A STUDY ON JOB STRESS – CAUSES & COPING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Stress is inevitably present among individuals at all levels irrespective of what they are. The only difference is it may vary from case to case. There are several factors that cause stress and create hindrances to the individuals in their performance, work life situations, and even in their family relationships. Though several attempts have been made to identify the causes of stress and coping them, the ultimate solutions have been till today not traced out. Almost all the methods seems to be temporary solutions. Managing stress is all about taking charge: taking charge of thoughts, emotions, schedule, environment, and the way how one deal with problems. The ultimate goal is a balanced life, with time for work, relationships, relaxation, and fun – plus the resilience to hold up under pressure and meet challenges head on.

Keywords: Stress, Meaning of Stress, Causes of Stress, Positive Stress, Negative Stress, Effects of Stress, Coping Stressess, Environment, Balanced Life, Relationships, Relaxation, Resilience, Pressure, Challenges.
INTRODUCTION

"Stress, like Einstein's theory of relativity, is a scientific concept which has suffered from the mixed blessing of being too well known and too little understood."
(Dr Hans Selye)

Stress is an unavoidable part of everyday life, meaning different things to each of us. Stress is much more recognized than it used to be, we have become very aware of the potential negative impact of stress on our health. Yet despite all of this information and wealth of knowledge, the subject of stress still remains vague and not very well understood. There are also many myths about stress that are not accurate and this further confuses the subject. Life in the 21st Century is infinitely far more complex than it has ever been. We live in a crowded, noisy society that we often refer to as the rat race. Our lives are run by deadlines, the clock, modern technology, mobile phones, pagers, faxes, computers, satellites and a hundred and one other demands and pressures.

Many of us have too many tasks and too little time. We drive our children through traffic-clogged roads to may be two or three different schools. We then try to get to work on time, through more congested roads with millions more cars than there used to be, or we deal with delayed trains as some of us may have to commute hundreds of miles to work. While we are at work we have to operate computers, learn newer versions of software, deal with faxes, phones, manage many tasks and people, often without adequate training or support. There are no longer jobs for life and many people are working under temporary or short-term contracts. Research has shown that today we have fewer friends than we used to and live in a more fragmented, isolated society with lower levels of social support, which is an important buffer of stress.

We are less physically active, eat poorer diets, there is a greater amount of pollution, higher crime rates, greater urbanisation (it is known that there is a higher incidence of stress related problems like stress, anxiety and depression in urban areas than in rural areas), increased drug and alcohol misuse, we see daily the many world tragedies of famine, flood and war beamed directly into the television in our homes, we have higher levels of debt and we no longer have a religious faith to rely on.

However, contrary to popular myth, stress is not a unique problem to the 21st Century, human kind has suffered stress since the dawn of human evolution. Modern society however, has undergone more complex, radical change in the span of a few short years than in the whole of human evolution, and this is partly why stress is more of a problem today.

There are many benefits to living in our fast paced, modern industrialized world, however the same society has created complex demands on our psychological and physiological health. We don’t need to return to the stone age to regain our health and its impossible to remove all stress (pressure) from our lives, but what we do need to do is learn to deal with it in a more positive, less destructive manner, using our skills and knowledge of stress to learn how to reduce its impact on our lives.

Stress is an intrinsic part of work and a critical element of achievement,
without a certain amount of which one could never perform at all. Studies cited by the National Institute for Occupation Safety and Health (NIOSH) indicate that 40 per cent of all workers feel overworked, pressurised and squeezed to the point of anxiety, depression and disease. The American Institute of Stress reports that roughly 60 per cent of doctor visits stem from stress-related complaints and illnesses. American businesses lose a lot due to lowered productivity, absenteeism, health care and related costs due to stress. But there are simple techniques that can regulate the amount of stress one feels, increase productivity, performance and avoid burnout (Herbert Benson, 2005). In order to understand about stress, it is important to understand the definition and underlying meaning of stress.

MEANING OF STRESS

The Oxford Reference Dictionary refers to stress as the pressure or tension exerted on an object or a state of mental or emotional strain.

The foundations were laid for the current concept of stress, strain, and coping as far back as ancient Greece with the work of Hippocrates, otherwise referred to as the “father of medicine” (Selye, 1936, p. 8). Modern day stress theorists credit Cannon and Selye for their innovative and groundbreaking work that has formed the basis from which the predominant and most widely researched theories stem.

Selye (1974) defined stress as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand” (p. 27). It is through his research as an endocrinologist that he found that various biological responses could be predicted based the introduction of a toxin into a specific bodily system (Selye, 1974). He found that prompted Selye to develop his theory of the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), which he described as three distinct stages:

1. Alarm reaction - an organism is exposed to a stimulus that it has not adapted to. It reacts by going into a phase dominated by a shock response that eventually leads to another response in which the organism begins to counteract the initial alarm reaction.

2. Stage of resistance – the organism has adapted to the stressor or stimulus and any symptoms improve or disappear.

3. Stage of exhaustion – if the stressor has been particularly severe and prolonged the symptoms reappear and the organism become exhausted and/or death might occur.

In the modern mechanized world, stress is a common problem that affects almost all people at some point of life. Stress is experienced everywhere, whether it is within the family, business, organizational enterprise or any other social or economic activity; one is invariably exposed to various stressful situations (Pestonjee, 2001).

Ivancevich and Matteson (1983) define stress as “the interaction of the individual with the environment”. They define stress in a detailed manner as “an adaptive response, mediated by individual differences and/or psychological processes, that is a consequence of any external action, situation or event that places excessive psychological and/or physical demands upon a person”.

There are many factors responsible for stress in employees. Work pressure increases along with their salary and position. People always have to
drastically compete with their colleagues for keeping their position and their job and are unable to relax them. Therefore, they suffer from anxiety and stress. Another reason is linked with the family. People are in need of money in order to bring up their family and children (Cotetiu, 2007).

Personality factors are extremely important in today’s competitive organizational settings. Often the ‘wrong’ kind of personality proves disastrous and causes undesirable tensions and worries organization. Khosla pointed out that based on personality characteristics, there are four types of needs that people have at work. These are: needs for achievement, affiliation, autonomy and dominance. Those who have high need for achievement engage themselves proactively in work behavior in order to feel proud about their achievements and success; those having high need for affiliation work co-operatively with others; those having high need for autonomy, like to work in an environment with less close supervision; and those with high need for dominance are very effective in an environment where they can actively enforce their legitimate authority.

Stress refers to two simultaneous events: An external stimulus called a stressor and the emotional and physical responses to that stimulus (fear, anxiety, surging heart rate and blood pressure, fast breathing, muscle tension and so on). Good stressor inspire to achieve. Accumulated over time, negative stress can cause depression, burnout, sickness or even kill individuals (Bruce Cryer et al., 2003). Many research studies show that negative stress is both an emotional and physiological habit.

Cofer and Apley (1964) define stress as a class of conditions, producing disturbances within the individual and it is envisaged as a continuum of stimuli. Thus, it may be said that

Stressors + Individual = Stress

Frustrated, angry, nervous, or anxious. Stress is caused by an existing stress-causing factor or "stressor."

**Stress may be defined as "a state of psychological and/or physiological imbalance resulting from the disparity between situational demand and the individual's ability and/or motivation to meet those demands."**

**EFFECTS OF STRESS**

**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 under load can be extremely unpleasant as well. Second, it may frequently promote personal growth referring 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
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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.

Negative effects:

The consequences of stress regarding the individual and the organization are:

On the individual:

1. Physical ailments: Head ache, indigestion, insomnia, heart trouble, tendency to sweat for no good reason, nail biting, high blood pressure, etc.
2. Mental: Anxiety, irritability, lack of clear thinking, inability to relax, frustration, helplessness, loneliness, expression of boredom, dissatisfaction, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate, inability to make decisions, etc.
3. Behavioural: Excessive smoking or drinking, withdrawn from relationships, speech disturbances, feeling unable to cope, lack of interest in life, changes in appearance such as dress, complexion, etc.

On the organization:

Work-related mental health problems constitute one of the main challenges currently faced by organizations, particularly because of their serious consequences-and-extent for these organizations and for individuals. Indeed, it has been found that there is a direct link between stress and heart disease, dissatisfaction at work, accidents and certain forms of cancer. In addition to having impacts on the individuals concerned, work-related mental health problems are the main causes of the increase in absenteeism rates.

JOB STRESS

What is Job Stress?

Job stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Job stress matters to our health and our work. When we feel stressed, our bodies respond by raising the concentration of stress hormones in our blood. When our bodies continually respond to constant demands or threats, coping mechanisms stay in overdrive, which can be damaging to health over time. Research shows that excessive job stress can lead to many long-term health problems, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, weakened immune function, high blood pressure, musculoskeletal disorders, substance abuse, depression and anxiety. Stressful working conditions can also impact health indirectly by limiting our ability or motivation to participate in other health promoting behaviours such as eating well and exercising.

If you work, it is likely that job stress will affect you at some point during your career. Whether you are an employee or an employer, it is important to recognize that stress in the workplace can contribute to poor health, which can lead to lower productivity, absenteeism, and higher healthcare costs. For example:
Up to 44% of women and 36% of men want to quit their jobs because of workplace stress. This contributes to unhappiness as well as many negative health effects.

Healthcare expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress.

Sixty percent of lost workdays each year can be attributed to stress.

Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problem.

"Job stress arises when demands exceed abilities, while job-related strains are reactions or outcomes resulting from the experience of stress." (Westman)

HSE's formal definition of work related stress is:

"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work."

Stress is not an illness – it is a state. However, if stress becomes too excessive and prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop. Work is generally good for people if it is well designed, but it can also be a great source of pressure. There is a difference between pressure and stress. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor, and is often essential in a job. It can help us achieve our goals and perform better. Stress occurs when this pressure becomes excessive. Stress is a natural reaction to too much pressure.

Balancing demands and pressures with skills and knowledge

A person experiences stress when they perceive that the demands of their work are greater than their ability to cope. Coping means balancing the demands and pressures placed on you (i.e. the job requirements) with your skills and knowledge (i.e. your capabilities). For example, if you give a member of your team a tight deadline on a project they feel they have neither the skills nor ability to do well, they may begin to feel undue pressure which could result in work related stress. Stress can also result from having too few demands, as people will become bored, feel undervalued and lack recognition. If they feel they have little or no say over the work they do or how they do it, this may cause them stress.

According to National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, USA workplace stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Stress at the workplace can lead to poor health and even injury. Workplace stress has become one of the major causes of concern. Stress in the workplace is not good for the organization as it leads to decrease in quality and productivity. It is also not good for the individual either as it is leads to job dissatisfaction and low morale.

CAUSES OF JOB STRESS

There are two schools of thought on the causes of job stress.

According to one theory, differences in individual characteristics, such as personality and coping style, are best at predicting what will stress one person but not another. The focus then becomes on developing prevention strategies that help workers find ways to cope with demanding job conditions.
The other theory proposes that certain working conditions are inherently stress-inducing, such as fear of job loss, excessive workload demands, lack of control or clear direction, poor or dangerous physical working conditions, inflexible work hours, and conflicting job expectations. The focus then becomes on eliminating or reducing those work environments as the way to reducing job stress.

**MANAGING JOB STRESS**

- **Put it in perspective.** Jobs are disposable. Your friends, families, and health are not. If your employer expects too much of you, and it's starting to take its toll on you, start looking for a new job/new employer.

- **Modify your job situation.** If you really like your employer, but the job has become too stressful (or too boring), ask about tailoring your job to your skills. And if you got promoted into a more stressful position that you just are not able to handle, ask about a lateral transfer -- or even a transfer back to your old job (if that's what you want).

- **Get time away.** If you feel the stress building, take a break. Walk away from the situation, perhaps walking around the block, sitting on a park bench, taking in a little meditative time. Exercise does wonders for the psyche. But even just finding a quiet place and listening to your iPod can reduce stress.

- **Fight through the clutter.** Taking the time to organization your desk or workspace can help ease the sense of losing control that comes from too much clutter. Keeping a to-do list -- and then crossing things off it -- also helps.

- **Talk it out.** Sometimes the best stress-reducer is simply sharing your stress with someone close to you. The act of talking it out -- and getting support and empathy from someone else -- is often an excellent way of blowing of steam and reducing stress. Have a support system of trusted people.

- **Cultivate allies at work.** Just knowing you have one or more co-workers who are willing to assist you in times of stress will reduce your stress level. Just remember to reciprocate and help them when they are in need.

- **Find humor in the situation.** When you -- or the people around you -- start taking things too seriously, find a way to break through with laughter. Share a joke or funny story.

- **Have realistic expectations.** While Americans are working longer hours, we can still only fit so much work into one day. Having unrealistic expectations for what you can accomplish sets you up for failure -- and increased stress.

- **Nobody is perfect.** If you are one of those types that obsess over every detail and micromanage to make sure "everything is perfect," you need to stop. Change your motto to performing your best, and leave perfection to the gods.

- **Maintain a positive attitude (and avoid those without one).** Negativism sucks the energy and motivation out of any situation, so avoid it whenever possible.
Instead, develop a positive attitude -- and learn to reward yourself for little accomplishments (even if no one else does).

**TIPS FOR MANAGING STRESS**

- Monitor your level of strain regularly.
- Predict periods of stress and plan for these.

**REFERENCE:**