

A Brief Review on Stress and its Management

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Abstract

In a medical or biological context, stress can be depicted as a physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension which can initiate the "fight or flight" response, a complex reaction of neurologic and endocrinologic systems. There are several different types of stress that range from eustress, which is a positive and exciting form of stress, to chronic stress, which has been linked to many serious health issues and is the type of negative stress most often mentioned in the news. While we want to manage or eliminate the negative types of stress, we also want to keep positive forms of stress in our lives to help us remain vital and alive. To manage this negative stress, firstly we need to identify the stressors and then we need to try to apply the 4 A's, avoid, alter, adapt, or accept accordingly. We must not opt for addiction as easier way out. Rather we have to concentrate more on nutrition, exercise, outdoor aerobic activities which help in the secretion of endorphin hormone which acts as a mood elevator, stress buster. We need to prioritize what to do in a day, then concentrate more on what we have completed or accomplished for the day, rather than what we are yet to finish. We must set aside some time each day for ownself and find something that helps to relax, such as reading a book, going for a walk, listening to music, or spending time with a friend or a pet. Joining a choir or a gym helps some people. Breathing exercises, aromatherapy etc. are also coming out as measures to combat stress. In our present social scenario we must deal this stress issue soberly and manage it properly.

Keywords

Eustress,
chronic stress,
4 A's,
stress buster,
exercise,
outdoor aerobic
activities

Introduction

Stress is an adaptive response to an external situation or disturbing factor in the environment that results in physical, psychological and/or behavioural deviations of an individual (Fred Luthans 1998). Stress can manifest itself in both a positive and a negative way. Eustress, the term

referred to as positive stress, is often considered as a motivator since in its absence the individual lacks the 'edge' necessary for peak performance. When the situation offers an opportunity for one to gain something, eustress helps to stretch the boundary of one's ability. Conversely, stress is negative when it is associated with heart-disease, alcoholism, drug abuse, marital breakdown, child

abuse and a host of other social, physical, organisational and emotional problems. Stress is associated with constraints and demands. The former prevents an individual from doing what he or she desires. The latter refers to the loss of something desired. Constraints and demands can lead to potential stress. When they are coupled with uncertainty of the outcome and importance regarding the outcome, potential stress becomes actual stress. Higher the uncertainty and significance of the outcome, higher is the stress.

Intensity of Stress

The intensity of stress differs among people. Some individuals may over-react to disturbing factors and get highly stressed, while others may have the stamina, endurance and composure to cope with the same. The way an individual experiences stress depends on several factors (Don Hellriegel et. al. 2001), some of which are as follows:

i) The person’s perception to the situation: Perception refers to a psychological process whereby a person selects and organizes stimuli into a concept of reality. Individual’s perception

of a situation can influence whether or not one experiences stress.

ii) Past Experience of the Person: Whether a person experiences stress or not depends on his/her past experiences in a similar situation. The relationship between past experience and stress is also based on reinforcement. Positive reinforcement or previous success in a similar situation can reduce the level of stress that a person experiences under certain circumstances, while punishment or failure under similar conditions can increase the same.

iii) The Presence or Absence of Social Support: The presence of fellow workers who are confident and competent in a stressful situation may help an individual to behave in a similar way and cope more effectively with stress. Conversely, the presence of co-workers may irritate some people and make them anxious, reducing their ability to combat stress.

iv) Individual Differences with regard to Stress Reactions: Individual differences in motivation, attitudes, personality and abilities also influence whether people experience work stress and if they do, how they respond to it. What one person considers a major source of stress, another may hardly notice.

Signs of Stress

Physical signs	Emotional signs	Mental signs	Relational signs	Spiritual signs	Behavioural signs
Appetite changes	Bad temper	Lacking humour	Isolation	A feeling of emptiness	Pacing
Headaches	Anxiety	Dull senses	Defensive	Apathy	Sweating
Fatigue	Nightmares	Lethargy	Intolerance	Inability to forgive	Substance abuse
Insomnia	Irritability	Boredom	Resentment	Cynicism	Nail biting
Indigestion	Depression	Indecisiveness	Loneliness	Loss of direction	Slumped posture
Cold	Frustration	Forgetfulness	Nagging	Doubt	Restlessness
Weight change	Oversensitivity	Poor concentration	Lower sex drive	Need to prove self	Risk aversion
Teeth grinding	Mood swings	Personality changes	Aggression	Negative outlook	Eating disorders
Tension	Fearfulness	Stuck in past	Abuse	Gloom	Headaches

(Suzanne C. de Junasz et. al.)

Stressors- The Source of Stress

The physical or psychological demands from the environment that cause stress are called stressors. They create stress or the potential for stress when an individual perceives them as representing a demand that may exceed the person's ability to respond. Stressors originate at the individual, group, organizational and extra-organizational levels.

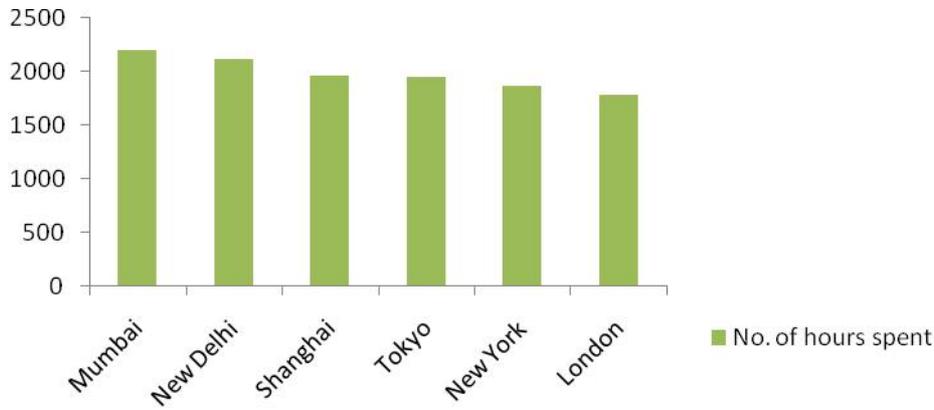
i) Individual-level Stressors: These relate directly to a person's personality and job responsibilities. The most common individual-level stressors are discussed below.

- a) *Personality Type:* Type 'A' personalities are always in a hurry, impatient and fast in whatever they do. These individuals are stress-prone. In contrast, Type 'B' personalities are patient, not in a hurry and stay in a relaxed mode. They are less stress-prone.
- b) *Role Overload:* Too much work causes stress to an individual. Reduction in workforce and restructuring of work by the organizations, leave the remaining employees with more tasks and fewer resources of time to complete them causing excess workload.
- c) *Role Conflict:* Role conflict occurs where people face competing demands. Inter-role conflict occurs when an individual has two roles that are in conflict with each other. Personal conflict occurs when personal values clash with job responsibilities or goals of the organization.
- d) *Role Ambiguity:* Role ambiguity exists when people are uncertain about their responsibilities, functions, performance expectations and levels of authority. This tends to occur when people enter new situations.
- e) *Task Characteristics:* Tasks are more stressful when they involve decision-

making, monitoring equipment or exchanging information with others.

ii) Group-level Stressors: Group-level stressors are caused by group-level dynamics and behaviour of higher authority. Individuals having higher authority may create stress by: a) exhibiting inconsistent behaviour, b) failing to provide support, c) showing lack of concern, d) providing inadequate direction, e) creating a high productivity environment, and f) focusing on negatives while ignoring good performance. Sexual harassment, physical violence and aggression are also considered as group-level stressors.

iii) Organisational Stressors: Organisational climate is a prime example of such stressors. A high pressure environment that places chronic work demands on individuals fuels the stress response. In contrast, participative management can reduce organisational-level stressors. Poor lighting, loud noise, improper placement of furniture and a dirty and smelly environment create stress. These factors should be monitored and eliminated at the earliest. Organisational structure defines the level of differentiation, the degree of rules and regulations and where the decisions are made. Excessive rules and lack of participation in decision-making may be considered as potential stress. Organisational leadership represents the managerial style of the organisation's senior executives. Some chief executive officers establish unrealistic pressures to perform in the short run, impose excessively tight controls and routinely fire employees who fail to measure up to expectations. Such officers creating a culture characterised by tension, fear and anxiety generate stress. Long hours and high pressure of work cause stress considerably.



No. of hours spent in the Office Anually by the Employees

(The Economic Times, February 10, 2007)

The youth in India spend more hours in office compared to their counterparts, causing potential stress.

iv) Extra-organisational Stressors: Extra-organisational stressors are those factors outside the organisation. For instance, conflicts associated with one's career and family life are stressful. Home life certainly impacts one's attitude and performance.

Outcomes of Stress: Burnout

Behavioural scientists are of opinion that stress has behavioural, cognitive and physiological consequences. Studies indicate that stress is negatively related to job satisfaction, organisational commitment and performance, and positively related to turnover. Burnout is a troublesome outcome of stress. It is a state of mind resulting from prolonged exposure to intense emotional stress. The key phases of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and feeling a lack of personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion is due to a combination of personal, job and organisational stressors. It is fuelled by having too much work to do, by role conflict and by the type of interpersonal interactions encountered at work. Frequent, face-to-face interaction that are emotionally charged are associated with higher levels of emotional exhaustion. Over time, emotional exhaustion leads to depersonalisation,

which is the state of psychologically withdrawing from one's job. This finally results in a feeling of being unappreciated, ineffective or inadequate. The additive effect of these three phases is a host of negative attitudinal and behavioural outcomes.

Stress Management

Stress reduction strategies may be categorised as:

i) Individual Strategies: If an individual is exposed to stressors and has the signs of stress, he/she needs to adopt coping strategies immediately. These are:

- Muscle Relaxation:** During one's stress, the muscles get tense. A conscious effort should be made to relieve muscle tension. This could be achieved by stretching exercises, enjoying a massage, taking a hot bath or shower etc.
- Deep Breathing:** Stopping and taking a few deep breaths can take the pressure off right away. One can sit in a comfortable position with the hands on the lap or lie down with closed eyes, imagine oneself in a relaxed position while taking deep breaths in and out slowly. Doing this for 5 to 10 minutes at a time can help to overcome stress.
- Exercise:** Working out regularly is one of the best ways to relax one's body and mind. Exercise causes the secretion of Endorphin, which acts as a mood elevator.

- d) *Meditation*: several meditation techniques are used with positive results and a majority of them are derivatives of eastern philosophies. Included in this category is Zen Meditation or Sumran. Perhaps the most widely practiced technique everywhere is Transcendental Meditation (TM) as taught by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. TM practiced for 20 minutes twice daily helps reduce stress significantly.
- e) *Cognitive Restructuring*: Cognitive restructuring involves two steps. First, irrational or maladaptive thought processes that create stress are identified. The second step consists of replacing these irrational thoughts with more rational or reasonable ones. Cognitive restructuring would alleviate stress by encouraging a person to adopt a more reasonable belief about the outcomes associated with the events.
- f) *Time Management*: Some basic principals in time management are:
-) Preparing a daily list of activities to be attended to
 -) Prioritising activities by importance and urgency
 -) Scheduling activities according to the priorities set and
 -) Handling the most demanding part of a job when one is alert and productive.
- g) *Eating Regularly*: Eating a regular, well-balanced diet help to keep one fit and feel better in general. It may also help to control one's mood. Meals should be full of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and lean proteins for energy. Meals should not be skipped.
- h) *Slowing Down*: One should slow down from the daily rat race and set aside time for things to enjoy. This may include hobbies, listening to favourite music etc.
- i) *Avoid Caffeine, Alcohol and Nicotine*: One should avoid or at least reduce the consumption of nicotine and any drinks containing caffeine and alcohol. Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants and so will increase one's level of stress rather than reducing it. Alcohol is a depressant when

taken in large quantities, but acts as a stimulant in smaller quantities. So using alcohol as a way to alleviate stress is not ultimately helpful. One should have herbal teas or diluted natural fruit juices to keep the body hydrated and enable it to cope better with stress.

- j) *Get adequate Sleep*: A lack of sleep is significant cause of stress. Unfortunately though stress interrupts our sleep as thoughts keep whirling through our minds, stopping us from relaxing enough to fall asleep.

ii) Organisational Strategies: Organisational coping strategies help reduce the harmful effects of stress in three ways: a) identifying and then modifying or eliminating work stressors, b) helping employees to modify their perception and understanding of work stress, and c) helping employees cope more effectively with the consequences of stress. These could be achieved by implementing Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), Fitness Programmes etc. that focus on specific problems and address solutions to the employees based on medical approach.

Conclusion

Stress is negatively related to performance, that is, higher the stress, lower the performance. Research indicates that at the initial stage stress may improve performance but at some point it begins to fall. The precise location, called inflection point (the point at which the direction of the function reverses) depend on the complexity of the task being performed. The greater the complexity, the lower the levels of arousal at which a downturn in performance occurs. Individuals having knowledge about stress and ways of its management can develop exceptional skills and may cognitively appraise a potentially stressful situation as a challenge rather than a stress.

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