

EMPLOYEE STRESS

INTRODUCTION & CONCEPT

Stress is the general term applied to the pressures people feel in life. The presence of stress at work is almost inevitable in many jobs.

Stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important.

"Job stress is a condition arising from the interaction of people and their jobs and characterised by changes within people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning."

— T.A. Bechr and J.E. Newman

"Stress is an adoptive response mediated by individual characteristics and psychological processes, that is a consequence of any external action situation, or event that places special physical or psychological demands upon a person."

— John M. Ivancevich and Michael T. Matterson

NATURE/ FEATURES/ CHARACTERISTICS OF STRESS

Nature & characteristics of stress are as follows :

1. Stress may be the result of individual's interaction with environmental stimuli. Such stimuli may be in any form, interpersonal interaction event and so on. The impact of the stimuli produces deviation in the individual.
2. Stress may result in any kind of deviation — physical, psychological or behavioural — in the person. The deviation is from the usual state of affairs. From this point of view, stress is different from anxiety which operates solely in the emotional and psychological sphere. Thus, stress may be accompanied by anxiety but it is more comprehensive than the latter.
3. Stress can be either temporary or long term, mild or severe, depending mostly on how long its causes continue, how powerful they are, and how strong the individual's powers are. If stress is temporary and mild, most people can handle it or at least recover from its effects rather quickly.
4. It is not necessary that stress is always dysfunctional. On the contrary, there may be some stresses, called *enstress*, like stress for creative work, entrepreneurial activities, competition etc. which stimulate better productivity. It is only the *dysfunctional stress*, called *distress*, which is bad and must be overcome.

TYPICAL SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

When pressure begins to build up, it can cause adverse strain on one's emotions, through processes and physical conditions. When stress becomes excessive, employees develop various symptoms of stress that can harm their job performance and health, and even threaten their ability to cope with the environment. People, who are stressed, may become nervous and may develop chronic worry (Fig. 32.1). They are easily provoked to anger and are unable to relax. They may be

uncooperative or use alcohol or drugs excessively. Although these conditions also occur from other causes, they are common symptoms of stress.

Stress also leads to physical disorders, because the internal body system changes to try to cope up with stress. Some physical disorders are short range such as an upset stomach, others are longer range, such as stomach ulcer. Stress over a prolonged time also leads to degenerative disease of the heart, kidneys, blood vessels, and other parts of the body. Therefore, it is important that stress, both on and off the job, be kept at a low level enough for most people to tolerate without disorders.

Stress is not necessarily bad in and of itself. While stress is typically discussed in negative context, it also has positive value. It is an opportunity when it offers potential gains, for example, the superior performance that an athlete or stage performer give in such situations. Such individuals often use stress positively to rise to the occasion and perform at or near their maximum.

More typically stress is associated with *constraints* and *demands*. The constraints prevent us from doing what we desire, the demands refer to the loss of something desired.

Two conditions are necessary for potential stress to become actual stress. There must be uncertainty over the outcome and the outcome must be important. Regardless of the conditions, it is only when there is doubt or uncertainty regarding whether the opportunity will be seized, the constraint removed, or the loss avoided that there is stress. That is, stress is highest for those individuals who perceive that they are uncertain as to whether they will win or lose and lowest for those individuals who think that winning or losing is an unimportant outcome, there is no stress. If keeping our job or earning promotion doesn't hold any importance for us, we have no reason to feel stress over having to undergo a performance review.

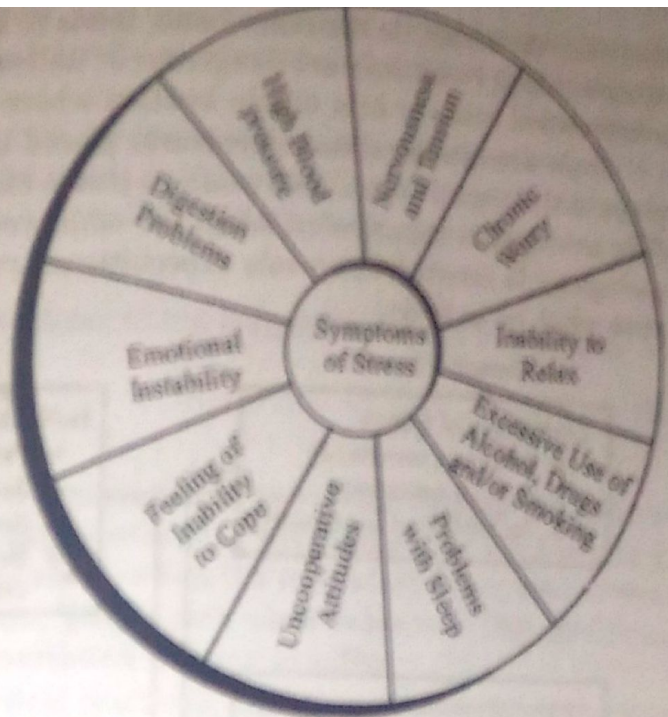


Fig. 32.1. Typical Symptoms of Stress.

POTENTIAL SOURCES OF STRESS

The potential sources of stress can be summarized by the following factors (Fig. 32.2) :

1. **Environmental Factors** : Environmental uncertainty influences the design of the organisation's structure. It also influences stress levels among employees in that organisation.

Changes in the business cycle create *economic uncertainties*. When the economy is contracting, people become increasingly anxious about their security.

Political uncertainties are also the probable source of stress.

New innovations can make an employee's skill and experience obsolete in a very short period of time. *Technological uncertainty* is thus a factor which causes stress.

2. **Organisational Forces** : There is no shortage of factors that cause stress. Pressures to avoid errors or complete task in a limited time period, work overload, a demanding & insensitive superior and unpleasant coworkers are a few examples.

Task demands are factors related to a person's job. They include the design of the individual's job autonomy, task variety, degree of automation, working conditions and the physical work layout. Assembly lines can put pressure on people when their speed is perceived as excessive. The more interdependent

Economic problems created by individuals over-extending their financial resources is another set of personal troubles that can create stress for employees and distract their attention from their work.

Besides that, some people may have an inherent tendency to negative aspects of the world in general. A significant individual factor influencing stress is a person's basic dispositional nature. That is, stress symptoms expressed on the job may actually originate in the person's *personality*.

■ EFFECTS/ REACTIONS TO STRESS

High level of stress leads to the following problems to the employees.

1. Behavioural problems
2. Physical problems
3. Psychological problems.

1. Behavioural Problems : People show dysfunctional behaviour because of stress of high level. Such behaviour may be in the form of alcoholism, drug addiction, increased smoking, sleeplessness, under or overeating etc. In extreme cases, when the individual is not able to bear stress, it may result in suicide. At the work place, people may show behaviour like tardiness, absenteeism and turnover. In all these cases, organisation is going to suffer.

2. Physical Problems : Stress causes physical reactions, including autonomic, excitability of nerves, increased heart rate, and a decrease in body temperature. A research finding suggests that high level stress is accompanied by high blood pressure and high level of cholesterol and can result in heart disease, ulcer & arthritis. There may even be link between stress and cancer. Such serious ailments, however, are not caused exclusively by stress alone; physical characteristics of the individual have their contribution. These ailments have a drastic effect on the individuals, their families and organisations.

3. Psychological Problems : High level of stress may be accompanied by psychological reactions such as anger, anxiety, depression, nervousness, irritability, tension and boredom depending upon the nature of stress and the capacity of individual to bear stress. The effects of psychological reactions on individuals may be changes in mood and other emotional states, lowered self-esteem, resentment of supervision, inability to concentrate and make decisions, and job dissatisfaction. These affect productivity in the organisation adversely.

■ STRESS & JOB PERFORMANCE

Research in behavioural area indicates that the level of difficulty, the nature of the task being performed, personal dispositions (such as type A, personal control and learned helplessness, self-efficacy, and psychological hardiness) other psychological dispositions (such as negative affectivity) and neuroticism may affect the relationship between stress and performance. However, it is still safe to conclude that :

1. Performance usually drops off sharply when stress rises to high levels.
2. The performance of many tasks is in fact strongly affected by stress.

Generally, stress is considered to be negative, thereby it has negative consequences. However, stress has neutral connotation. It is only the degree of stress which produces positive or negative consequences. From this point of view, stress can be classified as *entress* or *distress*.

Entress : Entress denotes the presence of optimum level of stress in an individual which contributes positively to his performance. This may lead employees to new and better ways of doing their jobs. In certain jobs such as sales, creativity (journalism, radio/television announcement where time pressure is significant), a mild level of stress contributes positively to productivity.

Distress : Distress denotes the presence of high level of stress in an individual which affects job performance adversely and creates many types of physical, psychological, and behavioural problems.

Stress can either be helpful or harmful to job performance depending upon the amount of it. Figure 32.3 presents a stress performance model that shows the relationship between stress and job performance. When there is no stress, job challenges are absent and performance tends to be low. As stress increases, performance tends to increase, because stress helps a person call up resources to meet job requirements. It is a healthy stimulus that encourages employees to respond to challenges. Eventually, stress reaches a plateau that corresponds approximately with a person's top day-to-day performance capability. At this point, additional stress ends to produce no more improvement.

Finally, if stress becomes too great, performance begins to decline, because stress interferes with it. An employee loses ability to cope with it, becomes unable to make decision, and is erratic in behaviour. If stress increases to a breaking point, performance becomes zero; the employee has a breakdown, becomes too ill to work, is fixed, quits or refuses to come to work to face the stress.

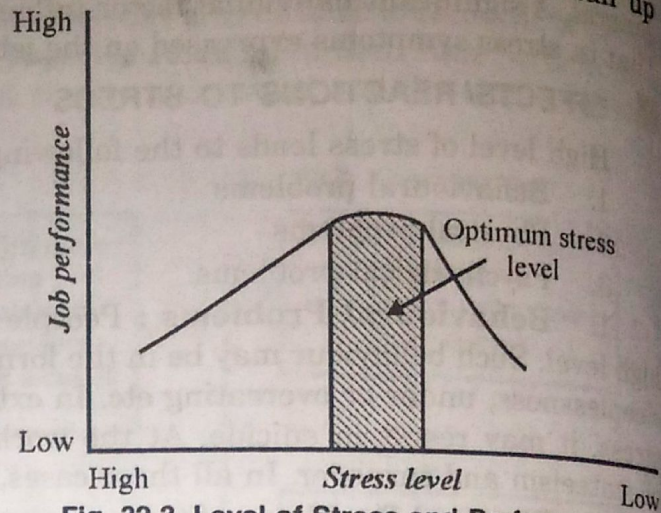


Fig. 32.3. Level of Stress and Performance.

STRESS THRESHOLD

People have different tolerance for stressful situations, and this helps to explain variations in employee performance across similar jobs. The level of stresses that one can tolerate before negative feelings of stress occur and performance is adversely affected is one's stress threshold. Some people are easily upset by the slightest change or disruption in their work routines, others are cool & calm, and collected under the same conditions, partly because they have confidence in their ability to cope. They have a much higher stress threshold, and their performance does not suffer unless a stressor is major or prolonged.

Type A And Type B People (Behaviour) : Reactions to stressful situations often are related to type A and type B people.

Type A behaviour is characterized by feeling a chronic sense of time urgency and by an excessive competitive drive. Type A people are aggressively involved in a chronic incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time, and if required to do so, against the opposing efforts of other things or other persons. Type A people:

1. Are always moving, walking and eating rapidly;
2. Feel impatient with the rate at which most events take place;
3. Strive to think or to do two or more things simultaneously;
4. Can not cope with leisure time; and
5. Are obsessed with numbers, measuring their success in terms of how much of every thing they acquire.

Type B people are rarely worried by the desire to obtain a widely increasing number of things or participate in the endless growing...

The researchers believe that type A people are more likely to experience stress on or off job. More specifically, type A's were widely expected to be at higher risk for heart disease. The type A persons are chronically angry, suspicious and mistrustful.

So just because a person is a workaholic, rushes around a lot and is impatient or competitive, does not mean that he is unduly susceptible to heart disease or the other negative effects of stress; rather, it is the quickness to anger, the persistently hostile outlook and the cynical mistrust of others that are harmful.

■ STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

From the organisation's stand point, management may not be concerned when employees experience low to moderate level of stress; because, it is such levels of stress can be functional and lead to higher employee performance. But high levels of stress, or even low levels of stress sustained over long period of time, can lead to reduced employee performance and thus require action by management.

A limited amount of stress may benefit an employee's performance. From the individual's standpoint, even low levels of stress are likely to be perceived as undesirable. It is not unlikely, therefore, for employees and management to have different notions of what constitutes an acceptable level of stress on the job. Following approaches can be used to reduce the level of stress among employees :

1. Individual Approaches :

(a) Time management	(b) Physical exercise
(c) Relaxation training	(d) Social support
2. Organisational approaches

(a) Selection & placement	(b) Job redesign
(c) Goal setting	(d) Organisational communication
(e) Participative decision making	

1. Individual Approaches : An employee can take personal responsibility for reducing his stress level. Individual strategies that have proved effective are :

(a) **Time management :** Many people manage the time poorly. The things they have to accomplish in any given day are not necessarily beyond completion if they manage their time properly. The time management principles include :

- (i) Making daily list of activities to be accomplished
- (ii) Prioritizing activities by importance and urgency
- (iii) Scheduling activities according to the priorities set
- (iv) Knowing daily cycle and handling the most demanding parts of the job during the high part of our cycle when we are most alert & productive.

(b) **Physical exercise :** Physical exercise such as acrobatics, jogging, swimming have long been recommended by physicians as a way to deal with excessive stress levels.

(c) **Relaxation training :** Individuals can teach themselves to relax through techniques such as meditation, hypnosis and bio-feedback. The objective is to reach a state of *deep relaxation* when one feels physically relaxed, somewhat detached from the body sensations. Fifteen to twenty minutes a day of deep relaxation releases tension and provides a person with a pronounced sense of peacefulness.

(d) **Social support :** Having friends, family or work colleagues' talks provides an outlet when stress levels become excessive. A social support network can reduce the tension considerably.

2. Organisational Approaches : Several of the factors that cause stress are controlled by management. As such, they can be modified or changed. Strategies that management might consider include :

(a) **Selection and placement** : As certain jobs are more stressful than others, the individuals differ in their response to stress situations. The 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. While management can not restrict having only experienced individuals, such individuals may adopt between too high stress jobs & perform those jobs more effectively.

(b) **Job redesign** : Re-designing 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 lesser dependence on others. But this fact is also true that not all employees want enriched jobs. The right job design, then, for employees with a low need for growth might be less responsibility and increased division of labour.

(c) **Goal setting** : Individuals perform better when they have specific and challenging goals and receive feedback on how well they are progressive towards these goals. 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.

(d) **Organisational communication** : Increased formal communication with employees reduces uncertainty by lessening role ambiguity and role conflict. Management can use effective communication as a means to shape employee perceptions.

(e) **Participative decision making** : Role stress is detrimental to a large extent because employees feel uncertain about goals, expectations, how they will be evaluated and the like. By giving these employees a voice in those decisions that directly affect their job performances, management can increase employee control and reduce this role stress. So, managers should consider increasing employee participation in decision making.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by employee stress ? Discuss the typical symptoms of stress.
2. What do you understand by employee stress ? Discuss the various potential sources of stress.
3. Contrast type A and type B behaviour. Are type B individuals less effective employees than type A's ?
4. Do you think the proportion of type A's in a society differs from country to country ? Explain.
5. Write a brief note on stress threshold.
6. Write a detailed essay on stress management strategies.
7. What can individuals do to reduce their stress level ?
8. What can organisation do to reduce employee stress ?
9. Write a brief note on stress and job performance.

