Stress Management

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INTRODUCTION

Many people think they understand stress. In reality, however, stress is complex and often misunderstood. To learn how job stress truly works, we must first define it and then relate it to the individual in the workplace.

Stress Defined

Although stress has been defined in many ways, a common ground of most definitions is that stress is caused by a stimulus, that the stimulus can be either physical or psychological and that individual respond to the stimulus in some way. Here, then we define stress as a person's adaptive response to a stimulus that places excessive psychological or physical demands on that person.

Let us look at each component of this definition. First is the notion of adaptation. As we discuss shortly, people adapt to stressful circumstances in any of several different ways. Second is the role of the stimulus. This stimulus is generally called a stressor. That is, a stressor is anything that induces stress. The definition also notes that stressors can be either psychological or physical. Finally, the demands placed on the individual by the stressor must be excessive for stress to result. Of course, what is excessive for one person may be perfectly tolerable for another.

The Cost of Stress

The human cost is severe. In America, the estimated annual cost to industry of combined absence from work, health charges, increased insurance and diminished productivity, is thought to run close to $75 billion. The cost of stress related coronary heart disease alone is about $30 billion. In Britain, at least 40 million working days are lost each year due to the effects of stress and it is estimated that stress related illness costs the medical and social services an average of 55 million pound per year, accounting for loss of 2-3 per cent in the gross national product.

Stress and the Individual

Much of what we know about stress today can be traced to the pioneering work of Dr. Hans Selye identified what he called general adaptation syndrome and the notions of eustress and distress.

General Adaptation Syndrome?

According to this view, we each have a normal level of resistance to stressful events. Some of us can tolerate a great deal of stress, while others can handle much less, but everyone has a basic threshold at which stress starts to affect us.

The GAS begins when a person first encounters a stressor. The first stage is called alarm. At this point, the person may feel some degree of panic, may wonder how to cope, and so forth. For example, suppose a manager is assigned a lengthy report to write overnight. His first reaction may be, "How will I ever get this done by tomorrow?"

If the stressor is too extreme, the person may simply be unable to cope with it at first. In most cases, however, the individual gathers his or her strength (physical or emotional) and resists the negative effects of the stressor. For example, the manager with the long report to write may calm down, call home to say he's working late, role up his sleeves, order out for dinner, and set to work. Thus, at stage 2 of the GAS, the person is resisting the effects of the stressor.

In many cases, the resistance phase may end the GAS. If, for example, the manager is able to complete the report earlier than expected, he may drop it in his briefcase, smile to himself, and reach home tired but happy. On the other hand, prolonged exposure to a stressor, without resolution, may bring on phase 3 of the GAS i.e. exhaustion.

At this stage, the person literally gives up and can no longer fight the stressor. The manager, for example, might fall asleep at his desk at 3.00 a.m. and not get the report finished.

Distress and Eustress

Selye also pointed out that the effects of all stress need not be detrimental. For example, receiving a bonus and then having to decide what to do with the money can be stressful. So, too can getting a promotion, gaining recognition, getting married and similar "good" things. Selye called this type of stress eustress.

Of course, there is also negative stress. Called distress, this is what most people think of when they hear the word stress. Excessive pressure, unreasonable demands on our time, bad news, so on and so forth, all fall in to this category.

For purposes of simplicity, we will continue to use the simple term stress. It is important to remember throughout the discussion, though, that stressor can be either positive or negative. It can motivate and stimulate us, or it can lead to any number of dangerous side effects.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

It is also important to note the effects of individual differences on stress. We have already noted, for example, that people differ in their normal levels of resistance to stressors. Cultural differences are also important. For example, as detailed more fully in international Perspective research by Cary Cooper suggests that American executives may have less stress than executives in many other countries, including Japan and Brazil.

Other research suggests that women are perhaps more prone to experience the psychological effects of stress, whereas men may report more physical effects.

Finally, it has also been suggested that people who see themselves as being very complex are better able to handle stress than are people who have a simpler view of themselves. We should add, though, that the study of individual differences in stress is still in its infancy; it would be premature to draw rigid conclusions about how different types of people handled stress.

SOURCES OF JOB STRESS

Individuals will experience stress when they face new or threatening factors in their work environments. While individuals will vary, of course, in what they experience as stressful there are some aspects of work that systematically create job stress for employees. One major source of job stress is the job itself. The way the job is designed, the amount of time pressure an individual faces, and the expectations others have of a person at work can all lead to job stress. Interpersonal relationships are a second source of job stress. How much contact an individual has with coworkers and bosses, how much time he or she deals with clients or consumers, and how pleasant in personal lives can spill over into the work environment, adding further tension to an already stressful work situation.

1)Job characteristics

A major source of job stress is a person's role in the organization. A role is simply the set of expectations that other people in the organization have an individual in his or her job. Supervisors, co-workers, customers, suppliers, and inspectors all of these people expect an individual to behave in certain predictable ways. Often, the expectations others have of an employee are unclear, in conflict, or too high for the employee to meet within the time allotted, and he or she experiences stress.

a)Role Ambiguity

In order for people to perform their jobs well in organizations, they need to know their job objectives, what they are expected to do and not do, and what the scope and responsibilities of their jobs are. When there is a lot of uncertainty surrounding job definitions or job expectations, people experience role ambiguity.

With the recent increase in mergers and acquisitions among major corporations, for instance, more and more employees are often unsure who is to perform which job duties. Employees wonder if they are duplicating other people's work, and are uncertain about whom they should be reporting their problems to. All this role ambiguity is anxiety-arousing to employees, and they consequently experience job stress.

b)Role Conflict

Often employees discover that different groups of people in an organization have widely varying expectations of them and that they cannot meet all these expectations. This inconsistency of expectations associated with a role is called role conflict. There are two general types of role conflict in organizations.

The first type is interceder role conflict: two different groups have expectations of an individual that are incompatible or inconsistent. For example, admissions of clerks in hospitals are expected by public relations officers to be pleasant, sympathetic and helpful to incoming patients and their families but are also expected by the comptroller's office to get detailed insurance and financial information. It is difficult for admissions clerks to achieve both goals simultaneously.

The second type is intrasender role conflict: One group has incompatible or inconsistent expectations of another. The plight of air traffic controllers is a good illustration of such conflict. Air traffic controllers are under order from the Federal Aviation Administration to properly space all air craft traffic. Nevertheless, control tower supervisors encourage air traffic controllers to ignore some of these regulations because aircraft traffic would get too heavy if all rules were followed to their letter. However, if a near-miss or an error occurs, the controllers are disciplined by these same supervisors for not following the regulations. Air traffic controllers are receiving inconsistent messages from their bosses (ignore regulations; follow regulations) and experience tremendous stress as a result. In one year alone at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, seven controllers experienced such acute hypertension that they had to be carried out of the control tower on a stretcher.

c) Role Overload

Role Overload is a situation in which employees feel they are being asked to do more than time or ability permits. Working under time pressure is especially stressful. People are anxious when they have a lot to do before some deadline; as time runs out, a feeling of impending disaster increases.
Two particularly interesting studies have been conducted on the impact of role overload on job stress.
One study was done with tax accountants approaching the April 15 tax deadline, the other was done with medical students before an impending examination. In both studies, physiological symptoms of stress increased dramatically prior to the time deadline, and decreased sharply after the deadline had passed. The general adaptation syndrome does activate itself as the threat of time deadlines draws near and the body returns to equilibrium after the threat is over

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d) Role Underload

Most frequently, employees experience stress from having to respond to the role expectations of too many people. For some jobs and some workers, though stress comes from role under load.

Role under load is the condition in which employees have too little work to do too little variety in their work. Salespeople in a store with no customers, sanding around all day with nothing to do could be said to experience role under load. Assembly line workers also generally experience role under load; rarely do they perform more than one or two tasks day after day.

Ironically, role under load can lead to many of the same problems as role overload; low self-esteem; increased frequency of nervous symptoms and complaints; increased health problems.

One of the most disturbing outcomes of role under load is passivity. Workers with role under load report they feel both physically and psychologically weary; even when they are not at work, they do not show much interest in social activity or physical exercise.

2) Interpersonal Relationships

A second major source of stress in organizations is poor interpersonal relationships with others, namely supervisors, coworkers or clients. When interpersonal relationships at work
are unpleasant, employees develop a generalized anxiety, a diffuse feeling of dread about upcoming meetings and interactions. Three aspects of interpersonal relationships at work, in particular, have a negative impact on job stress.

a) Amount of contact with others
b) Amount of contact with people in other departments
c) Organizational climate

a) Amount of Contact with Others

Jobs vary in terms of how much interpersonal contact is built into them. Some
job, like security guard or research scientist, involve relatively little interactions with others. In
contrast, jobs like administrative assistant or waitress require constant human interaction.
While most of these interactions proceed smoothly, over time people become burned out and a
feel a need for privacy. Too much prolonged contact with other people can cause stress.
This stress is exacerbated when the people we come into contact with are in distress
themselves. For this reasons, employees in the "helping professions" - health care, social
service, education and law-report the highest levels of stress. The client's stress rubs off on
people who are acting in the helping capacity. It is ironic that doctors have the highest rate of
alcoholism of any of the professions and that psychiatrists have the highest rate of suicide.

b) Amount of Contact with people in other Department

Having contacts with people outside one's own departments creates a special sort of stress.
People in other departments do not always have an adequate understanding of jobs outside
their own areas. As a result they are more likely to make requests that cannot be honored or
set deadlines that cannot be met.
In hospitals, for example, employees in service departments like X-ray and pharmacy report
high amounts of stress. The X-ray technicians and pharmacists report that doctors and nurses
from the medical and surgical units make unreasonable demands on them and set very
unrealistic deadlines for their services. Two X-ray technicians on call all night, for instance,
cannot respond to all calls for service quickly when always has to be on duty in the emergency
room.

c) Organizational Climate

Finally, the overall psychological climate of the organization can create stress, when day-to-day
life in an organization is marked by unfriendly distant, or hostile exchange, employees are
continually tense. They have little trust in each other and do not express their true concerns
and desires. They are unsupportive of each other and spend little time helping each other with
problems.

3) Personal Factors

Frequently, employees' personal lives have a marked effect on their lives at work. If things are going well personally, they are more likely to be upbeat and optimistic. They have more energy and patience for dealing with problems at work. On the other hand, if employees are having some personal problems, they might be more tense or distracted when they go to work. Little problems at work make them angry and irritable. Their nerves may already be a little frayed; it takes less to get them upset.

Three factors in particular, influence how much stress people bring from their personal lives to the work setting:

1) Their career concerns
2) Their geographical mobility and
3) The rate of change in their personal lives.

One major career concern that can cause stress is lack of job security. With the exception of some unionized employees, very few workers in America have job security and in recessions, even those employees enjoy few guarantees. Even top-level managers can lose their jobs on short notice. When the economy worsens or the profits of the firm go flat, people become especially worried about how they could support themselves if they lost their jobs.

CONSEQUENCES OF JOB STRESS

(1) Physical Health

Job stress has a substantially negative impact on physical health. First, job stress increases the Frequency of minor physical ailments. People who are experiencing stress are more likely to have headaches, stomachaches, backaches, and chest pains.

Second, job stress has a major impact on contributory factors to major illnesses. People under stress are more likely to have a quickened heartbeat and greater difficulty breathing. Blood pressure rises with stress, as do cholesterol levels. All of these factors make the body more susceptible to major illnesses like heart disease. Indeed, the research quite strongly suggests that people who undergo prolonged periods of stress are more likely to suffer more major physical illnesses. In particular, stress is a major contributor to ulcers, arthritis, drug and alcohol abuse, and heart disease. Some researchers suggest that managers with high levels of stress may be twice as prone to heart disease, five times as prone to a second heart attack, and twice as prone to fatal heart attacks as low-stress managers.

Finally, and not surprisingly in light of the evidence presented above, job stress influences longevity. There is strong evidence that job stress shortens one's life. Job Stress not only makes

bodies more susceptible to major illnesses, but also contributes directly to life-threatening diseases.

Even the courts have been making worker compensation awards on the basis of stress-induced disabilities. Courts have rules that in stress cases, "the central consideration isn't the actual work environment, but how the employee reacts to it." Employers can be held liable if the illness has been "aggravated, accelerated, precipitated, or triggered" by the conditions of the job.

(2) Psychological

Stress has a marked impact on mental as well as physical health. Probably the most noticeable impact job stress has on people psychologically is that it increases their anxiety. Anxiety is a vague sense of apprehension and foreboding. People may not know exactly how to put their finger on what's bothering them, but they feel vulnerable to people and events in their work environments. They worry more about how they will deal with potential threats that may not even materialize.

Stress also increases frustration. When people are blocked from behaving the way they would like to behave or from getting what they want, they are said to be frustrated. 34 When people get passed over for a promotion, for instance, they feel frustrated. They can't do the job they want, and they can't obtain the status and rewards they desire. There are several ways in which individuals respond to frustration.

One response to frustration is passivity. If a person constantly fails at a job despite increased efforts, or keeps on getting the bad breaks, he or she is likely to give up or become disinterested. When you read in the newspapers about unemployment among those "actively seeking employment," for instance, these figures exclude those workers who have not looked for a job in six months. These workers are so frustrated by constant rejection that they have withdrawn from the work force and have stopped looking for work altogether.

Another response to frustration is aggression. Aggressive employees strike out at those around them. If employees feel aggressive toward their supervisors and coworkers, they may snipe at them in meetings. They may become irritable, losing their temper over relatively unimportant matters. They may become more negative, finding fault with everyone and everything.

A third response to frustration is depression. When people are frustrated at work, they often become sad. They may become pessimistic and lose their self-confidence and self-esteem. Individuals may start to avoid social contacts and feel lonelier. For instance, sometimes people will become depressed if they do not win some special award or recognition they had hoped for. They blame themselves for their failure and feel helpless to control events around them.

Most people have suffered from acute depression occasionally. Individuals may be really depressed after getting poor performance evaluations, or getting job rejection letters, or breaking up a marriage.

Generally, after a short while, they are like their "old selves" again, with confidence renewed. However, if the depression does not self-correct and becomes chronic, more serious problems can ensue."

A fourth response to frustration, although much rarer, is suicide. For a variety of reasons, an individual may feel unable to cope with all the negative aspects of his or her life and decide to end it. Unfortunately, the occurrence of suicide has increased over the past decade, particularly among executives.

(3) Performance

Stress may also have a negative impact on individual performance. Stress can lead to increased turnover and absenteeism, for instance. Turnover and absenteeism allow workers to withdraw from unpleasant environments. In addition, stress has been frequently associated with industrial sabotage. Workers sometimes create mechanical failures on the assembly line to give themselves a break from the monotony and stain of their work. Job stress also has an impact on individual productivity.

(4) Decision Making

Stress also impedes effective decision-making. When people are feeling stress, they are more likely to procrastinate and to avoid having to make decisions. They have more trouble concentrating and often forget important pieces of information. They are less likely to seek out new information that could help them make better decisions. As a result, the quality of the decisions they make suffers.

For example, when individuals are trying to decide which job offers to accept, they frequently feel stress. While there are several good opportunities that lie ahead, there is also much uncertainty about what these jobs are really like. The costs of a wrong decision can be high. Moreover, often these decisions have to be made within a few days' time. As a result of this stress, many people delay making the decision until the last moment; they keep on trying to put it out of their minds. They have trouble concentrating on the information they already have, and feel too distracted to search out additional data on their options. As a result, individuals often make bad job decisions when they are operating under high stress.

COPING WITH JOB STRESS

As we have pointed out before, it is not true that employees do not want any stress at work. Indeed, there is substantial evidence that employees are energized and motivated by moderate amounts of stress. However, most people want to reduce their stress to the point where they feel they have some control over what is going on around them.

In this, section, we will be looking at a variety of ways in which individuals cope, or deal, with stress at work. The first set of these coping strategies are work-focused. Employees can decrease stress by directly changing their own work habits or the work environments they are in. The second set of these coping strategies are emotion-focused. These strategies do not directly change the work environment per se, but rather help employees adjust to the stress more easily.

(1) Work-Focused Coping Strategies

Role Clarification Probably the most direct way in which individuals can cope with stress is by trying to clarify or change the role expectations of others. If employees feel their job assignments are unclear, they can ask their supervisors for clarification of what is expected. If they feel that they are getting conflicting signals from their managers (for instance, "I don't care how you get this done, just get it done" but "Don't step on any toes") they can confront their managers about the lose-lose situations they find themselves in. One overlooked coping strategy in this area is changing the constraints put upon a job assignment. If a job is due in two days and there is no way it can be accomplished even by working twelve-hours days, it is rational to ask for more time or help when the assignment is initially given.

Time Management

Another way of coping with stress is to manage time more effectively. People can learn to get better organized so that they can do their work more efficiently and fritter away less time needlessly. For example, managers often waste time by answering all calls and letters as they come in. Instead, they could put off unimportant activities until slack periods and try to do their most important work in the morning when they are feeling fresh.

Delegation

A third way of coping with job stress is to delegate some responsibilities to others. Managers can let subordinates gather some of the data they need, or represent them at some meetings. Secretaries can take care of many of the bureaucratic details managers don't need to attend to personally. Delegation can directly decrease work demands put upon the manager-and often the tasks the manager delegates to subordinates are seen as challenging by those who receive them. Some employees may think it is a sign of weakness to ask for more information or some initial assistance when given an unfamiliar task. It is not uncommon, for instance, to see new employees work three times longer on a job than necessary rather than admit they are not sure what they are doing. It is much more efficient, effective and anxiety-reducing to get some help before getting lost.

Co-operative work Strategies : Sometimes an effective way of dealing with too much work is to co-operate with other people in the same situation. For instance, in preparing major reports, dividing the work and sharing information can help employees complete their projects faster and with much less effort. People worry, of course, that they will be taken advantage of they will work hard, but others will not. However, more often than not, people will realize it is in their own best interest to share the load and will co-operate enthusiastically.

Departure from the job : Finally, it is important to note that sometimes the stress on a job is too great, and that not much can be done to relieve it. The organization may be greatly understaffed, and the person greatly overworked. An employee might be in a job for which he or she is simply not well trained. Whatever the reason, it is not a sign of weakness to leave a job before one gets physically sick or emotionally depressed.

(2) Emotion Focused Coping Strategies

Reduced Perfectionism

One of the biggest sources of stress in people's lives is the attempt to live up to the impossible standards they set for themselves. People expect themselves to perform consistently at high levels, even when they are trying to get too much done in too little time. They expect themselves to be efficient "machines" at work even when they are ill or pre-occupied with personal problems. Sometimes a good way of dealing with stress is to accept less than one's very best every once in a while. Not that people should become lazy or lackadaisical, but rather they should realize that not every performance can be stellar, and the world will not stop turning if they are not perfect every time. Employees also have fantasies about what the perfect job or perfect manager would be like. They imagine there are saintly, compassionate, competent supervisors out in the world and they feel ill-used because they don't have them.

However, their managers have the same stresses they have, probably nor, an expecting ideal behavior from them inevitably leads to disappointment. There is no perfect boss and there not perfect job. Learning to live with a little less is not compromising standards. It is dealing with the job more realistically. Increased Social Support

A very effective way of coping with job stress is to seek out social support from others. When people feel stressed, it helps to have friends and colleagues who are supportive. Friends can provide an outlet for blowing off steam; they can support lagging self-confidence or self-esteem; they can be confided in about personal and work-related problems.

Increased Tolerance of Ambiguity

Throughout school, most people receive clear homework assignments, objective tests, and frequent feedback. The work world is not like that. Most of the problems managers work on is ill-defined: little feedback is received; the criteria for success are much fuzzier. Certainly it makes sense to try to reduce role ambiguity wherever possible. However, employees can never obtain the role clarity they had as students, and they might be better off becoming more tolerant of ambiguity.

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques are another type of emotion-focused coping device. When individuals can't change the stressful work situation, they can sometimes cope with it more effectively if they are claimer. Some researchers have found that people experience a "relaxation response" if: (1) they are in a quiet environment' (2) they close their eyes; (3) they get into a comfortable position; and (4) they keep on repeating a simple sound to block out work-related thoughts. While the research in this area is still relatively new and sketchy, there is some evidence that such a "relaxation response" can decrease muscle tension, heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of breathing.

Health Maintenance

Researchers in the area of job stress have advocated increased health maintenance for those in high stress jobs. Proper diet, proper exercise, and enough sleep can keep he body in better shape for dealing with stress. When employees are tired and run down, they are much more likely to let their jobs get on their nerves. They eat too much junk food, drink coffee to keep them going and consider walking to the vending machine as sufficient exercise. People are much more likely to get physically sick or emotionally depressed if they are out of shape, over tired, or poorly nourished.

In the final analysis, then, the management of stress lies by necessity with the individual. Even if organizations continue to remain active in stress management programs; ultimately it is the individual who has to be responsible for he or her own well-being.