

Stress Management: Issues & Challenges

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Abstract:

Stress management is a process wherein an effort is made to understand Stress and its effects in our life. It involves finding out if there is harmful stress in area of work and, if so, to identify the main causes of stress. It helps to find various measures to tackle stress at work and understand stress management. This paper conceptualizes and develops a framework wherein an effort is made to understand stress in our lives and workplace and how it can be tackled for effective organizational behavior.

At one point or the other everybody suffers from the stress. Relationships, demands, physical as well as mental health problems, pressure at workplaces, traffic snarls, meeting deadlines, growing-up tensions- all of these conditions and situations are valid causes of stress. People have their own methods of stress management. In some people, stress-induced adverse feelings and anxieties tend to persist and intensify. Learning to understand and master stress management techniques can help to prevent the counter effects of this urban malaise.

Methods of coping up with stress are aplenty. The most significant or sensible way out is a change in lifestyle. Relaxation techniques such as meditation, physical exercises, listening to soothing music, deep breathing, various natural and alternative methods, personal growth techniques, visualization and massage are some of the most effective of the known non-invasive stress busters. Stress at work is a relatively new phenomenon of modern lifestyles. The nature of work has gone through drastic changes over the last century and it is still changing at a whirlwind speed. They have touched almost all professions, starting from an artist to a surgeon, or a commercial pilot to a sales executive. With change comes stress, inevitably. Professional stress or job stress poses a threat to physical health. Work related stress in the life of organized workers, consequently, affects the health of organizations.

Job stress is a chronic disease caused by the condition in the workplace that negatively affects an individual's performance and/or overall well-being of his body and mind. One or more of a host of physical and mental illness manifests job stress. In some cases, job stress can be disabling. In chronic cases a psychiatric consultation is usually required to validate the reason and degree of work related stress.

Introduction:

“Stress is not a weakness” The word “stress” is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a state of affair involving demand on physical or mental energy”. A condition or which can disturb the normal physical and mental health of an individual. In medical terms, stress is the disruption of homeostasis through physical or psychological stimuli. Stressful stimuli can be mental, physiological, anatomical or physical reactions. Extreme stress conditions, psychologist say, are detrimental to human health but in moderation stress is normal and, in many cases proves useful. Stress, nonetheless, is synonymous with negative conditions. Today, with the rapid diversification of human activity, we come face to face with numerous causes of stress and the symptoms of stress and depression.

The most commonly accepted definition of stress (mainly attributed to Richard S Lazarus) is that stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that **“demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.”** He published in 1974 a model dividing stress into eustress and distress. Where stress enhances function (physical or mental, such as through strength training or challenging work) it may be considered eustress. Persistent stress that is not resolved through coping or adaptation (distress) may lead to escape (anxiety) or withdrawal (depression) behavior. In our fast paced world, it is impossible to live without stress, whether you are a student or a working adult. There is both positive and negative stress, depending on each individual's unique perception of the tension between the two forces. Stress bears deliberating effects on both the employees and the employer. (Khanka, p.319) Corporate India is finally waking upon the fact that a lot of human potential is being drained away because of stress and burn out.(Shekhar Bajaj)

The difference between experiences which result in eustress or distress is determined by the disparity between an experience (real or imagined), personal expectations and resources to cope with the stress. A person living in a fashion consistent with personally-accepted expectations may have no stress even if the conditions might be interpreted as adverse from some outside perspective — rural people may live in comparative poverty, and yet be unstressed if their resources are sufficient to meet their needs and expectations. If there is chronic disparity between experience and expectations, stress may be relieved by adjustment of expectations to meet the ongoing experiences or conditions. Alarming experiences, either real or imagined, can trigger a stress response.

At one point or the other everybody suffers from the stress. Relationships, demands, physical as well as mental health problems, pressure at workplaces, traffic snarls, meeting deadlines, growing-up tensions- all of these conditions and situations are valid causes of stress. People have their own methods of stress management. In some people, stress-induced adverse feelings and anxieties tend to persist and intensify. Learning to understand and master stress management techniques can help to prevent the counter effects of this urban malaise. Stress is a prevalent and costly problem in today's workplace. About one-third of workers report high levels of stress. One-quarter of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. Three-quarters of employees believe the worker has more on-the-job stress than a generation ago. Evidence also suggests that stress is the major cause of turnover in organizations.

Dynamics of Stress:

In a challenging situation the brain prepares the body for defensive action—the fight or flight response by releasing stress hormones, namely, cortisone and adrenalin. These hormones raise the blood pressure and the body prepares to react to the situation. With a concrete defensive action (fight response) the stress hormones in the blood get used up, entailing reduced stress effects and symptoms of anxiety.

Stress can cause headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, eating disorder, allergies, insomnia, backaches, frequent cold and fatigue to distress such as hypertension, asthma, diabetes, heart ailments and even cancer. In fact, Sanjay Chug, a leading Indian psychologist, says that 70% to 90% of adults visit primary care physicians for stress-related problems. Scary enough, but where do we err?

Just about everybody – men, women, children and even foetuses—suffers from stress. Relationships, demands, chronic health problems, pressure at workplaces, traffic snarls, and meeting deadlines, growing-up tensions or a sudden bearish trend in the bourse can triggers stress conditions. People reacts it to their own ways. In some people, stress-induced adverse feelings and anxieties tend to persist and intensify. Learning to understand and manage stress can prevent the counter effects of stress.

Common factors of stress:

Both negative and positive stressors can lead to stress. Some common categories and examples of stressors include:

1. Organizational factors- Discrimination in pay/salary structure, strict rules and regulations, Ineffective communication, Peer pressure, Goals conflicts/goals ambiguity, more of centralized and formal organization structure, Less promotional opportunities, Lack of

employees participation in decision-making, Excessive control over the employees by the managers

2. Individual factors- There are various expectations which the family members peer, superior and subordinates have from the employee. Failure to understand such expectations or to convey such expectations lead to role ambiguity/role conflict which in turn causes employee stress. Other individual factors causing stress among employees are inherent personality traits such as being impatient, aggressive, rigid, feeling time pressure always, etc. Similarly, the family issues, personal financial problems, sudden career changes all lead to stress. They also include Life events: birth and deaths, marriage, and divorce, Responsibilities: lack of money, unemployment, Work/study: exams, project deadlines, Personal relationships: conflict, deception, Lifestyle: heavy drinking, insufficient sleep Early life exposure (e.g. child abuse) can permanently alter an individual's stress response & Environmental: Lack of control over environmental circumstances, such as food, housing, health, freedom, or mobility.
3. Job concerning factors- Monotonous nature of job, Unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, Lack of confidentiality, Crowding
4. Extra-organizational factors- In today's modern and technology savvy world, stress has increased. Inflation, technological change, social responsibilities and rapid social changes are other extra-organizational factors causing stress.

Stress at Workplace:

Stress at work is a relatively new phenomenon of modern lifestyles. The nature of work has gone through drastic changes over the last century and it is still changing at a whirlwind speed. They have touched almost all professions, starting from an artist to a surgeon, or a commercial pilot to a sales executive. With change comes stress, inevitably. Professional stress or job stress poses a threat to physical health. Work related stress in the life of organized workers, consequently, affects the health of organizations.

According to Global business and Economic Roundtable of Addiction and Mental Health, the top 10 stressors are:

1. **Lack of Control:** Less control employees have over their situations, the greater their stress. Solicit and consider employee suggestions, comments and input.
2. **Lack of Communication** Try communicating early and often, making sure you listen as often as you deliver news or observations.

3. **No Appreciation** When is the last time you praised an employee for a job well done? Say —Thank you more often. Put it in writing for even greater impact. Corporate wellness is a good investment, with a strong return on investment.
4. **No Feedback, good or bad** Don't wait until the annual review to let employees know how they're doing. They wonder every day.
5. **Career and Job ambiguity** Uncertainty about opportunity within the company or job security can lead to a feeling of loss of control. Keep employees clear about performance goals, room for advancement and how your organization is doing.
6. **Unclear Policies and no Sense of Direction** Clearly communicate policies and company goals, and alert top management if employees need further clarity.
7. **Mistrust, Unfairness and Office Politics** It's important to treat everyone the same — and perfectly appropriate to reprimand someone who is negative about other employees. Backbiting keeps everyone on edge.
8. **Pervasive Uncertainty this** results from inadequately explained or unannounced changes. Meet with people individually to review changes. Follow those meetings with a written memo so everyone can review the facts after emotions have died down.
9. **Random Interruptions** Telephone calls, e-mails, walk-ins and supervisor demands can keep employees from completing the work at hand. Consider time management training to help people prioritize and delegate.
10. **The Treadmill syndrome** Having too much or too little to do results in self-defeating behavior that can lead to high stress. Make sure work is evenly divided, and hire additional help where needed.

The research problem is formulated on the basis of vast study of related literature survey which provides theoretical background and conceptual frame work to this study which broaden knowledge base in this area of research. The research takes the lead from the following dimensions; those are the impact of stress on body, mind, behavior and emotions on the basis of review of literature.

Handling Stress at Workplace:

- Talking to your employer: after all, if they don't know there is a problem, they cannot help. If you do not feel able to directly to your employer or manager, ask a Trade Union or other employee representative to raise the issue on your behalf;
- Encouraging more of organizational communication with the employees so that there is no role ambiguity/conflict.

- Seeing if your employer’s counseling or employee assistance service can help (if there is one);
- Encourage employees’ participation in decision-making. This will reduce role stress;
- Grant the employees greater independence, meaningful and timely feedback, and greater responsibility
- The employees must be given feedback on how well they are heading towards these goals;

Effects & Symptoms of Stress: People perceive demands in different ways – as either challenging or threatening. Demands can lead to personal growth, satisfaction and fulfillment. However, when demands are perceived as threatening, mental and physical health can be affected.

- Effects on the individual
- It is usually recognized that stress can affect the body in three different ways i.e. physically, behaviorally and emotionally. Individuals can suffer from one, or a combination of these symptoms, for both short &/or long-term periods.

➤ Physical symptoms include:	➤ Behavioural symptoms include:	➤ Emotional symptoms include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Backache ➤ Fatigue ➤ Muscle tension ➤ Skin rashes ➤ Breathing difficulties ➤ Headaches ➤ Chest pains ➤ Changes in menstrual patterns ➤ Sweating palms, dry mouth, nervous twitches etc 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Absenteeism ➤ Erratic moods ➤ Apathy ➤ Increased use of alcohol/tobacco ➤ Increased use of tranquillisers ➤ Indecision ➤ Unusually emotive or impulsive ➤ Accidents ➤ Loss of appetite ➤ Evading duties responsibilities ➤ Complaining 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Anxiety ➤ Irritability ➤ Low self-esteem and confidence ➤ Depression ➤ Loss of libido ➤ Guilt ➤ Fear and panic ➤ Poor sleep ➤ Aggression ➤ Inappropriate behaviour ➤ Withdrawal from social contacts ➤ Mood swings

- The effects of stress can lead to physical symptoms of ill health, such as heart disease, as well as longer term psychological damage. Many of the early outward signs will be noticeable to managers and work colleagues and should alert those with significant control and responsibility for workplaces to problems within the organization. They include:- Changes in behavior, Unusual tearfulness, irritability or aggression, Indecisiveness, Increased sickness absence, Poor timekeeping, Reduced performance, e.g. inability to concentrate, Overworking or failure to delegate, Erosion of self-confidence, Relationship problems, e.g. becoming withdrawn or argumentative, Increased unwillingness to co-operate or accept advice, Excessive smoking or drinking, Drug abuse. The victim may also complain of or demonstrate symptoms of:- Anxiety, Depression, Panic attacks, Headaches, Raised blood pressure, Indigestion, Muscle tension, Increased heart rate.
- ***Stress management programs***
- Conducting stress management programs at organizational level, with the objective of creating awareness about stress and making employees to learn stress management techniques.
- ***Physical activities planned in job design***
- The body can release stress, better through physical exertion, as physicians were suggesting, indulging any kind of physical activity is recommended while job design. Journal of Information Technology and Economic Development
- ***Stress-audit***
- Conducting stress-audit at organizational level, for the purpose teaching individual, what causes stress and its impact on themselves. This leads to design the best suitable strategies for managing the stress.
- ***Life style modification programs***
- To combat the ill effects of stress, life style modification programs at individual and organizational level are recommended, after discussing experts. Ultimately individual should be responsible to carry forward these programs.
- ***Finding triggers and stressors***
- Identifying triggers and stressors through continuously monitoring health of the employees and proactive organizational style will be a coping strategy in stress management.
- ***Supportive organization culture***
- Though, Organization culture impacts in multiple dimensions of organizational outcomes, stress management is also among them. A supportive organizational system will integrate an individual system in order to understand stress and designing appropriate coping strategies.
- ***Ergonomics and environmental design***

- Need for improvement in equipment used at work, and physical working conditions are in much demand in present tech-savvy world, and undoubtedly this will become one of the best stress coping strategies at organizational level.
- ***Stress counseling programs***
- Introducing stress counseling programs, in order to understand and solve stress related problems to control mostly behavioral and emotional outcomes of employees.
- ***Spiritual programs***
- Conducting spiritual programs at organizational level will leads to introspection of employees and reduce stress to create more energetic and enriched platform which can increase organizational performance.

Table-1: Impact of stress in various dimensions Impact

Impact on Body	Impact on Mind	Impact on Behavior	Impact on Emotions
Head aches, taut muscles, breathlessness	Worrying, muddled thinking, night mares	Accident prone, loss of appetite	Loss of confidence, more fussy
Frequent infections, skin irritations	Impaired judgment, indecisions	drinking and smoking more	irritability, depression, apathy
Fatigue, muscular twitches	Negativity, hasty decisions	Loss of sex drive, insomnia	Alienation, apprehension

Causes of Workplace Stress:

Job stress may be caused by a complex set of reasons. Some of the most visible causes of workplace stress are:

- **Intrinsic to the Job:** Physical working conditions – noise, temperature, lighting, workplace design, inadequate welfare facilities, badly maintained buildings, inadequate or poorly sited equipment etc, Isolation from others, overcrowding etc, Lack of a Health and Safety culture, Deadlines and Targets, Shift work, Long hours, Travel, New Technology, Work overload, Boring/repetitive work
- **Role in the Organization:** Role ambiguity –no clear work objectives, no clarity re scope and responsibilities, Role conflict. Related to job demands, personal wants, dislikes, perception of how jobs should be done etc, Responsibility – for people and for things.

- Relationships at Work: Lack of recognition and support from managers and co-workers, Bullying by managers or other members of staff, Racial, sexual or other forms of harassment, Conflicts between members of staff.
- Organisational Structure and Climate: No sense of belonging/being part of the team, Lack of opportunities to participate in briefings/meetings etc, Not Included in communications and consultations, No involvement in decision making, Poor management culture, Too many demands, Lack of control by staff over their own jobs, Poor management of change,

Having identified some of the causes of stress it could be useful to remember that individual and organizational health are interdependent, in the sense that organizational hazards can create substantial ill-health amongst employees, and distressed employees can cause substantial organizational dysfunction. It follows that organizations will be more productive if workers are motivated and healthy.

The Survival Sutras:

Because change is constant in life, stress is an integral part of it. Since we don't want to perish under it, we have to adhere to the bottom line of the survival—adapt.

Following are some of the long-term tips to survive stress:

- Even if feel secured in a habituated life, the truth remains that changing with the time makes one's position more secure. In today's business climate, you must continually be prepared for changes to avoid stress and survive in the competitive world.
- Find and protect whatever time you get to refresh, re-energise and re-motivate yourself. Spend quality time with your family. This can be excellent source of emotional and moral support.
- Avoid giving into alcohol, smoking and other substance abuses while under constant stress.
- Develop positive attitude towards stressful situations in life. Give up negative mental traits such as fear, anger and revengeful attitudes, which actually germinate stress. Try to revert to holistic relaxation and personal growth techniques such as meditation, breathing and exercises, to remodel your lifestyles.
- In case of chronic stress consult a health professional.
- Reduce workplace stress by celebrating your colleague's accomplishments.
- Adapting to demands of stress also means changing your personality. Improve your line of communication, efficiency and learn from other's experiences.
- Don't be complacent. Be prepared for any change physically, emotionally and financially.

Management Standards For Work-Related Stress:

- Work-related stress is a major cause of occupational ill health. That means sickness absence, high staff turnover and poor performance in your organization. HSE's Management Standards will help you, your employees and their representatives manage the issue sensibly and minimize the impact of work-related stress on your business. In fact, it might help you improve organizational performance.
- The Management Standards represents a set of conditions that reflects high levels of health, well being and organizational performance.

What can employees do? The International Stress Management Association has produced a leaflet showing how employees can work with their employers to tackle work-related stress using the Management Standards approach. The leaflet is supported by HSE, Acas, TUC and the CIPD.

The HSE Management Standards : The HSE introduced six Management Standards aimed at employers whose responsibility it is to assess, using recommended tools what the levels of work-related stress are in their workplace. The Standards look at the six key areas of work and if properly managed, can help to reduce work-related stress:

- Demands - Includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
- Control - How much say the worker has in the way they do their work.
- Support - Includes the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organization, line management and colleagues.
- Relationships - Includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behavior.
- Role - Whether all workers at every level understand their role within the organization and whether the organization ensures that they do not have conflicting roles.
- Change - How organizational change (large or small) is managed and communicated in the organization.

What Can Be Done about Job Stress?

Job stress may need to be approached in two ways. The two approaches would include:

- Stress Management to improve a worker's ability to cope with difficult work situations. Companies sometimes offer stress management training or offer assistance through an Employee Assistance Program.

- Organizational Change by the company upon identifying stressful aspects of work, and designing strategies and improving work conditions to reduce or eliminate the identified stressors.

What Other Strategies May Help Reduce Job Stress?

The following strategies are also helpful for reducing job stress:

1. Organize your time. Use a schedule planner and schedule tasks. Stick to the schedule! Be sure to schedule in time you need to meet deadlines, make phone calls, send correspondence, write reports, and so on.
2. Follow your bio-clock. Try to schedule the hardest tasks during your hours of peak and concentration.
3. Make "TO DO" lists. List everything you need to do in order of priority. As you finish a task, check it off and go to the next one.
4. Throw it away. Don't let things accumulate! Sort mail and toss what you don't need. Sort e-mails and delete what you don't need to read. Sort files and toss what's out-of-date.
5. Organize your work space. Organize papers, files, or items so that you know where everything is, and things can be found quickly.
6. Don't procrastinate. Don't wait. Do it now. You'll be happy you got it done!
7. Think in steps. Take a large project and break it down into small steps. Then do the project one small step at a time.
8. Take breaks. Avoid working around the clock. Go get a cup a coffee. Eat lunch away from your desk or work area. Try to go home on time.
9. Share a problem. If you encounter an unusually challenging work problem, talk with co-workers. They may not have a solution, but it helps to talk through issues. Sometimes just by talking through a problem, you can recognize a solution.
10. Sleep. Make sure you get enough sleep. Lack of sleep impairs concentration which can add pressure and anxiety.

11. Target ideas. Each time you feel stress, write down a list of targeted things you need to do to reduce the stress for that event.

Conclusion & Suggestion:

Creating a caring, supportive culture.

It is not possible to create a model stress policy applicable to all situations and workplaces. At our Conference in June 1999 a workshop looked at what a policy should contain and came to the following conclusions:

A good policy will have been created after thoughtful consultation (between workers and management). All workers representatives should liaise closely with their unions to obtain best advice during the consultation process.

It is important that the policy is 'owned' by those it is intended to protect.

All policies should commence with a statement of intent and links to the relevant Health & Safety legislation.

Acknowledgement of the issues and commitment from the very top of the organisation is essential. Employers need to say that they find the creation of workplace stress unacceptable and that they will work for its eradication.

An acknowledgement of the cost of stress in both personal and financial terms should be contained in the policy.

The policy should begin with the acceptance of employee responsibility for the stressors and for the illnesses that follow.

There should be clear arrangements for the carrying out of risk assessments. The policy should state clearly the steps the employer intends to take to eradicate the problem of work-related stress injury. It should contain arrangements for supportive and confidential health monitoring. There should be commitment to the provision of suitable training available to the workforce (including managers) throughout their working lives.

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