

## **SELF-THERAPY AS A FORM OF COPING WITH STRESS**

**Wiesława PACHOLEC**

*Prof. S. Tarnowski State Vocational University in Tarnobrzeg*

[pacholecwieslawa9@gmail.com](mailto:pacholecwieslawa9@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

Stress is an integral part of our lives. It can be our friend, but also our enemy. It is important to be able to cope with it on a daily basis, but also in difficult situations. Self-therapy is one of the effective forms of coping with stress.

**Keywords:** *stress, self-therapy, eustress, distress.*

### **Introduction**

Stress seems to be an inherent part of our lives. May be caused by being overloaded with chores, a demanding supervisor, difficult exams or relations with other people. Stress can be caused even by seemingly positive or happy events: getting married, birth of a child, buying an apartment or a first date. We also feel stressed in situations that we deem particularly hard to endure such as death of a relative or a breakup. What is stress then? Is it our friend or enemy? Benefactor or a bully? How can we cope with it everyday or in particularly difficult situations? Is it even possible to manage it effectively? These are the questions I will try to answer in this paper. One thing's for sure – here is no such thing as a stressless life.

### **Stress and its nature**

We all deal with stress, its symptoms and effects every day. Stress can be our friend, but also our enemy. It is a term that is often used or even misused. We talk about it referring to traumatic events, but also in relation to everyday situations, using, for example, "I'm stressed out." "this situation is stressing me out", "I don't know how to deal with stress" or even "stress is eating me alive".

So what exactly is stress? Stress is a natural, physiological phenomenon, necessary in the development of every human being. Therefore, it should not be treated as an enemy. It is thanks to stress that we act, focus, make decisions and overcome obstacles. So far, research has focused mainly on its negative effects, and above all on health disorders (N. Ogińska-Bulik 2009, s. 33).

Establishing what stress is, is a significant issue not only from the point of view of this paper i.e. theoretical deliberation but also in psychotherapeutic practice.

In modern-day psychology, stress is understood in three ways – as a reaction, a stimulus and a transaction (Moryś J, Jeżewska M. 2006, p. 318). Stress is defined as the body's complex response to stimuli that disturbs its homeostasis (Carlson NR, Heth CD, 2007).

While in biological sciences we find a fairly uniform and unambiguous position on the nature of stress, in psychology we find significantly different views in this respect.

The traditional division of the stress theory, based on statements regarding its nature, lists three groups of concepts, viewing stress either as a negative external factor, or as a state or, better yet, a reaction of the body, or as a subject-environment relationship, which in a sense combines two previous depictions (Łosiak 1994, p. 19).

In his definition of stress, Lazarus describes it as a special type of relationship between the individual and the environment, which is assessed by said individual as straining or exceeding his capabilities and threatening their well-being (Lazarus, Folkman 1984, p. 19). According to Strelau, stress is: a state characterized [...] by strong negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, anger, hostility, as well as other emotional states causing distress and the associated physiological and biochemical changes, clearly exceeding the basic activation level (Strelau 1996, p. 69). These are just two of many definitions of stress. Broadly speaking, stress can be divided into three basic categories:

- stress as a stimulus – unpleasant, disturbing and inhibiting the activity: this category includes various, unpleasant situations causing stress, e.g. persistent noise, loss of job or serious illness,
- stress as a reaction to an unpleasant stimulus from the external environment: this category includes reactions that appear in the human body and mind as a response to unpleasant situations, e.g. insufficient performance while completing a task,

– stress as a dynamic relationship between a person and the environment – which may be perceived by the individual as requiring a specific adaptive effort or exceeding their capabilities.

In the work of a psychologist/psychotherapist when talking about stress, it is important to determine whether they mean a mental process (thoughts, emotions) or a physiological process (physical symptoms caused by stress), or both of these aspects and their relations with each other. This issue is particularly important regarding the health consequences we may suffer due to excessive or chronic stress. The thesis regarding the negative impact of stress on both physical and mental health has been proven in a number of empirical studies. This correlation is almost taken for granted, especially if we view stress as a risk factor for many diseases. However, not all stress is destructive to health.

First mentions of the positive aspects of stress were presented by H. Sely (1974), who introduced the concept of eustress, i.e. the so-called good (positive, constructive) stress (eu = good). Although this term is quite commonly used, there is no uniformity as to its understanding, as well as the concept of stress itself (N. Ogińska-Bulik, 2009, p. 33). Selye, the creator of the concept of stress, also known as Dr. Stress, perceives eustress as a reaction of the body, which is a response to the action of stressors (stimuli), it is not only favorable, but even beneficial for the body. Eustress has a positive effect on motivation to act, helps to concentrate energy, is usually short-term and perceived as something we can cope with. In addition, it can be exciting/stimulating and significantly improves the body's performance as well as a factor stimulating the individual to undertake activities leading to self-development.

The latest publications on eustress refer to Sely's concept and emphasize that eustress is related not so much to the absence of negative states, but to the presence of positive ones. This approach is presented, among others, by: J. R. Edwards and C. L. Cooper (1988) and B. L. Simmons and D. L. Nelson (2001). The above-mentioned authors treat eustress as a positive psychological reaction to stressors, manifested by the presence of positive psychological states.

According to Selye (...) distress, also known as negative stress (dis=bad), is unpleasant stress that causes damage and anxiety or worry. It can be both short and long-term, perceived as something that is beyond our capabilities and ways of coping. Distress is experienced as something very unpleasant, reducing our efficiency, it can lead to both mental and physical problems, and as a consequence, it can overload the organism.

As you can see, stress does not have to be our enemy or destroyer – an important element is whether we can deal with it in everyday or more extreme situations. In the literature on the subject, we find three styles of coping with stress, i.e. emotion-based, avoidance-based and task-based.

The emotion-focused style is characterized by focusing on one's own experiences and emotions, wishful thinking and fantasizing about a situation in which the problem would disappear by itself. Although this strategy is intended to lower emotional tension, it usually increases it: after a while of thinking about how great it will be to live without the problem, the individual realizes that the problem still remains unresolved.

The avoidance-focused style manifests itself in the tendency to avoid thinking about a difficult situation, experiencing it and the emotions associated with it. People resort to substitute activities (sleeping, eating, cleaning, using the Internet, etc.) or seeking social contacts. Both strategies, although providing temporary relief, may increase the problem and the stressful experience.

The third style of coping with stress – task-focused style – the most desirable style when feeling stressed. In this approach, the stressor is perceived as a problem to be solved. A person who prefers this style of coping with stress looks for ways to solve the problem that has become a source of unpleasant experiences and sensations.

## **2. A few words about self-therapy**

One of the manifestations of the task-focused style of coping with stress and dealing with difficult situations is self-therapy. What exactly is self-therapy? It is an independent form of working on one's own mental condition using various techniques and tools, such as professional literature, psychological guides, physical activity or the use of elements of art (art therapy) (Zemelka 2023, p. 17).

Siek claims that self-therapy is the conscious and purposeful use of specific mental means towards oneself in order to induce specific positive changes in one's personality” (Siek 1999, p. 8). self-therapy can not only provide tools for everyday coping with adversities and achieving set goals, but also strengthen the individual's mental toughness and resilience, becoming an important support for health in a broader sense.

Self-therapy can be treated as an attempt to improve one's own well-being, and, for people who attend psychotherapy, as an addition to traditional work with a specialist or as a

method of self-work between sessions. Self-therapy is supposed to support and stimulate, and its effectiveness requires consistency and self-discipline.

According to A. Ellis, the idea of self-therapy is deeply rooted in the history of psychology and philosophy. It hails from the ancient thought of the Stoics. On the European continent, the sources of self-therapy are seen in the philosophical works of the Stoics (Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius) and Neoplatonists (Plotinus, Porphyry), while in America – one can point to the rich tradition of the genre of self-help literature, which from the very beginning was strictly linked to the culture of belief in human capabilities.

The origin of self-therapeutic activities can be traced back to what philosophers proposed (both from the more classical and more modern schools [Zielińska-Pękał 2022, p. 82]). As S. Siek mentions: The problems of human mental life were critically considered and analyzed for over two and a half thousand years. [...] Philosophers have been asking the first questions and giving the first answers on how to achieve and maintain inner peace and serenity, how to fight adversities, maintain one's dignity and inner independence, where to look for the meaning of life, how to fight your own anxiety, how to improve your own thinking and get to know the world and people better" (Siek 1999, p. 262). The philosophers' tips were not only advice from the outside, but impulses that triggered the processes of self-reflection and internal development .

Nowadays, self-therapy is defined as an alternative to formal psychotherapy (Shepard 1995, p. 7). According to M. Shepard, self-therapy helps overcome lack of self-confidence and uncertainty, and teaches how to derive satisfaction from life (ibid., p. 155). In the process of self-therapy, the action of the individual itself is very important. self-therapy assumes that you are responsible for yourself and work on yourself (ibid., p. 154). Working on yourself is what distinguishes therapy, psychotherapy, and help and counseling from self-therapy.

In 1859, exactly 20 years before the symbolic emergence of psychology as an independent academic science, an American thinker S. Smiles published a work entitled "Self-help".

Both of these sources, i.e. American and European, were pointed out by A. Ellis, a pioneer of cognitive-behavioral therapy. He emphasizes: "The view that a person can help themselves has survived to recent times in the works of many writers and philosophers. (A. Ellis 2008, p. 41). Causing a revolution in psychotherapy in the mid-20th century, Ellis not only proposed a new approach to the therapeutic process, but also promoted the idea of self-

therapy, which was within the reach of everyone. He deeply believed in the possibility of independently mastering effective tools and techniques for overcoming mental difficulties, as well as sharing this knowledge with friends and family.

The aim of self-therapy is to restructure harmful mechanisms in both thinking and action that have been established over the years. Improvement in well-being can occur quite quickly, however, to make it last, consistent and systematic work is required. It is important that self-therapy in itself should not replace psychotherapy conducted by a specialist, but it can definitely complement it or be a way to maintain the effects after the formal end of therapy. Additionally, autotherapy is also an excellent development option for people who do not face clinical problems.

It is significant that self-therapy is not a random or purposeless activity. These are intentional actions undertaken by an individual in accordance with their intention or plan. It is also extremely important that in self-help activities the subject puts themselves in the center of action as the person experiencing difficulties, and on the other hand, they launch strategies for themselves aimed at solving the problem and coping with the stress they experience.

As F. Riessman and D. Carroll mention, the basic element of such action (which in their studies the authors call self-help) is self-determination, self-reliance, self-creativity and empowerment, i.e. the need to use one's own resources (Riessman, Carroll 2000, p. 18).

Another important aspect – autotherapy, like other forms of assistance, is focused on positive changes for the subject, supporting him in his development and growth.

The common feature of various "self-help" approaches is that the individual goes through the entire process alone, without the physical support of other people.

There are so many different methods and techniques of dealing with stress used in self-therapy, it is impossible to mention them all. However, the starting point are the thoughts that accompany us when assessing the situations we encounter in life. It is not the event (stressful situation) that causes bad mood (physical and mental symptoms of stress), but how we interpret what is happening and our abilities to cope with the problem. Our mind makes many analyzes and assessments of all our actions and events on a daily basis. When we are under stress, our thoughts are usually negative and catastrophic..

Like a drop of blue ink dropped into a jar of water, they seem increasingly complex. At the same time, they become personal;... we become convinced that they could only happen to us (which further intensifies the stress reaction) (Langley, Zacharzewski 2023, p. 6).

Negative thinking is a habit – we learned it just as we learned to walk, talk and write – so the good news is: you can learn balanced realistic thinking too! (Jasińska 2016, p. 11). Realistic, rational thinking is nothing more than a conscious mind that allows for "healthy" thinking, well-being and proper action in any situation, even very stressful ones.

Neurobiolodzy wykazali, że pracę mózgu można zmienić i dostosowywać do potrzeb poprzez zbieranie nowych doświadczeń. Proces neuroplastyczności umożliwia neuronom „zapalenie się” i przebudowywanie, tworzenie kolejnych wspomnień, sposobów myślenia i zachowywania (Langley, Zacharzewski 2023, s. 6). Kiedy nie unikamy problemów, ale mierzymy się z nimi, tym samym doskonalimy się w ich przewycięzaniu.

Neuroscientists have shown that brain function can be changed and adapted to needs by collecting new experiences. The process of neuroplasticity allows neurons to "fire" and rebuild, creating new memories, ways of thinking and behaving (Langley, Zacharzewski 2023, p. 6). When we do not avoid problems, but face them, we become better at overcoming them.

Circling back to effective methods of dealing with stress, it is worth using anti-stress methods based on work with the body. One of them are relaxation methods, which are the basis of every anti-stress program. Practicing relaxation systematically results in stress reduction, better concentration, increases energy levels and reduces insomnia. It is also an excellent prevention of psychosomatic disorders, such as recurring headaches. There are many types of relaxation methods, the most popular of them are: Schultz's autogenic training or Jacobson's progressive muscle relaxation, which is based on the assumption that mental relaxation should naturally result from physical relaxation.

Other equally effective methods of dealing with distress are breathing techniques, such as breathing control training or diaphragmatic breathing. The way we breathe can signal the level of tension in our body. When we are stressed and tense, our breathing becomes faster and more shallow. We then breathe using the chest, not the diaphragm. To cope with the stress better, it is worth learning the breathing techniques. This way of breathing brings a number of benefits – it improves concentration, better oxygenates the brain and muscles, and reduces the level of tension – both muscular and emotional.

Another self-therapy method that helps alleviate the effects of distress is visualization, which involves using the imagination to experience the desired feeling – in the case of distress, peace and relaxation. (...) This method is effective when we cannot escape a

physically unpleasant situation – it allows us to mentally distance ourselves from it thanks to relaxing and pleasant images (Jasińska 2016, p. 23).

Other methods used in self-therapy include mindfulness, including: practicing your attention on what we are experiencing at a given moment – here and now, without worrying about the future and without dwelling on the past. One of the mindfulness techniques is mindful meditation (...) it is a type of practice that involves being aware of the sounds and events surrounding us, allowing thoughts to flow freely. This involves recording everything that is happening, but without focusing. It reduces the activity of brain structures responsible for responding to stress and increases brain flexibility. Recommended for people with anxiety disorders, chronic stress problems or depression (Żejmo, 2022 p. 194).

Another excellent method of self-therapy in dealing with stress is physical activity. Exercise can be a way to cope with an anxious brain. Not only do they allow you to get rid of negative energy, but they also give you the opportunity to better prepare for the fight against adversity, because the body gets used to the symptoms of stress that appear during physical activity.

Stress is an inseparable element of our lives and it is not possible to eliminate it completely. We can only avoid specific stressors, those that cause distress. There are many methods of dealing with stress; one of them is self-therapy which is an accessible way to deal with stress. It involves a lot of responsibility, but also independence, decision-making and the ability to influence your own life. According to Ellis, humans have both a creative nature that encourages us to overcome all difficulties, but also a self-destructive nature. I think that the words of Albert Elissa will be a perfect summary of these considerations. “There are forces within us that pull us down and those that allow us to rise above the ground. It is important to direct all your energy towards cultivating your creative, vital nature, which allows you to enjoy life and accept it.

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