

Managing stress at workplace for boosting both employee health and company profits

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Abstract

Modern life is full of stress. Stress on individuals ranges from personal day-to-day life to their organizational activities. Urbanization, Industrialization, and increase in scale of operations in the society are causing increasing stresses. In this changing environment, participation, interaction, transaction, planning, and regulation have become key issues, each with its own frustrations attached. People feel stress as they can no longer have complete control over what happens in life. There is no escape from stress in modern life. In today's context, stress is a costly business expense that affects both employee health and company profits. Therefore, our attempt should be to understand stress, its causes and impact, and adopting strategies for minimizing its impact.

Keywords: behavioural problems, group stressors, individual stressors, organizational stressors, stress management strategies

Introduction

The word stress is derived from the Latin term *Stringers* which means to draw tight. Some define stress as the non-specific response of the body to any demands made on it. When the demands on an individual exceed his capability and adjustment resources stress occurs. Stress is different from anxiety which is a the physical part of anxiety. Stress also differs from frustration which is blocked goal attainment.

Stress is basically the impact of one object on another. There are three terms which are used synonymously to denote this phenomenon: stress, strain, and pressure; however, there are thin differences in these terms. Stress is a term basically used in physical sciences which means pressure of one object on another. From physical sciences, the term stress came to medical sciences and finally to social sciences. As per the medical explanation, the term stress is the body's general response to environmental situations. Selye, who has done considerable research on stress, has viewed stress as the non-specifically induced changes within a biological system. It is non-specific because any adaptation to a problem faced by the body, irrespective of the nature of the problem, is included in stress. Ivancevich and Matteson have defined stress as an adaptive response, mediated by individual characteristics and/or psychological processes, that is, a consequence of any external action, situation, or event that places special physical and /or psychological demands upon as person. In the context of work, work stress may be considered as a condition arising from the interaction of people and their work and characterized by changes within people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning.

Stress is an internal phenomenon and a mental attitude. If stress is the condiment, strain is the salt and if there is an imbalance in condiment-salt relationship, the result is impalatable. Stress is generally believed to have a deleterious effect on health and performance. But a minimum level of stress is necessary for effective functioning and peak performance. It is the individual's reaction to stress which makes all the difference.

Thus, stress is a mental, emotional or physical reaction resulting from an individual's response to environmental pressure and similar stimuli. It refers to pressures people feel in life. Hans Selye, the father of stress, believes that stress is the spice of life and absence of stress is death. Different persons respond to stressful situations in different ways.

Causes of Stress

There may be numerous conditions in which people may feel stress. Conditions that tend to cause stress are called stressors. Although even a single stressor may cause major stress, like death of near one, usually stressors combine to press an individual in a variety of ways until stress develops. The various stressors can be grouped into four categories: individual, group, organisational, and extra organizational. Within each category, there may be several stressors. Though, stressors have been classified into these categories, all eventually get down to the individual level and put stress on individuals.

Individual Stressors

There are many stressors at the level of individual which may be generated in the context of organizational life or his personal life. There are seven such events which may work as stressors. These are life and career changes, personality type, and role characteristics.

1. Life and Career Changes: Stress is produced by several changes in life and career. Research studies show that, in general, every transition or change produces stress. People in newer places experience such state of transition as stress. Young adults between 20 and 30 years of age have been found to report twice as many stressful events, compared to older people. Stress has been found more amongst urban population than rural, and greater in higher educational categories. Any change in life of an individual puts him on disequilibrium state of affairs and he is required to bring a new equilibrium. In this process, he experiences stress. The impact of stress would depend upon the

change and new equilibrium required as a consequence. Life's changes may be slow and gradual (getting older) or sudden (death of spouse). In both these cases, intensity of stress would be different. Like life changes, there may be changes in career, in the form of promotion, demotion, transfer, separation. With each change, some kind of stress is experienced.

- 2. Personality Type:** Personality characteristics, such as authoritarianism, rigidity, masculinity, femininity, extroversion, supportiveness, spontaneity, emotionality, tolerance for ambiguity, locus of control, anxiety, and need for achievement are particularly relevant to individual stress. Recently, more attention has been paid to analyze type A and B personality profiles in the study of stress. Brief profiles of type A and B personalities are presented hereunder:

Profile of type A and type B personalities

Table 1

Type A Personality	Type B Personality
Is always moving	Is never in hurry Is patient Does not brag Plays for fun, not for win Relaxes without guilt Is mild mannered Has no pressing deadlines
Walks rapidly	
Eats rapidly	
Talks rapidly	
Is impatient	
Does two things at a time	
Measures success by quantity	
Is aggressive	
Is competitive	
Feels time pressure	

People with personality a profile experience considerable stress. They are ones who

1. Work long hours under constant deadline pressures and conditions for overload.
2. Often take work at home at night or weekends and are unable to relax.
3. Constantly compete with themselves, setting high standards of productivity that they seem driven to maintain.
4. Tend to become frustrated by the work situation, to be irritated with the work efforts of others, and to be misunderstood by superiors.
- 3. Role Characteristics:** There may be role stress either because of role conflict or role ambiguity. Role conflict arises because of incompatibility of two or more roles. When people become members of several systems like family, club, voluntary organisation, work organization, etc., they are expected to fulfil certain obligations to each system and to fit into defined places in that system. In many situations, the various roles may have conflicting demands and people experience stress as they are not able to fulfil the conflicting role requirements. In organisational context, role conflict arises because of incompatibility between job tasks, resources, rules and policies, and other people. Another source of role stress is the role ambiguity in which people are not clear about the actual expectations from a role. This may be because of inadequate knowledge or information to do a job.

Stress level in various jobs differs because of differences in over-time, quotas, deadlines, competitiveness, physical demands, environmental conditions, hazards encountered,

initiative required, stamina required, win-lose situations, and working in the public eye.

Group Stressors

Group interaction affects human behaviour. Therefore, there may be some factors in group processes which act as stressors. The following are the major group stressors:

- 1. Lack of Group Cohesiveness:** Group cohesiveness is important for the satisfaction of individuals in group interaction. When they are denied the opportunity for this cohesiveness, it becomes very stressing for them as they get negative reaction from group members.
- 2. Lack of Social Support:** When individuals get social support from members of the group, they are able to satisfy their social needs and they are better off. When this social support does not come, it becomes stressing for them.
- 3. Conflict:** Any conflict arising out of group interaction may become stressing for the individuals, be it interpersonal conflict among the group members or intergroup conflict.

Organizational Stressors

An organization is composed of individuals and groups and, therefore, individual and group stressors may also exist in organizational context. However, there are macro level dimensions of organizational functioning which may work as stressors. The major organizational stressors are as follows:

- 1. Organization Policies:** Organizational policies provide guidelines for action. Unfavourable and ambiguous policies may affect the functioning of the individuals adversely job description, frequent reallocation of activities, rotating work shifts, ambiguous procedures, inflexible rules, inequality of incentives, etc. work as stressors.
- 2. Organization Structure:** Organization structure provides formal relationships among individuals in an organisation. Any defect in organisation structure like lack of opportunity of participation in decision making, lack of opportunity for advancement, high degree of specialization, excessive interdependence of various departments, line and staff conflict, etc. works as stressors as relationships among individual and groups do not work effectively.
- 3. Organization Processes:** Organizational processes also affect individual behaviour at work. Faulty organizational processes like poor communication, poor and inadequate feedback of work performance, ambiguous and conflicting roles, unfair control systems, inadequate information flow, etc. cause stress for people in the organisation.
- 4. Physical Conditions:** Organizational physical conditions affect work performance. Thus, poor physical conditions like crowding and lack of privacy, excessive noise, excessive heat or cold, pressure of toxic chemicals and radiation, air pollution, safety hazards, poor lighting, etc. produce stress on people.

Extraorganizational Stressors

Since an organisation interacts continuously with its environment, events happening outside the organisation also work as stressors. Thus, social and technical changes, economic and financial conditions, social class conflicts,

community conditions, etc. work as stressors.

Effects of Stress

Generally, stress is considered to be negative, thereby meaning that it has negative consequences. However, stress has neutral connotation; it is only the degree of stress which produces positive or negative consequences. From this point of view, stress can be classified as eustress or distress.

Eustress: Eustress denotes the presence of optimum level of stress in an individual which contributes positively to his performance. This may lead employees to new and better ways of doing their jobs. In certain jobs, such as sales, creativity (journalism, radio/television announcement, where time pressure is significant), a mild level of stress contributes positively to productivity.

Distress: Distress denotes the presence of high level of stress in an individual which affects job performance adversely and creates many types of physical, psychological, and behavioural problems.

At the optimum level of stress (eustress), the performance is maximum. It is lower in the case of very low-level stress, and still lower in very high-level stress. Through optimum level of stress may be different for different individuals, each individual can determine how much stress is functional for him to operate in a productive manner. High level of stress (distress) causes physical, psychological, and behavioural problems.

Physical Problem

Stress causes physical reactions, including autonomic, excitability of nerves, increased heart beat rate, and a decrease in body temperature. High-level stress is accompanied by high blood pressure and high level of cholesterol and can result into disease. Ulcer, and arthritis. There may even be link between stress and cancer. Such serious ailments, however, are not caused exclusively by stress along; physical characteristics of the individuals have their contributions. These ailments have a drastic effect on the individuals, their families, and organisations.

Psychological Problems

High level of stress may be accompanied by psychological reactions, such as anger, anxiety depression, nervousness, irritability, tension, and boredom depending upon the nature of stress and the capacity of individuals to bear stress. The effects of psychological reactions of individuals may be changes in mood and other emotional states, lowered self-esteem, resentment of supervision, inability to Concentrate and make decisions, and job dissatisfaction. These affect productivity in the organisation adversely.

Behavioural Problems

People show dysfunctional behaviour because of stress of high level. Such behaviour may be in the form of alcoholism, drug addition, increased smoking, sleeplessness, under/over-eating, etc. In extreme cases, when the individual is not able to bear stress, it may result into suicide. At the workplace, people may show behaviour like tardiness, absenteeism, and turnover. In all these cases, organization is going to suffer.

Burnout

Burnout is a syndrome wherein a person breaks down physically and emotionally due to continuous over-work over a long period of time. The human body cannot instantly

rebuild its ability to cope with stress once it is depleted. As a result, people become physically and emotionally weakened from trying to combat it. They become detached from their jobs and feel unable to accomplish their goals, Burnout is a slow process and goes through the following stages:

1. Stage of job contentment-enthusiasm to work with high energy level and positive attitudes.
2. Stage of fuel shortage-experiencing mental fatigue, frustration, disillusionment, and low morale.
3. Stage of withdrawal and isolation-avoiding contact with co-workers, showing anger, negativism, and emotional disturbances.
4. Stage of crisis-very low self-esteem, cynicism, and negative feelings.
5. Stage of final breakdown-alcoholism, drug addition, suicidal tendency, and heart attacks.

Some persons, particularly those who are work addicts or workaholics, are susceptible to burnout. Similarly, some jobs, such as those in the helping professions (counsellors, health care professionals, and social workers) and those with continuous high stress (air-traffic controllers, customer service representatives, and stock brokers) are more likely to cause burnout.

When people become burnt out, they are more likely to complain, to attribute their errors to others, and to be highly irritable. They feel alienated which drives many of them to think about leaving their jobs, to seek out opportunities to become trained for new careers. In addition to higher turnover, such people show increased absenteeism, decreased productivity, and defective work quality.

Rustout

Rustout is a syndrome wherein a person is chronically under-worked and his skills are under-utilized in performing the job. This syndrome is a problem for employees. Like a rusting tool, there is continuous erosion in employees and over the period of time, they become useless. Rusting in employees occurs in two situations-side lined and misemployment. In side-lining, an employee is isolated by his superior either due to lack of confidence, prejudices, or due to demonstrated misdeeds/incompetence. In misemployment, the employee is placed on a job which requires much lesser skills than what he possesses. In both these situations, the employee develops one or more of the following feelings or behaviours:

1. He no longer engages in workplace events.
2. He does not identify with his job the way he used to do earlier.
3. He begins to feel that he is not needed or valued.

Stress Management Strategies

High level stress affects the individuals directly and through them, their families and organisations are also affected. Therefore, efforts should be made to overcome the negative consequences of high stress.

Stress management is required when an individual is unable to cope with the demanding environment. This inability generates anxiety and produces defensive behaviour and stress symptoms. Therefore, the actions are required for developing adaptive behaviour so as to overcome the consequences of stress. Such actions may be taken at individual level as well as at organisational level. Besides, counselling may be resorted to manage stress level.

Individual Coping Strategies

Stress may cause within organisational context and outside as discussed earlier. Therefore, coping strategies may be adopted by individuals without reference to the organisation. Individual coping strategies tend to be more reactive in nature, that is, they tend to be ways of coping with stress that has already occurred. Some individual strategies, such as physical exercise, can be both reactive and proactive, but most are geared towards helping the person who is already suffering from stress. Following are the major individual coping strategies.

- 1. Physical Exercise:** Physical exercise is a good strategy to get body fit and to overcome stress. Physical exercise of different types, such as walking, jogging, swimming, playing, etc. are good methods of overcoming stress. The role of Yoga, a scientific technique of physical exercise to keep body fit and to overcome stress, has been recognized in most part of the world. Physical exercise help people to better cope with stress generally as a side effect, such as relaxation, enhanced self-esteem, and simply getting one's mind off work for a while.
- 2. Relaxation:** Impact of stress can be overcome by relaxation. The relaxation can be a simple one or some specific techniques of relaxation, such as bio-feedback and meditation. In bio-feedback, the individual learns the internal rhythms of a particular body process through electronic signals feedback that is wired to the body area (for example, skin, brain, or heart).
- 3. Work-home Transition:** Work-home transition is also like a relaxation technique. In this technique, a person may attend to less pressure inducing type or routine work during the last 30 or 60 minutes of work time. For instance, during the last hour of work, the person can review the day's activities, list the priorities of the activities that need to be attended to the next day. Thus, he can finish his day's work and come back in relaxed manner.
- 4. Cognitive Therapy:** Because of increasing stress, special cognitive therapy techniques have been developed by psychologists. In these techniques, lectures and interactive discussion sessions are arranged to help participants to : (i) recognize events at work and what cognitions they elicit; (ii) become aware of the effects of such cognitions on their physiological and emotional responses; (iii) systematically evaluate the objective consequences of events at work; and (iv) replace self-defeating cognitions that unnecessarily arouse strain.
- 5. Networking:** Networking is the formation of close associations with trusted, empathetic co-workers and colleagues who are good listeners and confidence builders. Such persons provide mental support to get the person through stressful situation.

Organisational Coping Strategies

Organisation coping strategies are more of proactive nature, that is, they attempt at removing existing or potential stressors and prevent the onset of stress of individual job holders. As discussed earlier, there are many organisational stressors. Therefore, the organisational coping strategies revolve around those factors which produce or help producing stresses. Following are organisational coping techniques and efforts:

- 1. Supportive Organisational Climate:** Many of the organisational stressors emerge because of faulty organizational processes and practices. To a very great extent, these can be controlled by creating supportive organizational climate. Supportive organizational climate depends upon managerial leadership rather than the use of power and money to control organisational behaviour. The focus is primarily on participation and involvement of employees in decision-making process. Such a climate develops belongingness among people which helps them reduce their stress.
- 2. Job Enrichment:** A major source of stress is the monotonous and disinteresting jobs being performed by employees in the organisation. Through more rational designing of jobs, as discussed earlier, jobs can be enriched. Improving content factors, such as responsibility, recognition, opportunity for achievement and advancement, or improving core job characteristics, such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback may lead to motivation, feeling sense of responsibility, and utilizing maximum capability at the work. Such a phenomenon helps in reducing stress.
- 3. Organisational Role Clarity:** People experience stress when they are not clear about what they are expected to do in the organisation. This may happen because either there is ambiguity in the role or there is role conflict. Such a situation can be overcome by defining role more clearly. Role analysis technique helps both managers and employees to analyse what the job entails and what the expectations are. Breaking down the job to its various components clarifies the role of the job incumbent for the entire system. This helps to eliminate imposing unrealistic expectations on the individual. Role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload can be minimized, consequently leading to reduced stress.
- 4. Career Planning and Counselling:** Career planning and counselling help the employees to obtain professional advice regarding career paths that would help them to achieve personal goals. It also makes them aware of what additional qualifications, training, and skills they should acquire for career advancement.

A variety of career counselling programmes can be adopted

1. Devices designed to aid the individuals in self-assessment programmes can be understanding;
2. Devices designed to communicate opportunities available to individuals;
3. Career counselling through interviews by managers, counselling professionals and personnel, and educational specialists;
4. Workshops and educational activities designed to assist the individuals in goal setting and establishing action plan for change;
5. Educational and experimental programmes to prepare individuals with skill and knowledge for new activities and new careers; and
6. Programmes for enhancing the individual's opportunities to make job and career changes.

Various career planning and counselling programmes for individuals go a long way in providing them satisfaction and reducing the stress.

5. Stress Control Workshops and Employee Assistance Programmes:

The organization can hold periodical workshops for control and reduction of stress. Such workshops may help individuals to learn the dynamics of stress and methods of overcoming its ill effects. Similarly, the organisation can make arrangement for assisting individuals in overcoming their personal and family problems. This arrangement may include managing personal finance, dealing with family problems, dealing with health problems, and dealing with other kind of personal and family stresses.

Conclusion

Stress is an inevitable part of today's fast life. In this age of globalisation and liberalisation of the economy, competition among organisations has increased. Managers attempt to outperform one another to reach the top. Therefore, modern organisations are facing the problems or executive stress and burnout. Individuals and organisations have to pay economic and human cost due to these problems.

Stress is taken to be synonymous with tension or strain, having generally a negative connotation. However, people forget that there is some stress even when they suddenly get something they have been waiting for. It is of a pleasant nature. But, the same waiting acquires an unpleasant nature if it goes on too long and does not materialise even then. It turns into disappointment or frustration. That is, stress may be exciting in its mild form called eustress or become distress if it is excessive. In Greek, 'eu' means good. This term was coined by the pioneers of stress research from Greek.

Stress is, therefore, a consequence of or an adaptive response to an external situation that places some physical, psychological, and/or behavioural demands on an individual. It is a physical and emotional reaction to potentially threatening aspects of the environment. Stress involves the interaction of a person and his environment. The environment makes certain demands on the individual which may be excessive; or even if reasonable, the individual may find himself ill-equipped to handle. The resultant stress may cause physiological or psychological damage such as fatigue, tension, or high blood pressure. It is hence a preparation to meet the situation when faced with a demand.

Over the period of time, many changes have taken place throughout the world. Many of these changes are responsible for causing stress among people. However, the most important change appears to be is change in family norms. While stress has affected employees of corporate sector adversely in developed countries since long, it has now started affecting Indian corporate employees too. Hence, adoption of suitable stress management strategies at workplace is essentially required for boosting employee health and company profits.

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