

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

Stress in the Workplace: Stress Management

Neha Sagar

Assistant Professor, University of Delhi, India

Abstract:

Stress is a state of mind that reflects certain biochemical reactions in the human body and is projected by a sense of anxiety, tension and depression and is caused by such demands by the environmental forces or internal forces that cannot be met by the resources available to the person. It's not easy to find a generally acceptable definition of 'stress'. Doctors, engineers, psychologists, management consultants all use the word in their own distinctive ways . If a given person can handle the demand and enjoy the stimulation involved, then stress is welcomed and helpful. If they can't, then stress is harmful. In this research, I will discuss about the impact of work stress in the US, main causes of stress at workplace, impact on health, relationship between the stress, health and productivity, controlling measures. Stress is the number one problem for working people, many of whom are juggling work, home and care of the children and often time aging parents. A useful definition for this is a "demand made demand made on the adaptive capacities of the mind and body.

Key words: *Stress, Impact of workplace stress in the US, Stress, Health and Performance Relationship, Causes and Preventing Techniques*

1. Introduction

Stress is the nonspecific response of the body to any demand. It must be understood that for the stress to occur, the response should be non-specific. All responses requires utilization of energy. Stress does not necessarily occur due to undesirable developments. In all situations that produce increased demand on a vital activity requiring adapting to a new situation, produce stress in the form of a stereotyped pattern of bio-chemical, functional and structural changes in the human organism. One problem with a single definition is that stress is made up of many things: It is a family of related experiences, pathways, responses and outcomes caused by a range of different events or circumstances. Different people experience different aspects and identify with different definitions. Hans Selye (one of the founding fathers of stress research) identified another part of this problem when he saw that different types of definition operate in different areas of knowledge. To a lawyer or a linguist, words have very precise, definite and fixed meanings. In other fields, ideas and definitions continue evolving as research and knowledge expands.

Selye's view in 1956 was that "stress is not necessarily something bad – it all depends on how you take it. The stress of exhilarating, creative, successful work is beneficial, while that of failure, humiliation or infection is detrimental." Selye believed that the biochemical effects of stress would be experienced irrespective of whether the situation was positive or negative. Since then, ideas have moved on. In particular, the harmful biochemical and long-term effects of stress have rarely been observed in positive situations. Stress is the body's reaction to a change that requires a physical, mental or emotional adjustment or response. Stress can come from any situation or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, nervous, or anxious. Stress is caused by an existing stress-causing factor or "stressor." Dealing with a serious illness or caring for someone who is can cause a great deal of stress. Any demand made on the body that is for some specific activity that is natural, expected and a part of daily routine, does not necessarily create stress. Even walking, thinking, writing, and doing physical activities that are a part of personal and organizational existence, require energy consumption of the body but are not necessarily stress producing forces.

2. Impact of Workplace Stress in the U. S.

According to the 2001 report by the American Institute Of Stress (AIS), job related stress costs the U.S industry \$ 300 billion annually as assessed by absenteeism diminished productivity, employee turnover, direct mail costs, compensation claims, and legal and insurance fees. AIS estimates that 1 million workers are absent on an average workday because of stress related complaints. Other estimates place costs to American industry of more than \$26 billion every year in disability payments and medical bills with executives alone costing American industry more than \$10 billion annually through work days, hospitalization and early death. According to the 1995 workers compensation yearbook, nearly one half of the states allowed worker compensation claims for emotional disorders and disability due to stress on the job.

[However, courts are reluctant to uphold claims for what can be considered ordinary working conditions or just hard work].

In 2005, studies presented at the NSC world congress on Health And Safety at work stated:

- Work related stress only recently has been recognized as one of the major causes of some of the most costly, time robbing health problem for businesses: of 40.2 million working days lost by illness and injury, 13.4 are from stress, anxiety and depression.
- Among the high risk factors for workplace stress are work load, lack of recognition from co-workers and supervisors, poor relations with supervisors, a low level of participation in decisions and insufficient communication of information.
- Among the stresses created by a more globalized workplace are: culture shock among those transferred to new countries, or from rural to urban setting, isolation among outsourced workers and displacement resulting from mega mergers and downsizings.
- Stress can be hidden trigger behind cardiovascular and musculoskeletal disorders, obesity, depression and violence: all costs workplace hazards.
- Addressing psychological problems in workplace health and safety plans need not to be costly. By involving employees in decisions about workplace problems, morale improves, stress lessens, health and safety issues are resolved and costs go down.

In addition to the financial cost of workplace stress, employers should always be concerned about the adverse impact of workplace stress on a business ability to compete in the market place.

2.1. Other Studies and Statistics

While it is true that some stress is probably good for some people, studies indicate that too much job stress has become a common and costly problem in the workplace. For Example:

- 1 in 4 employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives.
- 3 in 4 employees believe that today's workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago.
- Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressor-more so than even financial problems or family conflicts.

According to 2001 studies, 73% of workers said their performance in the workplace is affected by the level of stress they experience. The research also indicates the potential scale of the problem, with the number of mental and psychological claims rising by an alarming 88% over the past seven years.

A 2003 survey examining attitudes in the workplace found stress about the economy, increase in emotional ailments including substance abuse and depression, incidents of anger, complaints and rudeness among co-workers. Attitudes in the American workplace IX, the Marlin company's ninth annual national workplace survey, found that 43% of American workers say that people in their workplace express fear or anxiety about national or world events at least several times a week. One third say they have observed an increase in anxiety or stress related physical ailments in their workplace in the last year such as headache, colds or headache problems such as depression, insomnia, substance abuse, or family conflicts. Other results:-

- 42% reported an increase in complaints among co-workers in the last year, 33% reported an increase in gossips, 24% increase in rudeness and 29% increase in anger.
- 44% said it's a source of irritation that people don't follow the company attendance schedule and 29% said that the same about offensive jokes.
- 27% said morale is lower than it was a year ago and 30% said their own ambitions are less important now than 12 months ago.
- 35% reported an increase in the number of stressed customers, 31% said there's been an increase in the number of customers who are hard to deal with, 25% says they've seen an increase in customer complaints.
- 54% of respondents say management is helping employees deal with stress. Where management helps, employees report fewer emotional and physical ailments, higher morale, fewer complaints, less gossips and lower stress levels.

2.2. Regarding office workers

- 40% have experienced fatigue as a result of job related stress or exertion.
- 35% have stress related headaches.
- 27% have gotten back pain, while 26% have felt neck strain.
- 18% reported repetitive motion injuries as a result of work stress.
- Only about one in three said they had not experienced any physical problems due to job related stress.

3. Stress, Health & Performance

Some employers assume that stressful working conditions are a necessary evil-that a company must turn up the pressures on workers and set aside health concerns to remain productive and profitable. But studies show that stressful conditions are actually associated with increased absenteeism, tardiness and intention by workers to quit their jobs- all of which have a negative effect on the bottom line. NIOSH research has identified organizational characteristics associated with both healthy, low stress work and high level of productivity.

Examples include:

- Recognition of employees for good work performance
- Opportunities for career development
- An organizational culture that value the individual workers
- Management actions consistent with organizational values.

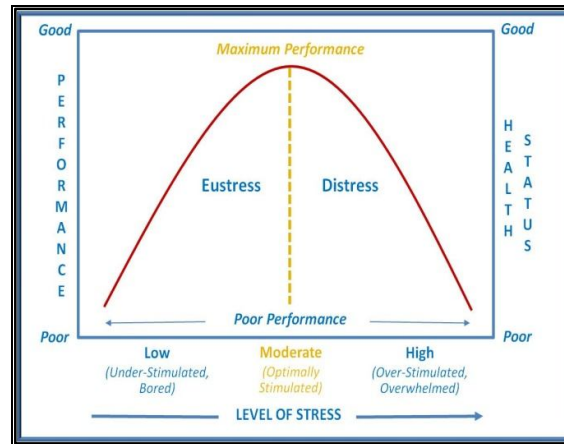


Figure 1

The stress created by desirable and successful events is called ‘Eustress’ and the stress created by undesirable outcomes is known as ‘Distress’. It is primarily the distress form of stress that requires examination and steps to cope with it. Eustress is a positive, healthy and developmental stress response. Thus, just as tension on muscles cause them to strengthen, some level of stress may lead to better performance and more adjusted personality, since we learn how to deal with the problems better, it improves our capacity to confront distress better. However even though some levels of stress are necessary for psychological growth, creative activities and acquisitions of new skills such as learning to drive a car or learning to use a computer, it is the high stressful situations that weaken a person’s physical and psychological capacity to cope with the stressors that have dysfunctional consequences. Just as high level stress is damaging to the physical and psychological well being of the person, extremely low levels of stress are equally undesirable for they cause boredom, and result in lack of stimulation, innovation and challenges. Thus moderate level of stress is necessary for higher level of performance. The following diagram shows the relationship between the level of performance and degree of stress.

4. Causes of Job Stress

Job stress results from the interaction of the workers and the conditions of the work. According to one school of thought, differences in individual characteristics such as personality and coping style are most important in predicting whether certain job conditions will result in stress.

- **The Design Of Task:** Heavy workload, infrequent rest break, long work hours and shift work, hectic and routine task that have little inherent meaning, do not utilize worker’s skill and provide little sense of control.
- **Management Style:** Lack of participation by workers in decision making, poor communication in the organization, lack of family-friendly policies.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Poor social environment and lack of support or help from co-workers and supervisors.
- **Work Role:** Conflicting or uncertain job expectations, too much responsibility, too many hats too wear.
- **Career Concerns:** Job insecurity and lack of opportunity of growth, advancement or promotion, rapid changes for which workers are unprepared.
- **Environmental Conditions:** Unpleasant or dangerous working conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution etc. Working Conditions plays a important role in causing job stress. Exposure to stressful working conditions can have a direct influence on worker’s safety and health. But individual and other situational factors can intervene to strengthen or weaken this influence.

| GENERAL CAUSES | TASK-RELATED CAUSES |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational problems • Insufficient back-up • Long hours, excessive overtime, shift work, rotating shifts • Poor status, pay and promotion prospects • Job uncertainty and insecurity • Poor relations with co-workers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient training • Responsibility of the job • Inability to help • High job demands • Emotional involvement with clients or subordinates |

| SPECIFIC CAUSES | PHYSICAL CAUSES |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role conflict • Poor communication • Lack of promotion/recognition • Inadequate leadership • Unclear role specifications • Low job control • Fighting unnecessary battles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical agents(noise, heat,radiation, cold) • Hazards which cause fear • Uncomfortable work area • Repetitive task |

Table 1

5. Preventing Techniques of Stress at Workplace

- **Promote good communications in the workplace:** We need to focus on improving communications at every level of the HSE and between levels. This is particularly important at times of major change. Good communication with staff, based on sensitivity, awareness and confidentiality, is often key to addressing stress related issues effectively. Regular and open communication can reduce suspicion of management and improve teamwork by ensuring all staff understand and appreciate each other's role. Regular staff meetings lead to greater understanding of each other's perspectives, and help to foster supportive working relationships.
- **Provide clear leadership and opportunities for team building:** Good interpersonal relationships in the workplace are the most powerful way to protect against potential stressors. Where strong relationships exist between work colleagues, staffs shows higher levels of coping skills and are better able to identify possible solutions to problems. Providing clear leadership and working through teams is a very effective way to create a healthier and safer workplace and to resolve onsite issues. Staff may need training and support to participate effectively in teams.
- **Encourage staff to take part in decision-making and problem solving :** Daily work routines can suppress innovation and deplete the energy of staff and managers. If you don't make time to meet and discuss problems, things will stay the way they have always been. A regular time-slot at staff meetings dedicated to service improvements can give staff an opportunity to provide suggestions and give you the space to listen to and encourage your staff.
- **Provide feedback on performance:** A culture where everyone's contribution is genuinely valued will help combat workplace stress. Give staff regular feedback on the things they are doing well, not just on the things that can be improved. A well-managed performance management system, linked to the staff member's job description and with agreed outcomes and timeframes, can reduce the potential for stress in the workplace.
- **Effective recruitment and induction practices are essential:** Ensuring that people are well matched to their job will reduce the potential for workplace stress. Provide clear job descriptions and role clarity to avoid confusion and use them as a basis for measuring performance. If staff know what is expected of them and others they will be more confident in their roles. An induction programme for new staff will help them to find their role within the team and carry out their duties to the necessary standards. It also reduces pressure on existing staff. As part of their induction, you should make new staff aware of policies, including those relevant to health, safety and welfare, and the various sources of help and support available within the HSE. You should also provide an induction to staff who are promoted, transferred or redeployed to your service.
- **Where possible, provide opportunities for flexible work practices:** Some flexibility or control of your own work significantly helps to reduce potential stress in the workplace. Examples of this include the sequence in which you carry out your work, your ability to use your own initiative or work creatively with people or tasks, the opportunity to take part in meetings and flexibility in when you can take your leave.
- **Promoting awareness of stress, stressors and solutions**
 - Always be aware of the duty of care to provide safe systems of work;
 - When conducting risk assessment, work closely with staff and colleagues to identify sources of stress in the workplace and to introduce realistic and appropriate stress control strategies;
 - Provide staff with opportunities to raise and discuss concerns they may have with regard to their area of work;
 - Support and work with staff to identify any additional training or information that they may need to effectively and safely carry out their duties;
 - Liaise with your local Health and Safety or Performance and Development Unit to access training relating to safety, health and welfare for yourself and your staff;
 - Encourage and facilitate staff to avail of any stress management training provided to help them to recognise and manage their own stress;
 - Address problems sensitively and confidentially when these arise. Don't let them fester;
 - Be aware of the range of employee support services available and how to refer to them, for example Occupational Health, Employee Assistance and Staff Counselling. Ensure that employees in your area also have this information.
 - Be attentive to staff going through stressful life events such as bereavement or separation and, where appropriate, remind staff of the supports available.

- **Managing stress in the workplace**

- You should ensure that, as far as it can be, the workplace you are responsible for is a safe and healthy one.
- Be alert to signs of stress in the workplace, as detecting it and intervening early is often the key to managing stress effectively.
- If an employee tells you that they are experiencing stress, your early response is critical to successfully addressing the issue. You should respond in an appropriate, sensitive and supportive manner.
- Ask the employee if you can explore the issues together in order to identify the source of stress. If the workplace is the stressor, then it is important to discuss the aspects of work that they perceive to be causing the stress. Decide together What steps to take to prevent the stress from recurring. If you need guidance, contact the Employee Relations, Occupational Health, Employee Assistance or Staff Counselling Services.
- Offer to refer the employee to Occupational Health, Employee Assistance or Staff Counselling or they may choose to self-refer to these services.
- If you feel that the source of stress may come under our Dignity at Work policy, tell the staff member this and give them a copy of the policy and details of the support contact persons’.
- Make all reasonable efforts to work with the employee to eliminate or minimise the sources of stress and to increase their ability to cope.
- Keep a record of what you agree with the employee and have regular meetings with them to monitor the situation.
- It is important that both of you focus your early discussions on attempts to resolve the matter by going through steps 1-8 above.

If the employee continues to report work-related stress due to an issue that comes under our Grievance Procedure¹⁰, invite them to make a complaint under the Grievance Procedure in order to resolve the matter. In this case, the employee should, with support as needed, set out in writing what they see as the source of their stress related ill-health. Alternatively, you may document the details as set out by the employee and you should both sign this record. Be mindful of the employee’s stress at all stages.

6. Conclusion

The stress faced by professional workers is substantial on both a human and financial basis

While it is intrinsic to the job itself, stress often develop into a living nightmare of running faster and faster to stay in the same place, making people feel undervalued, unable to say ‘no’ to any demand buy not being productive.

The cost of stress related ailment is substantial; therefore a healthy business should compete a stress risk assessment and develop specific control measure such as:

- Increasing employees sense of control and participation in the workplace
- Increasing the skills level of the employees.
- Increasing level of social support
- Making changes that improve physical working conditions
- Health use of technology
- Maintaining job demands at healthy levels.
- Job security and career development.
- Health work schedules.

Management can provide invaluable assistance to employees (and themselves) by understanding and setting effective stress management techniques.

7. References

1. www.google.co.in
2. Definition: <http://www.mindtools.com/stress/UnderstandStress/StressDefinition.htm>
3. NIOSH Safety and Health Topic : stress at Work <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress/>
4. NIOSH stress at work <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/stresswk.html>
5. Freedom from Stress: A Holistic Approach by Phil Nuernberger, Barbara B. Brown
6. Stress Diary: Daily Recorder Journal by Gino Norris
7. Organizational Behavior : An Evidence - Based Approach 12th Edition by Fred Luthans
8. Organizational Behavior by C.B Gupta University Of Delhi
9. Organization Behavior by J.S chandan, professor, Medger Evers College, University of Newyork.
10. Managing work related stress <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/>
11. Preventing stress at workplace http://www.helpguide.org/mental/work_stress_management.htm
12. Stress Management : A holistic approach by Subodh Gupta
13. 8 Keys to Stress Management," by Elizabeth Anne Scott