

## **Stress at workplace**

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**Abstract:** Stress is an inseparable part of present day living. The stress response occurs automatically when a person feels threatened by any change in the environment. A number of factors that can contribute to modern day stress may be listed as follows: economic uncertainty, increasing socio-political pressures, sterile life style, increasing workload and increasing performance demands and so on. High levels of stress negatively affect physical health, psychological well-being, and many facets of task performance. If the stress level exceeds an individual's capacity to handle, it may lead to mental and physical imbalance in the person. Hence, in the present day, managing stress has become a major challenge for individuals. Although, human bodies respond to both positive and negative sources of stress, the concept of stress is more often related to negative sources of stress. The present paper makes an attempt to discuss various conceptual aspects of stress, the strategy to managing and coping the stress.

**Key words:** Stress, burnout, psychological well-being

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### **Introduction**

Stress is an inseparable part of present day living. Stress is a physical, mental and emotional response to a challenging event — not necessarily of the event itself. The stress response occurs automatically when a person feels threatened by any change in the environment. Stress can be defined as a dynamic condition, in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, demand, or resource related to what the individual desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important (Schuler, 1980). A number of factors that can contribute to modern day stress may be listed as follows: economic uncertainty, increasing socio-political pressures, sterile life style, increasing workload and increasing performance demands and so on. High levels of stress negatively affect physical health, psychological well-being, and many facets of task performance (Quick et al, 1992). If the stress level exceeds an individual's capacity to handle, it may lead to mental and physical imbalance in the person. Hence, in the present day, managing stress has become a major challenge for individuals.

Scientists define stress as the pattern of emotional states and physiological reactions occurring in response to demands from within or outside organizations (i.e, stressors) [Greenberg & Baron, 2010: 182]. Although, human bodies respond to both positive and negative sources of stress, the concept of stress is more often related to negative sources of stress. The bias is due to the fact that people's reactions to stress on the job tend to be negative in nature, making it a concern to managers within organizational context. Hence, when one refers to work stress, the pointer is towards the harmful physical and emotional responses that people experience in their jobs (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, 2005).

The present paper makes an attempt to discuss various conceptual aspects of stress, the strategy to managing and coping the stress.

### **Type of stress**

Stress can manifest itself in a number of ways depending upon the suddenness of an even to be dealt with and types of stressors to be handled by an individual. It may manifest itself either physically, emotionally and / mentally, as certain symptoms.

**Physical**—This occurs when the body as a whole suffers due to stressful situation. Symptoms may range from headaches, to tension in the neck, forehead, and shoulder muscles. Prolonged exposure to stress can cause other

alarming symptoms like digestive problems, ulcers, insomnia (sleeplessness), fatigue, high blood pressure, nervousness, excessive sweating, heart ailments, strokes and hair loss, as well.

**Emotional** – These responses are due to stress impacting the mind and include symptoms such as anxiety, anger, depression, irritability, frustration, over-reaction to everyday problems, memory loss and a lack of concentration while carrying out any task. Anxiety is manifested as a response to loss, failure, danger or a fear of the unknown. Anger is a response to frustration or social stress and can become a threat to other individuals, if not kept in check. Depression is frequently seen as an emotional response to upsetting situations, such as, the death of a loved one, illness and failure.

**Psychological** – Long-term stress can cause psychological problems in some individuals. Symptoms may include social isolation, phobias, compulsive behaviors, eating disorders and night terrors.

Based on the general experiences we have in day to day life, stress may be categorised into two types: eustress (positive stress) and, distress (negative stress). Eustress, or positive stress, has the following characteristics (Mills, 2005):

- Motivates, focuses energy
- Is perceived as within our coping abilities
- Feels exciting
- Improves performance

In contrast, Distress, or negative stress, has the following characteristics:

- Causes anxiety or concern
- Is perceived as outside of our coping abilities
- Feels unpleasant
- Decreases performance
- Can lead to mental and physical problems

On one hand, too much of stress is harmful to the body and the mind, and on the other, too little of light is also dysfunctional to the human system. We need to have optimum stress levels or eustress to attain peak performance.

#### **Sources of stress**

There are several stressors, which are responsible in causing stress in everyday life. The following may be seen to be the potential sources of stress:

**Environmental factors:** Environmental uncertainty influences stress levels among employees in an organization. Changes in the business cycle create economic uncertainties, which may lead to stress. Political uncertainties may also lead to stress. Technological uncertainty can cause stress too, as new innovations can make an employee's skills and experience obsolete and redundant in a very short period of time.

**Individual factors:** Essentially, these factors are family issues, personal economic problems, and inherent personality characteristics. Broken families, failed marriages and other family issues may create stress, which may affect job performance. Over-Spending and debt situation can also create financial strain and eventually, stress. Another individual factor, which is responsible for creating stress is, a person's basic dispositional nature. For example, a person, who loses temper often, is more prone to stress situation. Individuals with high level of mistrust for others also cause stress for themselves.

**Individual Differences:** Six individual difference variables moderate the relationship between potential stressors and experienced stress: perception, job experience, social support, locus of control, self-efficacy, and hostility (Robbins, 2004: 581). Perception regulates the relationship between a potential stress condition and an individual's response to it. Stress is experienced based on the individual's interpretation of those conditions. Negative Job experience may also cause stress. People who are not able to cope with the stress, they tend to get into depression, quit the job, show dissatisfaction. Social support from the colleagues and family act as the

buffer to lessen the impact of stress for an individual. Those with a high internal locus of control believe they control their own destiny, and therefore, try to rectify the situation by putting their best efforts, instead of succumbing into stress situation and sulking over the it. Self-efficacy, which helps to enhance confidence in one's own abilities appears to decrease stress. People who display anger frequently and show hostility often, are more likely to experience stress in various situations.

**Occupational factors:** Occupational stress is a complex phenomenon. The most significant occupational factors which are responsible for stress, have been discussed below.

*Occupational Demands-* By their very nature, some jobs place more uncontrollable demands than others. Five features, in particular, are important in determining the levels of stress in various jobs. Specifically, higher levels of stress may be experienced by individuals when their jobs require the following activities to be performed on a continuous basis (Greenberg & Baron, 2010:184):

- Making decisions
- Performing boring, repetitive tasks
- Repeatedly exchanging information with others
- Working in unpleasant physical conditions
- Performing unstructured rather than structured tasks

The more a job possesses these characteristics, more frequently the job has the potential to generate stress within individuals who may be performing it.

*Role based Stress-* Pareek (2011) has emphasized on job role stress and opined that, role stress can occur from two sources, namely role-space conflicts and role-set conflicts.

- *Role- space conflicts-* Every individual in the organizational context may be required to occupy and play a number of roles. If, there is any conflict within this field it would be referred to as role-space conflicts. This may lead to problems such as, self-role distance, intra-role conflict, role stagnation and inter-role distance.
- *Role-set conflicts-* It arises as a result of incompatibility among the expectations of the significant or important roles and the individual himself are referred to as role-set conflicts. For examples, a role set consists of persons, such as, boss, subordinate colleague and clients who have different expectations from the role an individual occupies. This may lead to such phenomenon as, role ambiguity, role expectation conflict, role overload, role erosion, resource inadequacy, person inadequacy and role isolation.

### **Consequences of stress**

Stress manifests in various ways, like, high blood pressure, ulcers, irritability, difficulty making routine decisions, loss of appetite, accident proneness, and the like. These symptoms can be classified as: physiological, psychological, and behavioral symptoms.

**Physiological Symptoms:** Earlier, researches pointed out that that stress could create changes in metabolism, increase in heart and breathing rates and blood pressure, inducing headaches, and heart attacks. Recent researches reveal that stress may have other harmful physiological effects. For example, one study linked stressful job demands to increased susceptibility to upper respiratory illnesses and poor immune system functioning, especially among people with low self-efficacy (Schaubroeck et al. 2001). Another study found out that, higher levels of psychological burnout among workers were related to substantially higher levels of sickness absence (Borritz, et al, 2010).

It has been proved that there is a strong link between job stress and personal health. A study revealed that, chronically stressed employees were likely to suffer much more from metabolic syndrome (combination of factors, such as, obesity around the abdomen, high triglyceride levels, glucose intolerance, etc.), than their non-stressed counterparts. Metabolic syndromes are linked to such serious problems like diabetes and hypertension (Chandola, et al. 2005).

**Psychological Symptoms:** Job dissatisfaction is the most obvious psychological effect of stress (Steffy & Jones, 1988). But other psychological states, such as, tension, anxiety, irritability, boredom, and procrastination, also act as indicator towards stress. It has been proved that, jobs with lack of clarity, or, with conflicting role demands, increase the possibility of stress and job dissatisfaction (Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006). It has also been seen that, lesser control on the speed of work, less variety in the job role, less significance and autonomy, lack of feedback, enhance stress and reduce job involvement and satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Interestingly, the increased autonomy is perceived differently by the individuals, with high external locus of control. With given autonomy, they perceive themselves more responsible for the success and failure of the job performance (instead of putting blame on the external factors), and hence, experience more stress (Meier et al., 2008).

**Behavioral Symptoms:** Evidence show that that low to moderate levels of stress stimulate the body and increase its ability to react. Individuals then are often able to perform their tasks better, more intensely, or more rapidly. But, too much stress places unattainable demands on an individual resulting in lower performance. Research suggests that stress has negative effects on task performance. It means that performance can be disrupted even by relatively low levels of stress. The greater the stress people encounter on the job, the more adversely affected their job performance tends to be (Motowidlo et al, 1986). However, more researches are needed to conclude the stress–performance relationship. However, in general, decreased productivity, higher absence rate, and, higher turnover, are some of the major behavioral symptoms of stress. Changes in eating habits, increased smoking or consumption of alcohol, fast speech, fidgeting, and sleep disorders, are also indicators of stress (deCroon et al, 2004; Cropamzano et al, 2003).

#### **Burnout:**

Stress, in varied magnitude, is an inevitable part any job. People, generally, tend to perform their jobs, despite the stressors. However, in some cases, it has been seen that individuals fail to cope with such stress. Such people are often described as suffering from **burnout** – a syndrome of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion coupled with feelings of low self-esteem or low self-efficacy, resulting from prolonged exposure to intense stress and the strain reactions following from them (Greenberg, 2010). Burnout has an adverse impact on job performance. People who are burned out tend to “go through the motions” instead of engaging actively in their work. Also, it is linked to the same adverse health effects as stress.

There are some similar features between burnout and diagnosable conditions, such as, depression, anxiety disorders or mood disorders. However, classic symptoms of burnout include the following (Korczak et al, 2010, Scott, 2014):

- **Emotional exhaustion:** Due to emotional exhaustion, an individual may feel low in energy and tiredness. Physical symptoms of this include pain or problems with the stomach or bowel.
- **Getting aloof from job:** People tend to develop a cynical attitude towards the job, the organization, and the colleagues, in case they perceive their job as non-rewarding and frustrating. This may lead to disengagement of the employees from their work.
- **Reduced performance:** People with burnout regard their activities quite negatively, face boredom, find difficulty to concentrate, and experience a lack of creativity.
- **Lower Physical Energy:** Prolonged stress can cause chronic tiredness.
- **Lowered Immunity to Illness:** People, suffering from burnout, fall sick often, as the immune system becomes weak. As a result, susceptibility to catch cold, the flu, and other minor illnesses get increased.
- **Withdrawal or avoidance syndrome:** Withdrawal or avoidance from maintaining steady interpersonal relationships is another possible sign of burnout.
- **Increased Absenteeism and Inefficiency:** People, who suffer from burnout, tend to skip the work more often to avoid the stressful situation, this leads to increased absenteeism. This may be an unconscious defence mechanism against burnout and people become less efficient as a result of this.

### **Strategies to manage stress**

Stress management strategies may be of two types: organizational and individual.

#### **Organizational strategies**

Organizations may adopt various techniques and programs for stress management. Some of such programs are as follows:

**Employee Assistance Programs** – Many companies today have formal programs in place to help employees with various problems they may face in their personal lives (e.g., substance abuse, career planning, financial and legal problems), which are known as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). Sometimes, such programs supplement or take the place of similar programs sponsored by trade unions, and therefore, known as Member Assistance Programs (MAPs) [Society of Human Resource Management, 2006].

**Stress Management Programs** – Companies also offer Stress Management Programs, which mainly include training sessions on a variety of techniques to manage stress (e.g., meditation and relaxation). These techniques also help individuals to become less adversely affected by stress.

**Wellness Programs** - Wellness Programs are also popular stress management programs adopted by several companies. These are systematic efforts to train employees with healthy lifestyles. Wellness programs usually consist of workshops, where, employees may learn techniques to reduce stress and maintain their health. Exercise, nutrition, and weight-management counseling are among the most popular areas covered.

GlaxoSmithKline, U.S., has taken several steps towards improving the work environment, to reduce work stress. For the same purpose, GSK introduced the TeamResilience program in 2001. The program included an employee survey to determine the sources of stress, which identified late meetings, artificial deadlines and other on-the-job stressors. By the end of 2008, participants reported an 80 percent reduction in workplace pressures, a 25 percent drop in work/life conflict, and a 21 percent increase in satisfaction with GSK as an employer (GlaxoSmithKline. "Health and Wellbeing Programmes." 2008 Report. 24 March 2009. <http://www.gsk.com/responsibility/health-and-wellbeing-programs.htm>).

At GE Plastics, with the help from experts, the company arranged for trainings to provide managers with awareness and skills in managing stress risks and conducted survey to investigate management actions to prevent and reduce stress at work. Employee feedback on the company's workplace stress policy was also taken. Eventually, a formal Workplace Stress Policy has been put in place (Lawrence 2010. <http://www.in-equilibrium.co.uk/case-study-stress-risk-assessment-and-management-at-ge-plastics/>).

Bank of America implemented a wellness program that featured educational materials and health Risk assessments. As a result, healthcare costs decreased by 20 percent over a two-year period with an ROI of more than 5:1 (Fries et al, 1993).

#### **Individual strategies**

Individuals, irrespective of the organizational strategies to manage stress, can adopt several techniques to reduce the stress level. Some of such techniques have been stated below:

**Becoming aware of the problem-** The first step in handling stress is to generate awareness about the stressors. Individuals have the tendency to deny the existence of stress in their life without realizing that stress is severely impacting their own well-being. As a result, they avoid acknowledging the root cause of the stress. This may develop into a vicious cycle, where the failure to cope with one stressor may give rise to another stressor, thus, adding to the magnitude of the experience of stress. Therefore, it is necessary to face the unpleasant notion of being under constant stress. Individuals need to develop insight into what causes their stress. This would help them develop a strategy for managing stress more effectively.

**Effective time management** - Without effective time management, individuals face more possibility of lagging behind the work schedule, overlooking significant priorities, and, work for longer hours to cope with the same. To manage time, an individual needs to distinguish between tasks that are very urgent and to be performed immediately and other tasks, which need to be done in due course of time. Higher priority needs to be given to the most important tasks with more priority. While planning, an individual also needs to assess the requirement of time to complete a task. Buffer time need to be provided, along with the allocating times for contingencies.

**Seek Social Support** - Social support network is made up of friends, family and peers. One can share his/her feeling, experience, problems and feel relieved. Social support provides a sense of belongingness, based on some commonalities. It also reduces the lone time, which in turn reduces the feeling of being stressed. Having friends also reinforces the self-worth as a human being. And, the social support network provides suggestions, advices to cope with the stress.

**Relaxation** – People who keep time to relax, are better at dealing with stress. Relaxation deviates mind off the stress and substitutes it with more calmness. Genuine relaxation must result in peace of mind. Relaxation techniques may range from watching television to listening to soothing music, or visiting some close friends or a power nap. Relaxation not only lowers blood pressure and heart rate but also improves concentration, boost up confidence and reduces anger and frustrations.

**Maintaining healthy Diet and fitness** - Research indicates that reduced intake of salt and saturated fats, and increased consumption of fiber – and vitamin-rich fruits and vegetables help to cope with the physiological effects of stress. Regular exercise also helps. People who exercise regularly obtain many benefits closely related to resistance of the adverse effects of stress (Bakker et al, 2000).

**Meditation as a technique-** Meditation results into relaxed and calm mind. During meditation, the thoughts which cause stress, get eliminated and the mind becomes more focussed. This process may result in enhanced physical and emotional well-being. Meditation helps in gaining a new perspective on stressful situations, building skills to manage stress, increasing self-awareness, and reducing negative emotions.

**Good night sleep** - Adequate sleep fuels mind and body. Irregular and disturbed sleep often hampers concentration and decreases energy levels. This, in turn, affects the effectiveness of work and increases job-related stress. During sleep, the body rests, repairs, rebuilds, grows, and heals itself and stresses and tensions accumulated throughout the day are ideally released. Regular exercise, light reading or music, even humorous movies induce sleep.

#### **Stress at workplace: with special reference to India**

A survey revealed that, Indian employers lead their regional counterparts in developing strategies to manage work-related stress. However, only 38% identified improving the emotional/mental health of employees (i.e. lessening the stress and anxiety) as a top priority of their health and productivity programs. The survey further revealed that, Indian employees rank unclear or conflicting job expectations (40%), inadequate staffing (lack of support, uneven workload or performance in group) (38%) and lack of work/life balance (38%) as the top three causes of stress.

It was also found that, Indian employers promote flexible working options (50%), organize stress management interventions (e.g. workshops, yoga, tai chi) (43%) and organize education and awareness campaigns (41%) to help their employees manage stress. While 85% of US employers promote Employee Assistance Program (EAP), only 2 of every 5 Indian employers are implementing the same. Written guidelines on stress are ranked last in the list of Top 10 steps taken by employers to manage stress with only 10% of Indian employers preferring that same option.

Overall, in India, organizations increasingly recognizing that, workplace practice can contribute to and reduce employee stress. Considering the same, employers are planning lifestyle change programs. Almost 1 in every 3 Indian employers has instituted stress or resilience management programs in 2013 and an almost equal number have planned to do the same in 2014.

(Adopted from Indian employers rank stress as #1 lifestyle risk factor: Towers Watson report, May 6, 2014. cited at <http://www.towerswatson.com/en-IN/Press/2014/05/Indian-employers-rank-stress-as-1-lifestyle-risk-factor>. accessed on 27.6.2015)

Lack of interaction and interpersonal communication are causing more stress among Indian employees, especially the mid-level senior executives. Stress management courses, developed by various institutes, have become a popular choice among the organizations, as a tool to manage employees' stress. Government organizations, corporates, schools and college and NGO sectors are following the suit. Stress Management techniques are also being planned to be taught through e-learning mode so that small companies in tier II and III cities can make use of such services without spending on traveling or organizing events. Some of the stress management modules include behavior and anger management. Apart from the above, most of the companies, who organize skill sharpening and management training for the employees, insist on including between 6 hours and 8 hours of stress management sessions.

The corporate yoga classes are also gaining popularity in managing stress in India. It has been found that, fitness sessions such as yoga, de-stresses the employees and the number of sick leaves go down. There may be two types of training sessions. One, where the company provides a space for yoga sessions. The second option is termed as Desktop Yoga, where the trainer sits on the floor, where the employees have their respective workstations. The exercises can be done even without taking a scheduled break. These sessions do not go on for more than 15 minutes.

(adopted from Companies organising stress busting courses for employees to increase productivity. Tasmayee Laha Roy, ET Bureau Apr 15, 2013, 06.10PM IST [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-04-15/news/38556060\\_1\\_stress-management-corporate-yoga-client-list](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-04-15/news/38556060_1_stress-management-corporate-yoga-client-list))

### **Concluding remarks**

It is clear that stress has long term adverse effects on individuals. Hence it is necessary to maintain a proper work-life balance to keep stress levels in check. Though organizations must make efforts at making work environments less stressful, the individual person must be aware about this phenomenon. The threshold level to resist stress varies across individuals. Therefore, being aware about possible stressors, maintaining a regular and balanced lifestyle along with time management and physical exercise and meditation can create an atmosphere in which stress can be largely monitored and controlled.

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