating effectively and coping with stress. Social skills enable the children to accept social norms which provide foundation for adult social behavior.
- Negotiation skills: It means not only negotiating with others but also with oneself. For effective negotiation with others, one needs to know what one wants in life, is firm on ones beliefs and can therefore say no to harmful behavior and activities.

UNICEF (2000) presents the following components of life skills:

Skills- This involves a group of psycho-social abilities which are inter linked to each other. For eg decision making is likely to involve creative and critical thinking component and value analysis.

Content- To be able to effectively influence the behavior, skills must be utilized in a particular content area or topic, whatever the content area a balance of knowledge, attitude and skills need to be considered.

Method- skill based education requires interaction among participants, this requires on a group of people to be effective.

All these three components need to be in correct perspective if this approach is to be successful.

Life skills require thinking or reasoning as has been emphasized earlier as well. It requires the use of one mind while dealing with problems. The expressions and feelings are rooted in ones emotions. Thus control of emotions or appropriate expression of emotions needs to be learned. A positive attitude towards others and life, and behaviors in which thoughts and feelings and attitude finds a unified expression. These skills can be learned by regular practice and training.

COPING SKILLS

To put it simply *coping* is what is being done all the time to enable one to survive. Coping is the cognitive and behavioral strategies that are used to deal with the demands of everyday living. The thoughts feelings and actions make up the coping strategies that are called onto a varying extent in particular circumstances to manage concerns. Coping skills can be developed through previous experiences, observing others, perception of one's own biological dispositions and social persuasion.

Coping is the process of managing taxing circumstances, expending efforts to solve personal and interpersonal problems and seeking to minimize, reduce or tolerate stress\conflict

Researchers have tried to study various strategies which are used by different individuals in difficult circumstances. The studies have also tried to identify different personality traits which promote coping and consequently better adjustment.

Resilience has been identified as one of the major abilities \skills which contribute to positive adjustments and enable a person to cope with stressful events.

Adaptability is a primary component of resilience. Adapting means changing oneself in a manner which is conducive to the environment and promotes an effective coordination with changed circumstances. In cognitive psychology adaptation is something which an individual is always bound to do after accommodating certain required changes as per changes in physical, intellectual, social, emotional and interpersonal arena.. Adaptation, according to psychologists who focus on intellectual growth and development is the basic component of intelligence. Thus, adaptation is an act of intelligence thus coping skills are part of intelligent way of behaving and thinking and adjusting which might be stress arousing or challenging,

Many studies have been done on people under especially difficult circumstances like the prisoners of war and their coping strategies have been studied extensively. **Humor** as a coping strategy along with adaptability and resilience has found unqualified acceptance. Captivity research and related literature has termed humor as “soul’s weapon to fight for self preservation” and also finding a purpose in life. Adaptability has been considered a primary component of resilience and humor is a trait of effective adaptation.

Resilience can be considered under the following components:

1. **Realize** that every one experiences events that can have a lasting impact and can also be the vehicles of change
 2. **Recognize** that individual anxiety and stress are natural human responses to adversity and change.
 3. **Redefine** how we view adaptation to change and reprogramming our lives towards health happiness and productivity.
 4. **Remember** all our experiences, both positive and negative can guide new growth.
 5. **Redeem** the adversities through positive acts for others and for the self.
- These 5 R’s of resilience can be learned in order to enhance coping skills of an individual.

COPING SKILLS FOR CHILDREN

Researchers have looked at what helps some people to manage difficult times while others do not cope so well. In times when we are faced with increasing uncertainty about the future and heightened stress levels as a result of competition and the need to excel. If parents can teach children to build inner strength to cope with the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ of life then this is the best gift for the child. Helping children to develop the confidence and skills to face, overcome or even be strengthened by the hardships is a powerful thing to teach children. In order to make children realize that hardships are beyond their control but the parents can try to help them build the strength that will help to cope with the stressful situation. Some things that can be stressful for children Small at birthparents or some close to them is ill or dies.

ROLE OF PARENTS

The resilience can be build up on the main building blocks wherein the child’s basic needs (physical and emotional) are being taken care of. The children need to develop a sense of being able to manage things for themselves as they grow up. This is possible when the children are given responsibilities according to their age and potential making sure that they are not ridiculed for their mistakes. The parents need to respond to child’s cries and little noises from an early stage so the child develops a sense of trust and security from infancy. The child should be encouraged with a smile or clap, thus acknowledging the child’s achievements however small they maybe.

Resilience can be build up on the following building blocks which ensures that that the child’s needs for the following is fulfilled:

- The child feel **I CAN make a difference**

- **The child be made to realize I AM a worthwhile person**
- The child should have the confidence that **I HAVE people around me who love and support me unconditionally**

Children need to feel good about themselves, and feel loved and cared for. Even in the cradle the child can have a feeling of self respect. This might sound a bit far removed but this message is conveyed to the child when someone is there for them when they cry or when they are uncomfortable or when the parent repeats the child's little noises the message to the baby is that she is being heard and noticed, this in itself is a powerful tool to develop the self esteem of the child.

The parents need to spend time with the children and promote their interests and show that they care, both with actions and words. The children should be given the opportunity to develop a sense of independence. This can be achieved when the child's opinion is taken especially which concern the child and the child is given the choices which he/she can exercise. Teach the child as to how she needs to solve her own problems and find solutions. Approval is the biggest tool to enhance the child's confidence and self esteem. Give approval and encouragement for trying new things. Even if the child does something wrong in the first go do not discourage the child by disapproval or doing things for the her. Still, praise the child for her efforts and teach the correct way.

Certain family rituals like kissing the child when he/she is retiring to bed or preparing a dish relished by the child help to convey a positive message to the child. Little special things done for the child, celebrating special days like birthdays or organizing small family functions gives a sense of belonging and stability in child's relationships with family and others.

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