

Managing Stress At Work

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Abstract

Stress is a reality and an inevitable part of our lives, especially at work, and to be free from stress or to have a stress free life is not a possibility. However, people need to be aware of its existence and its side effect as well as learn to live with it without suffering its effects. This paper examines the concept of stress, its nature, its consequences in the organisation, and how it could be managed both at the organisational and individual levels.

Introduction

Stress as a topic is receiving a lot of attention. As a word it is now firmly rooted in our vocabulary. It is frequently used and you can hear people saying 'they are stressed', and the word is used to describe a wide variety and range of feelings, symptoms and situations. These feelings are almost always linked or associated with situations at work and home. It is a difficult area to study, because what one individual may find stressful, another may find exhilarating.

One view of stress (Milkovich & Boudreau, 2006) relates it to control; lack of ability to make one's own decisions at work (or in life) or use range of skills. But what stress exactly is has no generally accepted meaning. It is however generally accepted that, the term refers to 'any force, pressure or strain applied to a system'.

Selye (1956) introduced the term into the health psychology language. Today, there are few areas of contemporary psychology that receive more attention than stress. The literature as submitted by Jibril (2003) reflects researchers' belief that stress is a major factor affecting people's lives, is intimately tied to mental health, and is very possibly linked to many problems of physical health. This is evident in the works of several stress researchers (e.g. Hobfall, 1989, 1986; Milgram, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 and Kaplan, 1983). The interest in stress has also caught the attention of the popular press, illustrating that stress is of concern to the lay public as well as the academia, 'You can manage stress' (Awake, 1998); 'Stress' (Times International, (1983).

Stress in psychology is a demand, threat or other events that requires an individual to cope with a changed situation. Stresses are unavoidable part of life. They range in severity from relatively mild forms, such as traffic jams to a family argument, to severe ones such as the death of a spouse or fear of dying from a particular ailment. As pointed out by Herbert and Cohen (1994), people's responses to stress vary widely depending on their cultural and family backgrounds, their personal experiences, and their mood at the time and on other stresses at the same time. However, when problems escalate faster than they can be solved, a person's adaptive capacity may be overloaded and chronic illness, anxiety or depression may result.

Stress is a pervasive phenomenon. Contemporary society is full of stressful experiences for the individual. Most people experience stress at some time in life, either at home or at the work place. Or even, the home based stress can have a direct link with

the work place and vice versa. This is always the case, since life itself is not always rosy and smooth. Hence, as people face one form of difficulty or painful experience at one point in their lives, they are bound to experience some form of stress. Although stress usually thought of in negative terms, not all stress could be thought as bad. Highly stressful situations have negative or dysfunctional consequences, especially in the work place. There are however the positive side of stress caused by good things. This is a form of *eustress*.

In other words, stress can be viewed in a number of ways and has been described as the most imprecise word in the scientific diction. The word 'stress' has been compared to the word 'sin'. They are both short, emotionally charged words used to refer to something that otherwise would have taken many words to say.

Nature of Stress

Stress can be described as a situational force that acts on a person, creating psychological and emotional disturbance, or strain beyond the limits or adaptive capacity or tolerance of our system. Coffey & Appley (1964) have defined psychological stress as a state of an organism in which his general well being is threatened and he must devote all his energies to its protection. Similarly, Lazarus (1974) suggested that stress occurs when there are demands on the person, which tax or exceed his adjustive resources.

These definitions imply that the individual facing such a demand will remain distressed unless and until he does something to neutralise the situation or problem, either in form of an injury, loss, threat, or challenge, he must deal with in some way. In some instance, if nothing is done, the individual may die.

Akinboye (1992) viewed stress as non- specific responses of human organism to demands on them in relation to perceived threat. He further identified several self –observable signs of stress as:

- ❖ General irritability, hyper excitation or depression
- ❖ Dryness of throat and mouth
- ❖ Impulsive behaviour, emotional instability
- ❖ Overpowering urge to cry or run or hide
- ❖ Inability to concentrate, flight of thoughts, and general disorientation
- ❖ Feeling of unreality, weakness, or dizziness
- ❖ Predilection to become fatigued, and loss of the 'joie de vivre'
- ❖ Floating anxiety, that is to say, we are afraid although we do not know what are afraid of
- ❖ Emotional tension and alertness, feelings of being 'keyed up'
- ❖ Trembling nervous ticks
- ❖ Tendency to be easily startled by small sounds, etc
- ❖ High pitched nervous laughter
- ❖ Bruxism ,or grinding of teeth in sleep
- ❖ Insomnia which is usually a consequence of being 'keyed up'

- ❖ Hyper-mobility, hyper-kinesia, and increased tendency to move about without any reason, and inability to just take a physically relaxed attitude, sitting quietly in a chair or on a bed
- ❖ Sweating , this becomes evident only under considerable stress by inspection of the skin, but is readily detectable by GSR
- ❖ Frequent need or urge to urinate
- ❖ Diarrhoea, indigestion, and sometimes vomiting, signs of disturbed gastrointestinal function which may eventually lead to such severe disease of adaptation as peptic ulcers, ulcerative colitis, the irritable colon etc
- ❖ Migraine headaches
- ❖ Premenstrual or missed menstrual cycles
- ❖ Pain in the neck or lower back
- ❖ Loss of, or excessive appetite
- ❖ Increased smoking, coffee drinking etc
- ❖ Increased use of legally prescribed drugs
- ❖ Alcohol and drug addiction
- ❖ Nightmares
- ❖ Neurotic behaviours

Fisher (1994) identified four classes or types of stress as; normal, acute, chronic and crisis stress. He further classified the effects of stress into three major categories as; physiological or physical effects, psychological or emotional effects and behavioural effects.

These same signs by Akinboye and effects by Bakare were broadly classified and elaborated on by Doctor and Doctor (1994) as follows:

Physical:

- ❖ Excessive worry about, or denial of illness
- ❖ Frequent illness
- ❖ Physical exhaustion
- ❖ Reliance on self medication, including over use of drugstore remedies like paracetamol and aspirin
- ❖ Ailments – headache, insomnia, appetite changes, weight gain or loss, indigestion nausea, nervous diarrhoea, constipation, sexual problems

Emotional

- ❖ Apathy - the 'blahs', sadness, lack of pleasure in usually desired activities
- ❖ Anxiety – apprehensiveness, tension, shakiness, arousal, off balance, fuzzy
- ❖ Irritability – snappy defensive attitude, standoffish, argumentative, angry and reactive
- ❖ Mental fatigue – difficulty concentrating, distractible, preoccupied, unable to focus or be creative

- ❖ Overcompensation or denial- work as distraction denial of problems or self, push others away symptoms, suspicious, unwilling to slow down

Behavioural

- ❖ Avoiding things – neglecting responsibilities and work, avoiding relationships and expression of personal feelings, unwilling to share, seclusion
- ❖ Doing things to extremes- addictions, chemicals to modulate feelings, maniac, poor judgement, and self- destructive behaviours
- ❖ Personal neglect – accident proneness, poor personal habits, eating the wrong foods, lack of rest or recreation, poor work habits
- ❖ Judgement problems- debts, petty crimes, anger and violent behaviour, affairs, superficial relationships

Sources of stress

The very question that comes to mind will surely be what the sources of stress are, what causes stress in an individual? Many sources of stress or stressors had been identified. These as key factors can influence the level of stress that may be experienced by individuals in the work place for example. Cole (2000) had identified the following as potential sources at work, depending largely on how individuals perceive their problems, their level of self confidence and the relative uncertainty and perceived importance of the outcomes of their work activity.

- ❖ **External environment;** The nature and /or pace of work are affected by frequent changes in external conditions e.g. economic, competitive or technological; individuals who are less happy with constant change and its attendant uncertainties are likely to become stressed.
- ❖ **Organisation structure/culture;** The job holder's place in the job hierarchy and the extent to which individual autonomy is encouraged or restricted are key factors in producing or avoiding stress; the dominant culture may emphasise long hours, maximum effort etc. and may not tolerate mistakes; team leaders may not always be supportive.
- ❖ **Job characteristics;** The way a job is put together can often cause stress e.g. where conflicting tasks are present or where too much is asked of the individual; jobs that allow little personal discretion tend to increase the potential for stress.
- ❖ **Work relationships;** The quality of working relationships with ones superior and colleagues can have a great influence on the relative levels of stress in a job; harassment is a frequent cause of stress at work.
- ❖ **Personal factors;** Every individual's ability to cope adequately with pressure is greatly influenced by personal attributes, such as temperament, level of commitment to the job, particular skills and talents etc.

According to Dressler (2004), whether a potential stressor becomes actual stressors and produce stress and whether the stress a worker experiences is positive or negative depend on how the worker perceives and interprets the stressor and on

individual difference .The effects of stress largely depends on its source. Also, no two people react to a situation in the same way. Personalities differ, as some can thrive and function well amidst intense stress, others cannot by differences in personality. Similarly, one's tolerance for ambiguity, health, patience, self –esteem, work and sleep patterns can also affect reactions to stress.

Consequences of stress

Job stress has serious consequences for both the employer and employee. The human consequences we have already mentioned many of them earlier on, to which cardiovascular diseases are included as a consequence. Basically, when employees suffer stress, the results are likely to take one or more of the following forms:

- ❖ High levels of sickness and absenteeism
- ❖ Reduced productivity and failure to meet targets
- ❖ Increased accidents and error rates
- ❖ Increased number of conflicts between individuals
- ❖ Undesirable rates of staff turnover
- ❖ Increased grievances and health care cost
- ❖ Reduction in the quantity and quality of performance.

The implications of these manifest stress signs to the organisation are that, the organisation is going to be faced with a wide range of other symptoms indicating an apparent dissatisfaction with work. What will prevail in such a work setting in addition will be demotivation, loss of vitality and energy, poor decision making, reduced creativity, innovation and job performance, focus on unproductive tasks and a host of other negative tendencies that will be inimical to the organisation. The cost to the organisation could therefore be substantial and it is in the interest of the organisation to take steps at reducing and managing stress to a minimum tolerable level in the work place.

Managing stress

Stress management strategies or options can be seen as ways to alleviate stress. These range from the commonsense remedies as getting more sleep and eating better to more exotic remedies like biofeedback and meditation. Other options include finding a more suitable job, getting counselling, and planning and organising each days work activities. The focus here is to overcome blocks and up tightness, relieving frustration and maintaining equilibrium. As it has been pointed out, stress from either the organisation or non- organisational factors is likely to hinder both the individual and organisational effectiveness, hence the need to learn to deal with it.

There are various approaches to managing stress and can be grouped under two broad categories: individual and organisational. The individual strategies tend to be more reactive in nature while the organisational approaches are more proactive

The organisation can take measures to reduce the experience of stress among the work-force through *stress avoidance measures* and *stress reduction measures*. Cole (2000) enumerated the following points as stress *Avoidance counter-measures*;

- ❖ Design jobs to permit maximum use of skill and discretion by job-holder; and incorporate sufficient task variety and challenge to maintain employee interest
- ❖ Design work so as to permit exercise of responsibility by job-holder, giving sufficient authority, and allowing job-holder to share in decisions that effect his or her work and ensuring work goals that do not conflict with those of others
- ❖ Encourage superiors to develop participative management styles, paying attention to individual needs as well as those of the task and the group
- ❖ Encourage team-spirit; where team-members support each other, and individuals are valued for their role.
- ❖ Encourage communication between departments / sections as well as vertically through the management chain, and provide constructive feedback to individuals (by job results, staff appraisal etc.)
- ❖ Ensure that decision-making is delegated so that people at every level are able to share in decisions affecting their work and future prospects.
- ❖ Develop an organisation culture in which attitudes towards employees are positive and where attention to products/service quality is reflected in respect for employees' knowledge, skills and contribution, and where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities rather than grounds for criticism

Furthermore, Cole also submitted *stress reduction measures* which be can adopted by concerned organisations to stem the negative impact of stress. These measures are;

- ❖ Reduce the number of changes expected of any one individual or team
- ❖ Limit the procedural and other complexities associated with the execution of tasks
- ❖ Permit individuals to express their feelings and anxieties to someone else – boss, colleagues and trained counsellors.
- ❖ Provide sports and social facilities
- ❖ Provide adequate canteen and rest-room facilities

In the same vein, Dressler (2004), suggested measures the individual can use at the work place to reduce stress. These *Stress reduction measures* according to him are:

- ❖ Build rewarding, pleasant, cooperative relationships with colleagues and employees.
- ❖ Don't bite off more than you can chew.
- ❖ Build an effective and supportive relationship with your boss.
- ❖ Negotiate with your boss for realistic deadlines on important projects.

- ❖ Learn as much as you can about upcoming events and get as much lead time as you can to prepare for them.
- ❖ Find time every day for detachment and relaxation.
- ❖ Take a walk round the office to keep your body refreshed and alert.
- ❖ Find ways to reduce unnecessary noise.
- ❖ Reduce the amount of trivia in your job; delegate routine work whenever possible.
- ❖ Limit interruptions.
- ❖ Don't put off dealing with distasteful problems.
- ❖ Make a constructive worry list'. That includes solutions for each problem

Individual techniques for managing stress are also very relevant. Despite what measures the organisation will put in place to check the occurrences of stress. Such individual techniques are many and are taught in stress reduction programmes. Some of these specific techniques the individual can use to eliminate or effectively manage inevitable prolonged stress include the following:

- ❖ *Exercise:* Today is not whether you win or lose, but whether you get some good exercise that counts. People of all ages are walking, jogging, swimming, riding bicycles, playing tennis or racquet ball in order to get some exercise to combat stress. This makes a lot of sense to many people, and physicians swear by it. There is still no conclusive evidence that exercise will directly reduce the chances of heart disease or stroke (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There seem to be little doubt that it can help people better cope with stress, even if it is only as a result of side effects, such as relaxation, enhanced self-esteem, and simply getting ones mind off work for a while.
- ❖ *Relaxation:* whether a person takes it easy once in a while or uses specific relaxation techniques such as biofeedback or meditation, the intent is to eliminate the immediate stressful situation or manages a prolonged stressful situation effectively. Taking it easy may mean curling up with a nice book or watching an interesting movie (not violent) or sports programme on television. Meditation involves muscle and mental relaxation; the person slowly repeats a peaceful phrase or word (religious phrases and chants like saying the rosary in Islam and religions) or concentrates on a mental picture in a quiet location. There is some research evidence that such meditation can have a desirable physical and mental impact on people (Jibril 2003).
- ❖ *Behavioural self-control:* By deliberately managing the antecedents and consequences of their own behaviour, people can achieve self-control. Besides managing their own behaviour to reduce stress, people can also become more aware of their limits and of 'red flags' that signal trouble ahead. They can avoid people or situations that they know will put them under stress. In other words, this strategy involves the individuals controlling the situation before the situation controls them.
- ❖ *Networking:* people need and benefit from social support. Applied as a strategy to reduce job stress, this will entail forming close associations with trusted, emphatic co-workers and colleagues who are good listeners and confidence builders. These

friends are there when needed and they provide support to get the person through stressful situations. Today such alliances, especially if deliberately sought out and developed, are called networks

Conclusion

Increasingly, attention is given to stress as a phenomena that abound in daily life. People as individuals and organisation as collective entities are more and more becoming aware of stress and its negative consequences. At the same time, more attention is paid to it more than in the past. Especially how it affects the individual worker, and how it adversely affects productivity and performance in organisations. Problems such as alcoholism, drug abuse sometimes result from stress, especially job stress. Here, job related factors as overwork, etc. put the person under such stress that several reactions, as earlier pointed, with dire end results and consequences can occur.

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