

Some Studies on Job Stress Management

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ABSTRACT

Stress may be referred to as an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. The word stress means different things to different people. Some people define stress as events or situations that cause them to feel tension, pressure, or negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. Others view stress as the response to these situations. This response includes physiological changes—such as increased heart rate and muscle tension—as well as emotional and behavioural changes. However, most psychologists regard stress as a process involving a person's interpretation and response to a threatening event. Stress is a common experience. We may feel stress when we are very busy, have important deadlines to meet, or have too little time to finish all of our tasks. Often people experience stress because of problems at work or in social relationships, such as a poor evaluation by a supervisor or an argument with a friend. Some people may be particularly vulnerable to stress in situations involving the threat of failure or personal humiliation. Others have extreme fears of objects or things associated with physical threats—such as snakes, illness, storms, or flying in an airplane—and become stressed when they encounter or think about these perceived threats. Major life events, such as the death of a loved one, can cause severe stress.

Stress can have both positive and negative effects. Stress is a normal, adaptive reaction to threat. It signals danger and prepares us to take defensive action. Fear of things that pose realistic threats motivates us to deal with them or avoid them. Stress also motivates us to achieve and fuels creativity. Although stress may hinder performance on difficult tasks, moderate stress seems to improve motivation and performance on less complex tasks. In personal relationships, stress often leads to less cooperation and more aggression.

INTRODUCTION

Definition of stress

Whilst there is little disagreement about the prevalence of stress there is considerable debate about what the word (stress) actually refers to. In ordinary conversation we seem to be willing

to apply the word to both cause and effect. In other words, the common sense view of stress is that it is a combination of external stressors and our **response** in the early and highly influential research of Selye (1936). Stress is as the result of an interaction between an individual 's emotional, intellectual, social, and physical resources and the **demands** on him or her.

Marshall & Cooper (1981) argue that 'stress' is a different phenomenon from 'pressure'. Stress is something more than mere pressure. It carries strong overtones of the breakdown of normal human performance. In an earlier work, Cooper & Marshall, (1978), the same two authors concluded that 'stress is essentially individually defined and must be understood with reference to characteristics of both the individual and his environment, as it is the outcome of the two'

The following are the various definitions of the term stress:

A. Stress is the excitement, feeling of anxiety, and/or physical tension that occurs when the **demands** placed on an individual are thought to exceed his ability to cope. This most common view of stress is often called distress or negative stress. The physical or psychological demands from the environment that cause this condition are called stressors. (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2004)

B. Holmes & Rahe,(1967) defined stress as a stimulus event that presents unusual demands.

C. It is defined by Ganster and Murphy (2000) as a form of 'strain' provoked in **response** to situational **demands** labeled 'stressors' which occur when jobs are simultaneously high in demands and low in control.

D. Is an adaptive **response**, mediated by individual differences and/or psychological processes, that is, a consequence of any external (environment) action, situation, or event that places excessive psychological and/or physical **demands** on a person. (Wehrich and Koontz, 1993).

E. Stress is the mental or physical condition that results from a perceived threat of danger (physical or emotional) and the pressure to remove it. (Leslie & Lloyd, 1977)

F. Selye (1976) define stress as the bodily **response** we make to the troublesome event.

G. Stress is any circumstances or transactions with the environment that threaten or are perceived to threaten our well-being and thereby tax our adaptive capacities. (Weiten, 1986).

H. An adaptive **response**, moderated by individual differences, that is a consequence of any action, situation, or event and that places special **demands** on a person. (Ivancevich, Konopaske and Matteson, 1987)

I. Stress (psychology), an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. (Auerbach et al, 2007 / Encarta 2008)

J. In physics, stress refers to the external force applied to an object – for example, a bridge girder. The response is —strain, which is the impact the force has on the girder.

K. Stress is defined as a nonspecific **response** of the body to a **stimulus** or event (stressor). Under a general model of the stress response, when an individual experiences a stressor, the stressor will lead to a physiological response, one that can be measured by several indicators, such as elevated heart rate. In related literature, the term ‘stress’ is used to refer to this physiological **response**.

General Principles of Stress

I. Stress may be either physical or psychological: Examples of physical stress include infections, exposure to excessive heat or cold failure to get adequate sleep, and pain. Examples of psychological stress include arguing with your spouse, starting a new job, staring at a stack of bills you are unable to pay, and being lonely.

II. Physical and psychological stress may overlap and interact: Although it is convenient to distinguish between physical and psychological stress, you should not think of these two types of stress as being altogether independent. They may overlap in that a single event, such as being wounded in combat, can produce both physical and psychological stress. Furthermore, there is evidence (Friedman, Ader & Glasgow, 1965) that physical and psychological stressors may function interactively.

III. The appraisal of stress is not necessarily objective: when under threat, people respond emotionally and seem particularly prone to deviate from objective and rational modes of thought (Folkman, Schaefer & Lazarus, 1979).

IV. Stress may be self-imposed: we tend to think of stress as something imposed on us from without by others and their demands. Surprisingly often, however, it would seem appropriate to characterize stress as self-imposed. For example, you might put pressure on yourself to get good grades or to climb the corporate ladder rapidly. These overly high expectations often lead to perceptions of failure and feelings of disappointment.

V. Our response to stress is complex and multidimensional: stress affects us at several levels. It tends to produce changes in our emotions, our physiology, and our behavior.

SOURCES OF STRESS

The circumstances that cause stress are called stressors. Stressors vary in severity and duration. For example, the responsibility of caring for a sick parent may be an ongoing source of major stress, whereas getting stuck in a traffic jam may cause mild, short-term stress. Some events, such as the death of a loved one, are stressful for everyone. But in other situations, individuals may respond differently to the same event—what is a stressor for one person may not be stressful for another. For example, a student who is unprepared for a chemistry test and anticipates a bad grade may feel stress, whereas a classmate who studies in advance may feel

confident of a good grade. For an event or situation to be a stressor for a particular individual, the person must appraise the situation as threatening and lack the coping resources to deal with it effectively.

Stressors can be classified into three general categories: catastrophic events, major life changes, and daily hassles. In addition, simply thinking about unpleasant past events or anticipating unpleasant future events can cause stress for many people.

a) Catastrophes

A catastrophe is a sudden, often life-threatening calamity or disaster that pushes people to the outer limits of their coping capability. Catastrophes include natural disasters—such as earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, floods, and hurricanes—as well as wars, torture, automobile accidents, violent physical attacks, and sexual assaults. Catastrophes often continue to affect their victims' mental health long after the event has ended. For example, in 1972 a dam burst and flooded the West Virginia mining town of Buffalo Creek, destroying the town. Two years after the disaster, most of the adult survivors continued to show emotional disturbances. Similarly, most of the survivors of concentration camps in World War II (1939-1945) continued to experience nightmares and other symptoms of severe emotional problems long after their release from the camps.

b) Major Life Changes

The most stressful events for adults involve major life changes, such as death of a spouse or family member, divorce, imprisonment, losing one's job, and major personal disability or illness. For adolescents, the most stressful events are the death of a parent or a close family member, divorce of their parents, imprisonment of their mother or father, and major personal disability or illness. Sometimes, apparently positive events can have stressful components. For example, a woman who gets a job promotion may receive a higher salary and greater prestige, but she may also feel stress from supervising coworkers who were once peers. Getting married is usually considered a positive experience, but planning the wedding, deciding whom to invite, and dealing with family members may cause couples to feel stressed.

c) Daily Hassles

Much of the stress in our lives results from having to deal with daily hassles pertaining to same hassles every day. Examples of daily hassles include living in a noisy neighborhood, commuting to work in heavy traffic, disliking one's fellow workers, worrying about owing money, waiting in a long line, and misplacing or losing things.

When taken individually, these hassles may feel like only minor irritants, but cumulatively, over time, they can cause significant stress. The amount of exposure people have to daily hassles is strongly related to their daily mood. Generally, the greater their exposure is to hassles, the worse is their mood. Studies have found that one's exposure to daily hassles is actually more predictive of illness than is exposure to major life events.

EFFECTS OF STRESS

Negative effects

A. Impairment of cognitive functioning: a moderately common effect of stress is impairment of one's mental functioning. In some people, stress may lead to a narrowed form of attention, reduced

flexibility in thinking, poor concentration and less effective memory storage. Such effects are far from inevitable. (Mandler, 1979)

B. Shock and disorientation: severe stress can leave people dazed and confused. (Horowitz, 1979) In these states, people tend to feel emotionally numb and they respond in a flat, apathetic fashion to events around them. They often stare off into space and have difficulty maintaining a coherent train of thought. Their behavior frequently has an automatic, rigid, stereotyped quality.

C. Burnout: burnout is a buzzword for the eighties. This is a stress-related syndrome wherein one's behavior comes to be dominated by feelings of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. The physical exhaustion includes chronic fatigue, weakness, and low energy. The emotional exhaustion refers to feeling hopeless, helpless, trapped, and emotionally drained. The mental exhaustion is manifested in highly negative attitudes toward oneself, one's work, and life in general.

D. Disruption of social relations: there is one evidence that stress can lead to deterioration in one's normal social relations. The effect of stress on interpersonal behavior has not attracted much attention. However, researchers working with Vietnam veterans suffering from the delayed stress response syndrome (also called —posttraumatic stress disorder) observed disruptions in social functioning with some regularities. These disruptions include feeling of alienation, difficulties in relating to spouses and friends, and impairments in the capacity to love and trust others. (Blank, 1982; Shatan, 1978)

Positive effects

The beneficial effects of stress are more difficult to pinpoint than the harmful effects because they tend to be more subtle. First, we would probably experience a suffocating level of boredom if we lived a stress-free existence. Life would be very dull indeed if it were altogether devoid of challenge. There is evidence (Suedfeld, 1979) that an intermediate level of stimulation and challenge tends to be optimal for most people. Although most of us think of stress in terms of stimulus overload, it is clear that underload can be extremely unpleasant as well.

Second, stress may frequently promote personal growth. Basically, personal growth refers to movement toward greater psychological health. Stress must sometimes force us to develop new skills, learn new insights, and acquire new strengths. In other words, the adaptation process

initiated by stress may often lead to personal changes for the better. Confronting and conquering a stressful challenge may lead to improvement in a specific coping abilities and to favourable alternative in one's self-concept.

Third, today's stress can 'inoculate' us so that we are less affected by tomorrow's stress. If stressful experience is moderate in intensity and does not overwhelm us, it may increase our subsequent stress tolerance. Thus, a fellow who has previously endured business's setbacks may be much better prepared than most people to deal with the fact that the bank is about to foreclose on his home. In light of the negative effects that stress can have, improved stress tolerance is a desirable outcome.

STRESS PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT

Organizational Stress Prevention and Management Programs

In addition to variety of activities that may be undertaken to improve person-environment fit, and increasing number of organizations have developed very specific stress prevention and/ or management programs. Some of these programs focus on a specific issue or problem, such as alcohol or drug abuse, career counseling, job relocation, or burnout. Two specific types of organizational programs have become particularly popular during the last two decades: employee assistance program and wellness programs.

A. Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)

This is an employee benefit program designed to deal with a wide range of stress-related problems, including behavioral and emotional difficulties, substance abuse, and family and marital discord and other personal problems. B.F. Goodrich, IBM, Xerox, and Caterpillar are examples of companies with such programs. EAPs tend to be based on the traditional medical approach to treatment. General program elements include:

- **Diagnosis:** Employee with a problem asks for help; EAP staff attempts to diagnose the problem.
- **Treatment:** Counseling or supportive therapy is provided. If in-house EAP staff is unable to help, employee may be referred to appropriate community-based professionals.
- **Screening:** Periodic examination of employees in highly stressful jobs is provided to detect early indications of problems.
- **Prevention:** Education and persuasion are used to convince employees at high risk that something must be done to assist them in effectively coping with stress.

B. Wellness Programs

Wellness programs, sometimes called health promotion programs is an employee program focusing on the individual's overall physical and mental health. Wellness programs may include

a variety of activities and assist in preventing or correcting specific health problems, health hazards, or negative health habits. This includes not only disease identification but lifestyle modification as well. Among the most prevalent examples of such programs are those emphasizing hypertension identification and control, smoking cessation, physical fitness and exercise, nutrition and diet control, and job and personal stress management. Examples of well-established wellness programs (all of which include a stress reduction component) include Mass Mutual's Wellness Partnership, 3M's Lifestyle 2000 program, Warner-Lambert's LifeWise program, and Control Data's StayWell program. Simply offering an EAP or wellness program does not guarantee positive results for either employers or the sponsoring organization. While many factors determine how successful any particular program will be, a number of recommendations, if followed, will increase the likelihood of achieving beneficial outcomes.

Individual Approaches to Stress Prevention and Management

A. Cognitive Techniques

The basic rationale for some individual approaches to stress management, known collectively as cognitive techniques, is that a person's response to stressors is mediated by cognitive processes, or thoughts. The underlying assumption of these techniques is that people's thoughts, in the form of expectations, beliefs, and assumptions, are labels they apply to situations, and these labels elicit emotional responses to the situation. Thus, for example, if an individual labels the loss of a promotion a catastrophe, the stress response is to the label, not the situation. Cognitive techniques of stress management focus on changing labels or cognitions so that people appraise situations differently. This reappraisal typically centers on removing cognitive distortions such as magnifying (not getting the promotion is the end of the world for me), over-generalizing (not getting promoted means my career is over; I'll never be promoted in any job, anywhere), and personalization (since I didn't get the promotion it's clear I'm a terrible person). All cognitive techniques have a similar objective: to help people gain more control over their reactions to stressors by modifying their cognitions.

B. Relaxation Training

The purpose of this approach is to reduce a person's arousal level and bring about a calmer state of affairs, both psychologically and physiologically. Psychologically, successful relaxation results in enhanced feelings of well-being, peacefulness and calm, a clear sense of being in control, and a reduction in tension and anxiety; physiologically, decreases in blood pressure, respiration, and heart rate should take place. Relaxation techniques include breathing exercises; muscle relaxation; autogenic training, which combines elements of muscle relaxation and meditation; and a variety of mental relaxation strategies, including imagery and visualization.

C. Meditation

The most widely practice is transcendental meditation, or TM. Its originator, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, defines TM as turning the attention toward the subtler levels of thought until the mind transcends the experience of the subtlest state of thought and arrives at the source of thought. The basic procedure used in TM is simple, but the effects claimed for it are extensive.

D. Biofeedback

Biofeedback is a technique in which people learn voluntary control of stress-related physiological responses, such as skin temperature, muscle tension, blood pressure, and heart rate. Normally, people cannot control these responses voluntarily. In biofeedback training, people are connected to an instrument or machine that measures a particular physiological response, such as heart rate, and feeds that measurement back to them in an understandable way. For example, the machine might beep with each heartbeat or display the number of heartbeats per minute on a digital screen. Next, individuals learn to be sensitive to subtle changes inside their body that affect the response system being measured. Gradually, they learn to produce changes in that response system—for example, to voluntarily lower their heart rate. Typically individuals use different techniques and proceed by trial and error until they discover a way to produce the desired changes.

E. Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercise—such as running, walking, biking, and skiing—can help keep stress levels down. Because aerobic exercise increases the endurance of the heart and lungs, an aerobically fit individual will have a lower heart rate at rest and lower blood pressure, less reactivity to stressors, and quicker recovery from stressors. In addition, studies show that people who exercise regularly have higher self-esteem and suffer less from anxiety and depression than comparable people who are not aerobically fit.

CONCLUSIONS

Stress could be defined as unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well-being. The word stress means different things to different people. Some people define stress as events or situations that cause them to feel tension, pressure, or negative emotions such as anxiety and anger. Others view stress as the response to these situations. This response includes physiological changes—such as increased heart rate and muscle tension—as well as emotional and behavioral changes. However, most psychologists regard stress as a process involving a person's interpretation and response to a threatening event. Stress is a common experience. We may feel stress when we are very busy, have important deadlines to meet, or have too little time to finish all of our tasks. Often people experience stress because of problems at work or in social relationships, such as a poor evaluation by a supervisor or an argument with a friend. Some people may be particularly vulnerable to stress in situations involving the threat of failure or personal humiliation. Others have extreme fears of objects or things associated with physical threats—such as snakes, illness, storms, or flying in an airplane—and become stressed when they encounter or think about these perceived threats. Major life events, such as the death of a loved one, can cause severe stress. Stress can have both positive and negative effects. Stress is a normal, adaptive reaction to threat.

It signals danger and prepares us to take defensive action. Fear of things that pose realistic threats motivates us to deal with them or avoid them. Stress also motivates us to achieve and fuels creativity. Although stress may hinder performance on difficult tasks, moderate stress seems to improve motivation and performance on less complex tasks. In personal relationships, stress often leads to less cooperation and more aggression. If not managed appropriately, stress can lead to serious problems. Exposure to chronic stress can contribute to both physical illnesses, such as heart disease, and mental illnesses, such as anxiety disorders. The field of health psychology focuses in part on how stress affects bodily functioning and on how people can use stress management techniques to prevent or minimize disease.

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