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Occupational stress and stress management in organizations

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ABSTRACT

Stress is a dynamic condition in which individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint, or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcomes are perceived to be uncertain. Constraints are barriers that keep employees away from doing what they desire. Constraints and demand can lead to potential stress, when they are coupled with uncertainty about the outcomes potential stress becomes actual stress. In this review stress is considered as an unpleasant emotion which manifests itself through tension, frustration, anxiety, anger and depression. All these emotions are result of different aspects of the working environment and personal lives of the employees. Moreover today the organizations have changed from manual to automated office management. Light of all these spasmodic changes the organizations and the individual alike have to adapt themselves in order to coop with the global challenges for survival. All these challenges consequently lead to occupational stress. The article is designed to highlight different causes and consequences of occupational stress with a view to manage it through individual and organizational approaches.

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Introduction

Stress can be defined as the imbalances that occur physiologically or psychologically as a reaction to perceived external threats. Stress can be termed neither good nor bad, it is a change in the body which either prepares a person to meet the threat exigencies or convinces the mind to avoid the situation. Physiologically the person may feel increased pulse rate, breathing rate, muscle tension, and pupil dilation. On the other hand psychologically the person feels tension, anxiety, and increased alertness brought on the released hormones from the pituitary, thyroid, and adrenal glands. Combining both physiological and psychological conditions the term is used as feeling stress.

Selye (1976) defines stressors as the agents or demands that evoke patterned response. Stressors are external events or conditions that affect organism. Stressors are not exclusively physical in nature. Emotions, love, hate, joy, anger, challenge, fears as well as thought also call forth the change characteristics of the stress syndrome. According to Brezitz & Goldberger (1993) description of stressors and their impact on behaviour is an open-ended task. Researches consider an increasing number of events and conditions to be stressors. Most of the efforts are in still in qualitative domain. Cognitive appraisals of stressors are different among different people.

Types of Stress

The General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS)

The response to the stress events follows a steady pattern known as General Adaptation Syndrome. It is defence reaction to the environmental demand or stressor, which is perceived as threatening. The more a person undergoes a stressful situation the more wear and tear of the body occurs, which results in fatigue, disease and aging.

Episodic Stress

High levels of stress followed by the intervals of relief are referred as episodic stress. For example when a person is taking

a sound sleep the stress level is at its ebb but as the alarm sounds the stress level rises and is calmed down as the

Chronic Stress

Chronic is stress is the constant tension and anxiety most of the individual living in the modern world face. That includes the traffic jams, noise, time limits to complete tasks, discussions, threats, accidents, troubled relationships, financial difficulties, and off course the breaking news. The mobile phone networks have also added another item of constant stress. Though people have learned to live with the constant stress prevailing as a social norm but the wear and tear of the body and psychological balance reduces the body and mind resistance level.

Dis- Stress

It is the usual stress we feel under unpleasant conditions or requirement beyond our body capacity. Sometime the stress is relational to the disturbed mental condition and very light activity seems to be stressful. Therefore it can be ascertained that under stressful conditions the total output of the body both mental and physical is tremendously reduced.

Eu Stress

When we talk about the stress usually it sends a negative unpleasant message but there is a stress which is a source of motivation and keeps us alert, that is called "Eu Stress". Eu in Greek is "good". This type of stress makes an individual to do things beyond the body capacity to achieve excellence and applaud. This is the stress we come across to suppress our evil desires, spend money with altruistic spirit, caring for others at the cost of our own comfort and sportsmen exhibit it too often to beat or outclass the opponents. Eustress is the type of stress you experience right before you have the need to exert physical force. The feelings of stress are converted into positive energy and motivate the person. Eustress prepares the muscles, heart, and mind for the strength needed for whatever is about to occur.

Symptoms of Stress

When a person is undergoing chronic stress different types of physical, mental and behavioural changes can affect the subject's health. The symptoms may not be obvious instantaneously and the victim fails to assess them mentally and physically. Some of the symptoms are listed but how often they occur it matters.

- Continuous tiredness
- Exhaustion
- Chronic headaches
- Stomach Problems
- Breathlessness
- Sweat on hands and feet
- Giddiness
- High blood pressure
- Palpitations
- Tension
- Insomnia
- Losing temper
- Fearfulness
- Stringent
- Lack of concentration
- Aggressive attitude
- Increased apatite
- Constant worrying
- Restlessness and sceptical
- Intolerant
- Hypersensitivity
- Depression
- Apathy
- Dependence on tranquilizers
- Use of drugs
- Excessive smoking

Consequences of Stress

According to McGrath (1976) stress is not always bad; some stress is inevitable and actually beneficial such as, it help people when they need to grow, attain difficult goals and perform their best. Insufficient stress leads to boredom, apathy and decreased motivation.

Some degree of stress enhances performance when individuals are not in immediate danger. Stress can increase performance, but only to a point. When one's stress exceeds a certain limit, additional stress will detract performance.

Stress or nervousness before a big presentation sometime helps one to perform better and or think with more clarity and precision, however, if a person becomes excessively stressed and anxious, then he or she will have difficulty in remembering what to say.

Everyone's tolerance for stress and ways to handle various types of stress are different. Stress takes its toll on the ability to perform effectively on the task. Baumeister (1984) gave a theory that pressure to perform often makes people self-conscious and this elevated self-consciousness disrupts their attention.

The major organizational concern about stress is its effects on individual's performance, when stress begins to deteriorate employee's physical and mental health some people choose to escape through absenteeism and turnover.

These are costly to the organization in terms of health care expenses, productivity and human resources. When the stress level rises the symptoms start appearing. Chronic stress can lead to nervous breakdown or other severe physiological disorder or paralysis.

Effects of stress

Subjective Effects. Anxiety, feeling alone, aggression, apathy, boredom, depression, fatigue, frustration, loss of temper, low self-esteem, nervousness

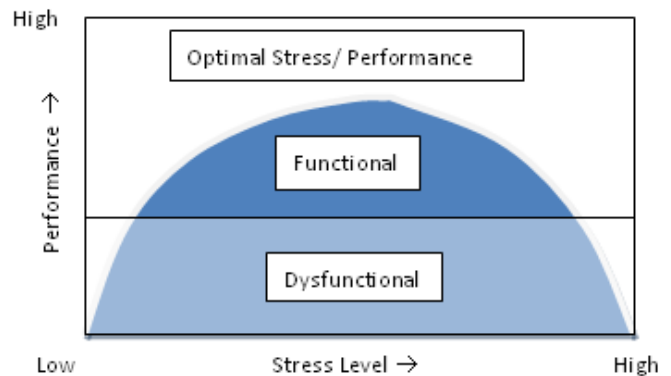
Behavioural Effects. Accident proneness, drug abuse, emotional outbursts, excessive eating, excessive drinking or smoking, impulsive behaviour, nervous laughter.

Cognitive Effects. Inability to make sound decisions, poor concentration, short attention span, hypersensitivity to criticism, and mental blocks.

Physiological Effects. Increased blood glucose levels, increased heart rate and blood pressure, dryness of the mouth, sweating, dilation of pupils, hot and cold flashes.

Organizational Effects. Absenteeism, lower productivity, alienation from co-workers, job dissatisfaction, reduced organizational commitment and loyalty. It also leads to reduced concentration and decreased ability to solve problems which ultimately leads to low job performance.

How stress affects the Organization? Primarily the organization is concerned about the performance of its employees and productivity. But in addition to the work condition the individual has other factors leading to stress which can be out of organization. The organization therefore, frames a social benefit to the employee like house rent, medical facilities extended to the family, bonuses, perks and privileges in order to reduce the stress from sources not in control the organization.



In an organization stress lesser than the required level leads to boredom, apathy, regressive attitude and lack of motivation. The Eu stress helps not only in yielding better productivity through elevated performance levels but also keeps the morale of the employees high. But at the same time the stress must not escalate beyond the optimal point or the high positive stress may not be sustainable to continue for longer durations and the employees may show work overload, tension and depleted energy and anxiety. (Albrecht 1979). When the stress starts affecting the health of the workers, then tendency to escape through absenteeism and turnover would increase. Hence the productivity of the organization would adversely be affected.

What Causes Organizational Stress? A number of factors are responsible for the stress prevailing in an organizational environment. It may be the boss, the type of work or incompatibility of home and office environments.

• **The Occupation as a source of Stress.** Jobs like manager, foreman, and secretary, possess high stress characteristics whereas jobs like sock hander, craftsperson and college professor do not have high stress characteristics.

• **The Job Role and Stress.** As the nature of work also contribute towards stress for example a manager has a pressure from above to meet targets, while on the other hand he can not

put extra work burden on the employees nor can he left them idle so without creating undue stress he has to keep the environments conducive. But he himself is under tremendous stress all the times.

Role Overload. When people are expected to accomplish more than their ability and capacity to perform within a tight time frame then they feel pressure and go under stress. There are two types of workloads:

Quantitative Overload. When employees are demanded to do a work which actually needs much more time to do comfortably. Moreover the time is also mismanaged by frequent interventions and change in schedules and amendments in the tasks.

Qualitative Overload. This type of overload is more demanding and occurs when the demand is more than the skill and knowledge of the incumbents. It happens mostly in contingency situations.

Underutilization. When a worker is not utilized optimally by the organization in accordance to the skills and knowledge one possesses it is liable to develop a sort of dysfunctional stress. Moreover it also happens when a more knowledgeable and skilled person is placed under an incompetent supervisor.

Role Ambiguity. When a worker is not clear about the nature of work he or she has to perform. Prolonged uncertainty of role gives way to a sense of futility, increased tension, decreased job satisfaction, and diminished self-confidence.

Stress Management Strategies

Stress influences our behaviour and thus our relations with others at work. Stress has serious health implications if not properly managed. To properly manage stress, it has to be identified, understood, and learn ways to handle it. Stress can be managed by, Exercise, Laughter, Diet, Stop smoking, Sleep, Support network, Self-empowerment, Improve coping skills.

Approaches to Stress

Stress can be managed in organizations through individual level as well as at organizational level.

At individual level employees' stress can be managed through effective time management because an understanding and utilization of basic time management principles can help individuals better cope with job demands.

Noncompetitive physical exercise such as aerobics, race walking, jogging, swimming, and riding a bicycle have long been recommended by physicians as a way to deal with excessive stress levels.

Relaxation Training can also reduce employees stress because through it individuals can teach themselves to relax through techniques such as meditation, hypnosis, and biofeedback. The objective is to reach a state of deep relaxation, where one feels physically relaxed, somewhat detached from the immediate environment, and detached from body sensations.

Social Support can play important role as a stress reduction strategy as having friends, family, or work colleagues to talk to provide an outlet when stress levels become excessive. So expanding social support network, therefore, can be a means for tension reduction.

Organization can play important role in managing the employees stress by using various approaches at organizational level such as, Selection and Placement, individuals with little experience or an external locus of control tend to be more stress-prone. Selection and placement decisions should take these facts into consideration.

Goal Setting can use as a strategy the use of goals can reduce stress as well as provide motivation. Specific goals that

are perceived as attainable clarify performance expectations. Additionally, goal feedback reduces uncertainties as to actual job performance. The result is less employee frustration, role ambiguity, and stress.

Redesigning jobs to give employees more responsibility, more meaningful work, more autonomy, and increased feedback can reduce stress, because these factors give the employee greater control over work activities and lessen dependence on others.

Participative Decision Making is giving employees a voice in decisions that directly affect their job performances, management can increase employee control and reduce this role stress.

Organizational Communication can be used as a strategy by giving importance that perceptions play in moderating the stress-response relationship, management can also use effective communications as a means to shape employee perceptions.

Moreover wellness programs focus on the employee's total physical and mental condition can be initiated. For example, they typically provide workshops to help people quit smoking, control alcohol use, lose weight, eat better, and develop a regular exercise program.

Finally stress can be managed through managing change, in order to meet the ever growing change in technology and demands emerging in relation to the globalisation the changing nature of the workforce due to multi cultural environments. To cope up with the international standards the organizations can plan change in their activities that are international and global oriented.

Discussion

Stress is the psychological and physical reaction to certain life events or situations (Aamodt, 2007). It is the non-specific responses of the body to any demand made on it. (Hans Selye, 1976 in Huffman, 2007).

Stress is the general term describing the psychological and physical response to stimuli that alters the body's equilibrium (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 in Kosslyn & Rosenberg, 2006). The body is nearly always in a some state of stress, whether pleasant or unpleasant, mild or severe (Huffman, 2007). A total absence of stress means a total absence of stimulation, which would eventually lead to stagnation, but stress is beneficial, when it is eustress, it is harmful when it is distress. And it reduce the employees performance we cannot eliminate stress from the organizations but we can teach at least how to manage stress to employees and if with the help of individual and organizational approaches employees managed their stress effectively it will save employee from the negative effects and harmful effects stress occupational stress.

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