

STRESS – A THREAT OR BOON

“No one reaches peak performance without being stressed, whether an athlete, an office worker or a manager.”¹

* Ms. Bindu Kannan & ** Dr. H. N. Ramesh

Introduction

“Layoffs” and “budget cuts” have become bywords in the workplace. During the times of economic crisis, people find it hard to cope with the challenges on the job. There is a pressure on all the levels of management irrespective of the employers, managers and workers. Meanwhile, though stress is a normal part of life, excessive stress affects the physical and emotional health and reduces the productivity. The price of stress in the workplace in the form of lowered productivity, excessive absenteeism, increased insurance costs, and premature loss of key people is staggering.

However, occupational stress/workplace stress has been defined as an “Global Epidemic” by the United Nations International Labor Organisation. Every year, workplace stress cost an estimated \$200 billion stress-related expense to the US employers. Hence, Stress management is considered as the important challenge of the 21st century.

What is stress ?

According to Richard S Lazarus²

“Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize. In short, it’s what we feel when we think we’ve lost control of events”.

United States National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health has defined workplace stress as³

“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 can lead to poor health and even injury.”

The above definitions on stress lay emphasis on the stress which generally arises when there is a mismatch between the nature and magnitude of the job to be done and the employee desires and capabilities. According to Hans Selye, one of the founding fathers of stress research defined way back in 1956 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.”

The ideas of “eustress” (good stress) and “distress” (bad stress) were developed by Hans Selye. He believed that a mild level of stress encouraged animals and people to behave in a more active way, while an excessive level of stress would hamper their performance. He believed that the biochemical effects of stress would be experienced irrespective of whether the situation was positive or negative.

But to a greater extent, stress is believed to have an adverse impact and unmanaged stress can have a serious implication on employee performance and overall wellbeing. Further, stress is said to be human body’s reaction to various organizational and social factors called as - **Stressors**. A stressor is anything

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¹ Robert Ostermann, professor of psychology, 1999, www.fdu.edu

² <http://www.fdu.edu/newspubs/magazine/99su/stress.html>

³ <http://www.cdc.gov/Niosh/stresswk.html>

which perceives to be causing stress. Stressors come in many different forms, and affect people differently. For instance, one person may react negatively to something that someone else may not think is stressful at all and they may fall into one of

the four categories of stressors (Exhibit I). Stress in the workplace generally comes in five forms, environmental, situational, physical, mental, and in relationships.

EXHIBIT I

CATEGORIES OF STRESSORS

- Internal stressors – those which we carry around inside of us. They are self owned stressors. These stressors may range from the posture we adapt, to addictions and assessment of life/personal satisfaction or simply not getting enough sleep.
- External stressors - these are the stressors in the environments in which we operate and will range from parental pressure, to work pressure, to role pressure, to household pressure, traffic, crime etc.
- Hidden stressors - these are factors which cause stress but where the underlying cause is difficult to identify. It often results in conflicting feelings and a sense of an inappropriate reaction or response to a situation. For example underdeveloped emotional intelligence where self-awareness is not parent.
- Obvious stressors - there are also those situations which obviously do or are intended to bring about stress. For example a work deadline would be an imposed obvious stressor where as the death of a loved one would be un-imposed but an obvious

Source: Cindy Hardy, www.cognit.co.za

Stress Mangement

Coping with stress is the important aspect in one’s life. Stress management involves the following steps:

1. Recognising the symptoms of stress
2. Identifying the causes of stress
3. Taking action to address the causes and thereby reduce the symptoms

1. Recognizing the symptoms of stress

Symptoms or negative reactions to stress can be divided into several categories — physical, cognitive (mental), emotional, and behavioral. Examples of signs and symptoms of stress and the categories under which they fall include:

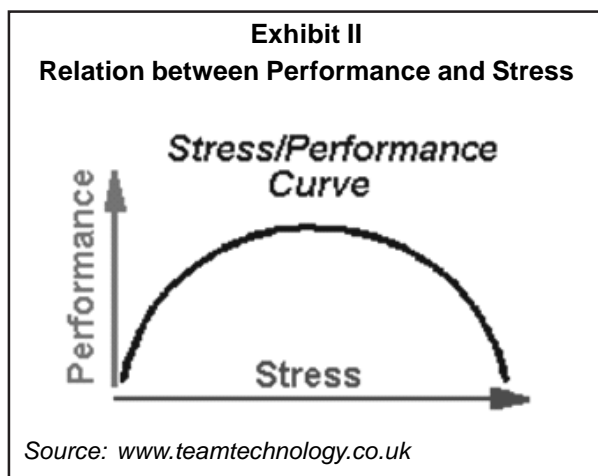
PHYSICAL	COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	BEHAVIORAL
Headaches	Difficulty in concentrating	Anger	Increased alcohol use
Backaches	Forgetfulness	Anxiety	Cigarette smoking
Chest tightness	Worrying	Depression	Increased caffeine use
Fatigue	Thoughts of death	Poor self-esteem	Drug use
Stomach cramps	Poor attention to detail	Moodiness	Violence
Difficulty breathing	Perfectionist tendencies	Suspiciousness	Overeating
Diarrhea	Indecisiveness	Guilt	Weight gain or loss
Loss of sexual interest	Feeling helpless	Weeping	Relationship conflict
Insomnia	Catastrophizing (blowing things out of proportion)	Loss of motivation	Decreased activity

1. Identifying the causes of stress

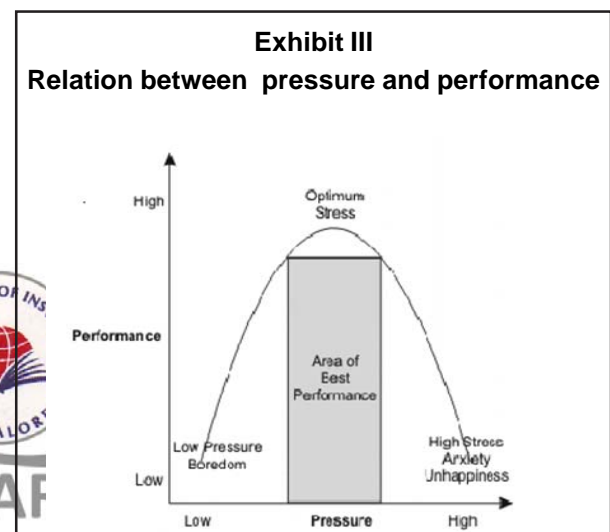
Reasons for stress can either be organizational (occupational) or extra-organizational (personal) and can be categorized based on:

- * **Nature of tasks:** long hours, heavy workload, infrequent breaks, boring tasks that does not utilize workers' skills, poorly defined goals, too much responsibility.
- * **Management style:** workers are not involved in decision- making, poor communication, lack of family-friendly policies.
- * **Interpersonal relationships:** lack of support or help from co-workers and supervisors, conflicting expectations.
- * **Career worries:** job insecurity, lack of opportunity for growth or advancement.
- * **Environmental conditions:** unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions, for example, overcrowding, noise, air pollution - or ergonomic problems.

However, the impact of stress is two faced. On the personal front, stress has an impact on the individual like poor health, depression and marriage problems and on the other from the employer point of view stress has an impact on low productivity, absenteeism and high staff turnover. Further, the impact of excessive stress on teamwork is also harmful and it can damage individual work performance, team performance, working relationships, cooperation between team members and team spirit which is shown in the Exhibit II



However according to Cindy Hardy, an industrial psychologist¹, stress is often viewed as a negative factor but there exists good stress or eustress². It is the unmanaged stress which has the serious impact on employee performance and overall wellbeing, which in turn, has crippling consequences on company output. Some of the negative consequences include, feeling anxious, irritable, fatigue, social withdrawal, stomach problems etc.,. The balance between **excessive stress (distress)** causing non-functional behavior and **good stress (eustress)** is often represented as an inverted U graph (Exhibit III)



The relationship between the pressure and the performance is one of the important ideas in stress management. The left hand side of the graph shows that when there is very little pressure to perform the task, there is little incentive to focus on energy and attention. As the pressure increases, the “area of best performance” is entered. Here, we are able to focus on the task and perform well and there is enough pressure to focus the attention and will not disrupt the performance. The right hand side of the graph is more complex and it leads to high stress, anxiety and unhappiness.

¹ www.cognit.co.za

² Eustress is a feeling of excitement and a sense of commitment to something. Eustress is often experienced when playing a sport, when accomplishing a goal or when succeeding at a challenge.

3. Taking action to address the causes and thereby reduce the symptoms

Creating a healthy workplace and a stress free work environment for the employee is one of the objectives of the top management on one hand and on the other, reducing the job stress is also the responsibility of the individual. From the employers point of view following points needs to be addressed.

Improve communication

- Share information with employees to reduce uncertainty about their jobs and future.
- Clearly define employees' roles and responsibilities.
- Make communication friendly and efficient, not mean-spirited or petty.

Consult your employees

- Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their jobs.
- Consult employees about scheduling and work rules.

From the employees point of view dealing with the stressful situation lead to the management of four A's (Exhibit IV)

- Be sure the workload is suitable to employees' abilities and resources; avoid unrealistic deadlines.
- Show that individual workers are valued.

Offer rewards and incentives

- Praise good work performance verbally and institutionally.
- Provide opportunities for career development.
- Promote an "entrepreneurial" work climate that gives employees more control over their work.

Cultivate a friendly social climate

- Provide opportunities for social interaction among employees.
- Establish a zero-tolerance policy for harassment.
- Make management actions consistent with organizational values.

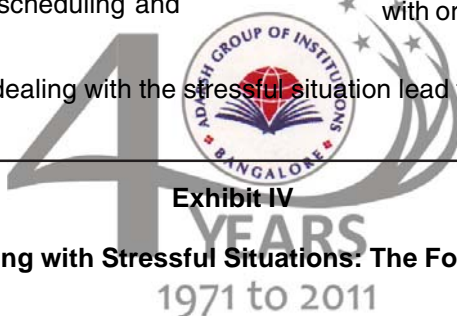


Exhibit IV

Dealing with Stressful Situations: The Four A's 1971 to 2011

Avoid the stressor

1. Learn how to say "NO"
2. Avoid people who stress you out
3. Take control of your environment
4. Avoid hot button topics
5. Pare down your to do list

Alter the stressor

1. Express your feelings instead of bottling them up
2. Be willing to compromise
3. Be more assertive
4. Manage your time better

Adapt to the stressor

1. Reframe problems
2. Look at the big picture
3. Adjust your standards
4. Focus on the positive

Accept the stressor

1. Don't try to control the uncontrollable
2. Look for the upside
3. Share your feelings
4. Learn to forgive

Source: www.helpguide.org/mental/stress_management_relief_coping.htm

Following are some stress-busting measures taken up by some top companies :

TCS established a gym and meditation center for helping employees to combat stress. It also initiated health campaign for its employees for spreading awareness about correct sitting postures. Further, the company also initiated research about radiation impact due to increased usage of computers on its employees. The company organized workshops on stress management for group leaders to create awareness about the impact of employee stress.

HCL Infosystems organizes lectures on the stress management and importance of positive and healthy living.

IT&T re-designed office furniture according to Ergonomics and also introduced 'break out method' - allowing employees to take two - three breaks before lunch hour.

Many companies provide assistance to their employees to balance their work and home. For example, companies like - HP, IBM, Cisco etc. help employees by providing emergency baby sitters, takeout food, and laundry services.

Companies have recognized the need to take preventive care about employee stress. For instance - Indian Airlines, State Bank of India, Onida, Tata Group and BSES (Reliance Energy) etc., focus on the executive health management. These companies conduct regular workshops on the stress

management, diabetics, hypertension and cardiac care during office hours.

Many companies, in association with healthcare majors such as - Apollo Hospitals, Wockhardt and Hinduja, provide complete medical checkup for their employees.

HSBC employees enjoy salsa dance in their Mumbai office every evening as a means of combating stress.

Conclusion

The ability to manage stress in the workplace can make the difference between success or failure on the job. In order to derive the benefits of stress management both individuals and the organization has to strive for it. However, generalizing the stress management technique would be a difficult task as organizations are as unique as the individuals. It must be noted that stress factors are subjective and what one person may find stressful, others may not necessarily experience as negatively. The way in which we experience and react to stress is described as an emotional condition which triggers physical, psychological and emotional responses from the individual. The design and the development of the stress management technique should be tailored made after assessing the needs, preferences and the specific circumstances of the organization. Last but not the least, stress management and employee wellness will contribute to the bottom line of the organization in particular and the society as a whole.

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