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Work Stress and its Management

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Stress is most important determinant of changing environment on mental health. This study is undertaken because modern life is full of frustrations, deadlines, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. It is a feeling of strain and pressure. Stress isn't always bad, though. Stress within our comfort zone can help us to perform under pressure, motivate us to do our best, even keep us safe when danger looms. Positive stress helps improve athletic performance. It also plays a factor in motivation, adaptation and reaction to the environment. But when stress becomes overwhelming, it can damage our health, mood, relationships, and quality of life. It can increase the risk of strokes, heart attacks, ulcers, and mental disorders. Stress can be external and related to the environment but may also be created by internal perceptions that cause an individual to experience anxiety or other negative emotions surrounding a situation, such as pressure, discomfort, etc., which they then deem stressful. We can protect ourselves by understanding how the body's stress response works, recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress overload and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects.

Introduction

Stress is a feeling of strain and pressure. Small amounts of stress may be desired, beneficial, and even healthy. Positive stress helps improve athletic performance. It also plays a factor in motivation, adaptation, and reaction to the environment. Excessive amounts of stress, however, may lead to bodily harm. Stress can increase the risk of strokes, heart attacks, ulcers, and mental disorders such as depression.

Stress is our body's way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When we feel threatened, our nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, and including adrenaline and cortisol, which rouse the body for emergency action. These physical changes increase our strength and stamina, speed our reaction time, and enhance our focus.

This is known as the "fight or flight" stress response and is our body's way of protecting us. When working properly, stress helps us stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save our life-giving us extra strength to defend ourselves.

Stress is the body's reaction to any stimuli that disturbs its equilibrium. When the equilibrium of various hormones is altered the effect of these changes can be detrimental to the immune system. Much research has shown a negative effect stress has on the immune system, mostly through studies where participants were subjected to a variety of viruses.

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In one study individuals caring for a spouse with dementia, representing the stress group, saw a significant decrease in immune response when given an influenza-virus vaccine compared to a non-stressed control group. A similar study was conducted using a respiratory virus. Participants were infected with the virus and given a stress index. Results showed that an increase in score on the stress index correlated with greater severity of cold symptoms.

But beyond our comfort zone, stress stops being helpful and can start causing major damage to our mind and body.

Objective of Study

1. Analyze various types of stress.
2. Identify problems caused due to stress.
3. Suggest various ways to manage stress.
4. Illustrate stress management through a case study of an organisation.

Types of Stress

For a better understanding of stress and its influence to an individual, psychologists categorize stress into three different types: acute stress, episodic stress, and chronic stress.

Acute Stress

Of all forms of stress, acute stress is the most widely experienced one, since it typically is caused by the daily demands and pressures encountered by each one of us. While the word “stress” connotes a negative impression, acute stress is what actually brings about excitement, joy and thrill in our lives. Riding a roller coaster in a theme park, for instance, is a situation that brings about acute stress, yet brings excitement. However, riding a higher and longer roller coaster can bring so much stress that we wish it would end sooner, or that we should have not gone for the ride in the first place. When the long and windy ride is over, we might feel the effects of too much acute stress, such as vomiting, tension headaches, and other psychological and/or physiological symptoms.

Because acute stress occurs only at a very short period of time, these symptoms might only come out when the stress has already accumulated:

Emotional distress, such as anger, anxiety, irritability, and acute periods of depression

Physical problems, such as headache, pain, stomach upset, dizziness, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, hypertension and bowel disorders

Episodic Stress

Acute stress that is suffered too frequently is called episodic stress. This type of stress is usually seen in people who make self-inflicted, unrealistic or unreasonable demands which get all clamoured up and bring too much stress in their attempt to accomplish these goals. Episodic stress is not like chronic stress, though, because this type of stress ceases from time to time yet not as frequently as acute stress does.

Episodic stress is also typically observed in people with “Type A” personality, which involves being overly competitive, aggressive, demanding and sometimes tense and hostile. Because of this, the symptoms of episodic stress are found in Type A persons. These include:

Longer periods of intermitted depression, anxiety disorders and emotional distress.
 Ceaseless worrying.
 Persistent physical symptoms similar to those found in acute stress.
 Coronary heart diseases or other heart problems.

Chronic Stress

Chronic stress is the total opposite of acute stress; it's not exciting and thrilling, but dangerous and unhealthy. Chronic stress tears the life of a person apart his mind, body or spirit.

This type of stress is brought about by long-term exposure to stressors, such as unhappy marriage, traumatic experiences, unwanted career or job, stress of poverty, chronic illnesses, relationship conflicts, political problems, and dysfunctional families. These stressful situations seem to be unending, and the accumulated stress that results from exposure to them can be life-threatening, and can even lead a person to resort to violence, suicide and self-harm. Serious illnesses like stroke, heart attack, cancer, and psychological problems such as clinical depression and post-traumatic disorder can originate from chronic stress.

The following table list shows signs and symptoms of chronic stress.

Cognitive Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Physical Symptoms	Behavioral Symptoms
Memory problems	Moodiness	Aches and pains	Eating more or less
Inability to concentrate	Irritability or short temper	Diarrhea or constipation	Sleeping too much or too little
Poor judgment	Agitation, inability to relax	Nausea, dizziness	Isolating yourself from others
Seeing only the negative	Feeling overwhelmed	Chest pain, rapid heartbeat	Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
Anxious or racing thoughts	Sense of loneliness and isolation	Loss of sex drive	Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax
Constant worrying	Depression or general unhappiness	Frequent colds	Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing)

The causes of stress since social engagement appears to be our best defense against stress, isolation or a lack of positive, consistent human interaction can be both a stressor in itself is the main cause of stress.

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as being negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demands on us or forces us to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion.

Of course, not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can also be self-generated, for example, when we worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational, pessimistic thoughts about life.

Common external causes of stress	Common internal causes of stress
Major life changes	Chronic worry
Work or school	Pessimism
Relationship difficulties	Negative self-talk
Financial problems	Unrealistic expectations/Perfectionism
Being too busy	Rigid thinking, lack of flexibility
Children and family	All-or-nothing attitude

What causes excessive stress depends, at least in part, on our perception of it. Something that's stressful to us may not faze someone else; they may even enjoy it. For example, our morning commute may make us anxious and tense because we worry that traffic will make us late. Others, however, may find the trip relaxing because they allow more than enough time and enjoy listening to music while they drive.

Effects of Stress Overload

The body's autonomic nervous system often does a poor job of distinguishing between daily stressors and life-threatening events. If we are stressed over an argument with a friend, a traffic jam on our commute to work, or a mountain of bills, for example, our body can still react as if we are facing a life-or-death situation.

Stress affects the immune system in many ways. The immune system protects the body from viruses, bacteria, and anything that is different or that the body does not recognize. The immune system sees these as intruders and it sends messages to attack. The white blood cells, leukocytes, are very important to the immune system. When an individual is stressed or going through a stressful experience the immune system starts to produce natural killer cells and cytokines. When levels of cytokines are higher they combat infections and therefore the brain gets communicated the body is ill and it produces symptoms as if the individual was ill. These symptoms include fever, sleepiness, lack of energy, no appetite, and basically flu like symptoms.

When we repeatedly experience the fight or flight stress response in our daily life, it can raise blood pressure, suppress the immune system, increase the risk of heart attack and stroke, speed up the aging process and leave us vulnerable to a host of mental and emotional problems. Many health problems are caused by stress i.e:

Pain of any kind	Depression
Heart disease	Weight problems
Digestive problems	Auto immune diseases
Sleep problems	Skin conditions, such as eczema

How to Manage Stress

Notice our self-talk

When we are stressed we sometimes say things in our head, over and over, that just add to our stress. This unhelpful self-talk might include things like: 'I can't cope', or 'I'm too busy', or 'I'm so tired' or 'it's not fair'. While we might think that these are fairly truthful descriptions of what's going on, they are not always helpful to repeat, and can even make you feel worse.

Notice when you are using unhelpful self-talk, and instead try saying soothing, calming things to yourself to reduce our levels of stress. Try more helpful self-talk like 'I'm coping well given what's on my plate', or 'Calm down', or 'Breathe easy'.

Look after our health

Well-nourished bodies are better prepared to cope with stress. Start our day with a healthy breakfast, reduce our caffeine and sugar intake, add plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, and cut back on alcohol and nicotine. Make sure us are eating healthy food and getting regular exercise. Take time to do activities us find calming or uplifting, such as listening to music, walking or dancing.

Engage socially

The simple act of talking face to face with another human being can release hormones that reduce stress even if you're still unable to alter the stressful situation. Opening up to someone is not a sign of weakness and it won't make us a burden to others. In fact, most friends will be flattered that us trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen our bond. Share our thoughts and feelings with others when opportunities arise. Spending time with people us care about, and who care about us, is an important part of managing ongoing stress in our life.

Establish routines

Having predictable rhythms and routines in our day, or over a week, can be very calming and reassuring, and can help us to manage our stress. Routines can include:

Regular times for exercise and relaxation, Regular meal times, waking and bedtimes Planning ahead to do particular jobs on set days of the week

Practise relaxation

Make time to practise relaxation. This will help our body and nervous system to settle and readjust. Learn a formal technique such as progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, meditation, and deep breathing activate the body's relaxation response, a state of restfulness that is the opposite of the fight or flight stress response. Make time to absorb ourselves in a relaxing activity such as gardening or listening to music. Plan things to do each day that us look forward to and which give us a sense of pleasure, like reading a book.

Get moving

Physical activity plays a key role in managing stress. Activities that require moving both our arms and our legs are particularly effective. Walking, running, swimming, dancing, and aerobic classes are good choices, especially if we exercise mindfully (focusing our attention on the physical sensations we experience as we move). Focused movement helps to get our nervous system back into balance. If we have been traumatized or experienced the immobilization stress response, getting active can help us to become "unstuck."

Get plenty of sleep

Feeling tired can increase stress by causing us to think irrationally. Keep our cool in stressful situations by getting a good night's sleep.

Case Study: An Organization Implementation of Stress Management

Stress management policies and procedures are explained and specified for each significant type of a stressor. This is done using a practical case study of an organization, where it shows how this firm deals with each kind of different stressors. The following is a demonstration of several kinds of stressors and the solutions that the organization's management implements for them:

1. Long working hours
 - a) Management teaches and trains its employees
 - b) Good time-management techniques, never to delay work for the last minute, etc.
 - c) Change employees' attitudes and encourage positive self-talk
2. Work-Life balance
 - a) Applying Flex-time, especially for females who have children and house responsibilities, where they do not have to be restricted to come and leave at a specific time, as long as the total sum of working hours still the same
 - b) Establishing nurseries in the organization for day care for employees' children
 - c) Applying Labor Law that states to offer paid vacations of minimum 21 days for employees (this varies according to each country)
3. Technology
 - a) The Organization employs a specialized IT professional who is only responsible for assisting all employees on their IT related issues
 - b) The organization provides specialized training courses on any topic required for work advancement
4. Manager's inability to find solutions for stress
 - a) The organization encourages communication and always asks for feedback, where the HR manager is always directly accessible to any employee to listen to.
 - b) The organization always try to follow up with all corporate and business news, in addition to new studies published regarding work stress, how to spot it and solve it
5. Security Fears The Organization has done great efforts in making employees and people feel safe by applying laws for security checks, checking identities of visitors to the firm and not allowing unauthorized people to enter
6. Retirement Plans Applying Social Security system and pension funds, which is a great insurance and relief for employees in order not to worry about their retirement any more.
7. Job stability and fear of downsizing The Economic Crisis is very complex. Unfortunately, layoffs and downsizing are forced on many organizations, and there is nothing that management can do internally to stop this issue.

8. Interpersonal demands created by other employees, stress to interact with co-workers and supervisors The organization tries to apply the most recent and proper Conflict management techniques as follows:
 - a) Setting ground rules of what is acceptable and what is not, and documenting them formally in the firm's policies.
 - b) Encouraging civilized communication.
 - c) Applying conflict management that focuses on issues not on personalities
 - d) Applying conflict management that also focuses on present not on past conflicts.
 - e) Applying compromising techniques that are a win-win scenario for both parties involved.
 - f) Applying penalty rules for breaking any of the ground rules.

Conclusion

Stress is a highly personalized phenomenon and can vary widely even in identical situations for different reasons. Work place stress can mean different things for different employees. What is stressful for one person may not be stressful for another, but some common drivers include long working hours, fears over job security and being given too much responsibility. Numerous studies confirm that occupational pressure and fears are far and away the leading source of work stress for Indian workers and these have steadily increased over the past few decades. Stress management policies and procedures are explained and specified for each significant type of a stressor. This is done using a practical case study of an organization, where it shows how this firm deals with each kind of different stressors. Last but not least “In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers.”

—Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*

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