Who is most vulnerable to stress?

Stress comes in many forms and affects people of all ages and all walks of life. No external standards can be applied to predict stress levels in individuals - one need not have a traditionally stressful job to experience workplace stress, just as a parent of one child may experience more parental stress than a parent of several children. The degree of stress in our lives is highly dependent upon individual factors such as our physical health, the quality of our interpersonal relationships, the number of commitments and responsibilities we carry, the degree of others' dependence upon us, expectations of us, the amount of support we receive from others, and the number of changes or traumatic events that have recently occurred in our lives.

Some generalizations, however, can be made. People with adequate social support networks report less stress and overall improved mental health in comparison to those without adequate social support. People who are poorly nourished, who get inadequate sleep, or who are physically unwell also have a reduced capacity to handle pressures and stresses of everyday life and may report higher stress levels. Some stressors are particularly associated with certain age groups or life stages. Children, teens, working parents, and seniors are examples of the groups who often face common stressors related to life transitions.

Teen stress

As one example of stress related to a life transition, the teen years often bring about an increase in perceived stress as young adults learn to cope with increasing demands and pressures. Studies have shown that excessive stress during the teen years can have a negative impact upon both physical and mental health later in life. For example, teen stress is a risk factor for the development of depression, a serious condition that carries an increased risk of suicide.

Fortunately, effective stress-management strategies can diminish the ill effects of stress. The presence of intact and strong social support networks among friends, family, and religious or other group affiliations can help reduce the subjective experience of stress during the teen years. Recognition of the problem and helping teens to develop stress-management skills can also be valuable preventive measures. In severe cases, a physician or other health-care provider can recommend treatments or counselling that can reduce the long-term risks of teen stress.