



IMPACT OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS ON HUMAN LIFE – AN OUTLOOK

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Abstract

The present study focus on how the occupational stress affects human life. To carry out an extensive research many research outcomes were studied in order to find out the impact of occupational stress on human life. Stress is an inevitable part of our corporate lives. Due to stress, there can be many different health and psychological issues, which may adversely affect our personal lives as well. Stress may also hold us back from making use of our professional skills and abilities to their fullest. Considering all the bad results of stress, companies are conducting various programs and trainings regarding stress management at the workplace. With some stress management tips and techniques, it is possible to reduce the amount of stress, without lowering the amount of work done and productivity shown. Stress management exercises, which mainly include time management, breathing or relaxation techniques, offer wings to your stress so that it flies away.

Keywords: *Occupation, Stress, Human life.*

STRESS A FOREWORD

Job life is one of the important parts of our daily lives which cause a great deal of stress. Due to the competitive nature of the job environment most of the people in the world are spending their time for job related work purposes resulting ignore the stressor those are influencing their work and life.

Usually people are more worry about their outcome of their work that can even affect the way they treat other people and how they communicate with their peers and customers. For example, people with a higher percentage of occupational stress may not be satisfied with their job and therefore they will not feel happy working in the organization. They may feel frustrated or “burned out” when they are having problems with peers or customers. This may leave a negative impact to the organization itself. Therefore, it is very important for employer and employees to realize the stress and the stressor that cause all the negative effects.

In the days when prehistoric man had not yet attained self-consciousness, he reacted to any signs of danger in two ways: he fought or he fled. This is the 'fight-or-flight' response a term coined by W.B. Cannon in 1914. The body reacts with alarm to the threat: there is a rapid increase in metabolism, with hormonal, physiological and biochemical changes taking place instantly.

The body muscles become tense and the hypothalamus activates the pituitary gland, which secretes hormones that then activate other hormone-producing centers like the adrenal glands. The release of adrenaline and other hormones sustains the alarm reaction and physiological changes occur in response to the stress stimulus. The body now needs glucose for the muscles to function properly. The liver responds by releasing some into the bloodstream. For the glucose to be transformed into energy, extra oxygen is required. The heart begins pumping blood faster to carry this extra supply, leading to a rise in blood pressure.

The amount of blood available in the body is, however, limited. In order to deliver extra blood to select areas—the muscles, heart, lungs, kidneys and the brain—there is a temporary cutoff in blood supply to non-priority areas. Consequently, the digestive system slows or stops altogether, the salivary glands stop secreting, blood vessels in the kidneys and the abdomen constrict and the immune system slows down.

These physiological effects are categorized as 'arousal'. Concomitant emotional manifestations like fear, apprehension and worry are termed 'anxiety'.

Once the threat diminished, the body's reactions quickly returned to normal. All of which was fine in the good old days of yore.

To a scientist, stress is any action or situation that places special physical or psychological demands upon a person, anything that can unbalance his individual equilibrium. And while the physiological response to such demand is surprisingly uniform, the forms of stress are innumerable. Stress may be present even in unconscious form like the noise of a city or the daily chore of driving the car. Perhaps the one incontestable statement that can be made about stress is that it belongs to everyone.



Nothing can isolate stress from human beings as is evident from various researches and studies. Stress can be managed but not simply done away with. Today, widely accepted ideas about stress are challenged by new research, and conclusions once firmly established may be turned completely around. Some stress is necessary to the well being and a lack can be harmful. Stress definitely causes some serious ailments. Severe stress makes people accident-prone.

DEFINING STRESS

Defining stress is a very complex matter, which is the subject of different analyses and continuous debate among experts. Beyond the details of this debate, a general consensus can be reached about the definition of stress, which is centered on the idea of a perceived imbalance in the interface between an individual, the environment and other individuals. When people are faced with demands from others or demands from the physical or psycho-social environment to which they feel unable to adequately respond, a reaction is activated to cope with the situation. The nature of this response depends upon a combination of different elements, including the extent of the demand, the personal characteristics and coping resources of the person, the constraints on the person in trying to cope and the support received from others.

Table No.1.1,Stressor-Stress Relationships

STRESSOR	STRESS
An External Demand or Event	A response to the External Event
Extreme temperature	Increased blood pressure
Extreme lighting	Elevated heart beat
Lack of sleep	Dilated pupils

Source: NIOSH manual

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as:

"The reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them. It arises when they worry they can't cope."

Stress is not in itself completely negative. However, people react to situations differently depending on their life experiences. Under normal circumstances the reaction mechanism of employees should enable them to find new balances and responses to new situations. Stress is, therefore, not necessarily a negative phenomenon. People with broad experience right from childhood encountering new situations can adjust better than those without.

THEORETIC/LITERARY REFLECTIONS OF STRESS

Scientists use the term homeostasis to describe the physiological limits in which the body functions efficiently and comfortably. Stress of any sort disturbs homeostasis by creating a state of disequilibrium, which significantly affects performance of workers in organisations. The potential consequences of stress on job performance and productivity are remarkable and take its toll on organisational' budgets. In recognition of this fact Flippo (1984) pointed out that in recent times, considerable amount of attention has been given to the impact of stress on the human body. Though stress can be functional and dysfunctional; the consequent effect of stress on Peoples' performance has made it exigent for them to optimally achieve their goals without adopting some palliative intervention stress management strategies. As a silent killer, stress is normal and a necessary evil, but if stress is intense, continuous or repeated and if the person is unable to cope or if support is lacking, then stress becomes a negative phenomenon leading to physical illness and psychological disorders (Di Martino, 2003). Supporting this contention, George and Jones 1996), noted that excessive high level of stress may retard managers' performance as well as lead to absenteeism and turnover. On the other hand, moderate stress which may be referred to as anxiety, may also be useful in assisting people in life adjustments and make the avoidance of dangerous situation achievable. Excessive stress is detrimental to the functionality of the workplace and any action taken against such a problem is an integral part of the organizational development of a sound enterprise.

According to Karasek Model cited in Di Martino (2003) Stress is intensified by three variables namely:

- I. **Demands (Psychological Demands):** The pressures put on the individual by the work environment including workload, pace of work, length of working hours, time schedules, tight deadlines, etc;
- II. **Control (Decision Latitude):** The individual's capacity to respond to work demands and pressures, including autonomy, responsibility, skill, training, experience, etc; and,
- III. **Support (Social Support):** The characteristics of the social environment in which working activities are performed including organizational culture, working climate, Management style, help from co- workers, involvement, participation, teamwork, etc.



By combining control and demand, four situations can be identified; they are as specified below:

- I. **Passive Low Control/Low Demand:** This is a situation where the employee has little control but where demands are also low. This leads to stress in the form of monotony and boredom;
- II. **High Strain Low Control/High Demand:** This is a situation where the employee has little control but demands are high. This leads to high stress.
- III. **Low Strain High Control/Low Demand:** This relates to relaxed or low strain situations where the employee has a lot of control and demands are low. This leads to little stress: and
- IV. **Active High Control/High Demand:** This is a situation where the employee has to respond to high demands, but at the same time can exercise high control. This leads to an active situation where most people feel they can somehow manage stress.

These are not static situations. Accordingly

- Stress increases when control declines in combination with rising psychological demands or stressors;
- Stress decreases when control increases in combination with falling psychological demands or stressors; and
- Social support operates as a “facilitator” in reducing stress at work. Stress will decrease when social support increases.

From the above, stress could be precipitated by several variables and consequences of stress need to be properly managed to avoid economic cost for organisations and the well-being of the employees.

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Defining Occupational Stress

Kyriacou (1987), defines “teacher stress as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant emotions such as tension, frustration, anger and depression resulting from aspects of his work as a teacher.”

Okebukola and jedgede (1989), defined occupational stress as “a condition of mental and physical exertion brought about as a result of harassing events or dissatisfying elements or general features of the working environment.”

Borg (1990), conceptualizes teacher stress as negative and potentially harmful to teachers’ health. The key element in the definition is the teacher’s perception of threat based on the following three aspects of his job circumstances.

1. That demands are being made on him.
2. That he is unable to meet or has difficulty in meeting these demands.
3. That failure to meet these demands threatens his mental/physical well being.”

According to United States National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, Cincinnati, (1999), Job stress can be defined as “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.

Occupational stress can be defined as 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 concept of Occupational stress is often confused with challenge, but these concepts are not the same. Challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and it motivates us to learn new skills and master our Occupations. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied (U.S NIOSH,1999).

Thus, challenge is an important ingredient for healthy and productive work. The importance of challenge in our work lives is probably what people are referring to when they say, “a little bit of stress is good for you. Occupational stress is that which derives specifically from conditions in the work place. These may either cause stress initially or aggravate the stress already present from other sources. In today’s typical workplace, stress is seen as becoming increasingly more common. People appear to be working longer hours, taking on higher level of responsibilities and exerting themselves even more strenuously to meet rising expectations about Occupational performance. Competition is sharp. There is always someone else ready to “step into one’s shoes” should one be found wanting.

United States National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health has defined workplace stress as “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.”



It simply means that workplace stress generally arises when there is a mismatch between the nature or magnitude of the job to be done and the employee desires and capabilities. Further, the definition also categorizes workplace stress into physical stress and psychological or emotional stress.

Employee stress can be managed more effectively if identified and tackled at an early stage. It has been observed that when an individual experiences stress, there would be visible changes in his physical health and also in his emotional behavior. Some of the common signs of stress are listed below:

- Increased irritation
- Depression
- Loss of interest in the job/ feeling of boredom in the job
- Frequent fights with the colleagues
- Withdrawal from social life
- Increased number of mistakes in any work done
- Frequent headaches
- Disturbed sleeping and eating patterns
- Aggravated health disorders such as - Asthma, ulcers, skin allergies and cardiac problems

When these signs are noticed in an individual, the individual is most probably a victim of stress. In order to combat employee stress, it is very important to know the reasons behind employee stress. It is only when there is evidence of specific stressors that one can think of eliminating them.

PHYSICAL STRESSORS

It has been found that poor working conditions at the workplace result in physical stress among employees. The physical stressors include - poor lighting, improper ventilation, high level of humidity, unsuitable temperatures at workplace etc. In addition to the physical comforts at the workplace, excessively long working hours, excessive work load, deadline pressures and stringent rules and regulations also exert the employees and have a very harmful impact on them.

Further, when employees are denied short-breaks during their work hours, they tend to feel more stressed up. One would be mistaken if he/she understands that physical stress at the work place is limited to a manufacturing or a field job scenario. Computerization at the workplace has brought in many computer related health hazards to desk jobs. It has been observed that individuals working in the IT industry are more susceptible to ailments related to muscles, eyes etc.

Extensive usage of computer leads to various muscle related ailments in employees, especially those in the IT industry. It has been found that employees working continuously on a computer were exposed to musculoskeletal disorders. Musculoskeletal disorders are caused by overuse of muscles, tendons and nerves. While working on computers, we tend to overuse our fingers and wrist, which lead to these problems. However, most of the employees do not know the real reason behind the inflammation and pain in the muscles related to the fingers and wrist. Further, improper chairs and incorrect height of tables might also lead to pain in the back and the neck of the employees. Employees working on computers are also prone to disorders related to eyes and vision.

PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESSORS

Physical stressors impact an individual even psychologically. For instance, long working hours without the required breaks would make a person tired and demotivated and a sense of helplessness creeps in. This would lead to frustration and eventually, psychological stress. Psychological stressors include - unfriendly work environment, monotonous job, problems in the social/external environment, job insecurity, problems with colleagues or immediate superiors, lack of proper balance between work and home, external factors in the industry, unsuitable work culture in the organization etc.

It has been found that when employees feel they don't have any control on their job or work they are doing, a sense of helplessness seeps into their mindset, leading to depression. Further, when the relations among employees are strained, it also exerts negative influence on the employees' attitude and their job. One more important factor that puts employees under psychological strain is unrealistic deadlines. If the deadlines at work decided by superiors are unrealistic or beyond the employee's capabilities, it would put the employee under stress to perform, affecting his overall health.

NIOSH APPROACH TO OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

On the basis of experience and research, NIOSH favors the view that working conditions play a primary role in causing Occupational stress. However, the role of individual factors is not ignored. According to the NIOSH view, exposure to



stressful working conditions (called Occupational stressors) can have a direct influence on worker safety and health. Individual and other situational factors can intervene to strengthen or weaken this influence. The need to care for her ill mother is an increasingly common example of an individual or situational factor that may intensify the effects of stressful working conditions. Examples of individual and situational factors that can help to reduce the effects of stressful working conditions include the following:

- Balance between work and family or personal life
- A support network of friends and coworkers
- A relaxed and positive outlook

CAUSES OF OCCUPATIONAL STRESS

Nearly everyone agrees that Occupational stress results from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. Views differ, however, on the importance of worker characteristics versus working conditions as the primary cause of Occupational stress. These differing viewpoints are important because they suggest different ways to prevent stress at work. According to one school of thought, differences in individual characteristics such as personality and coping style are most important in predicting whether certain Occupational conditions will result in stress. In other words, what is stressful for one person may not be a problem for someone else? This viewpoint leads to prevention strategies that focus on workers and ways to help them cope with demanding Occupational conditions. Although the importance of individual differences cannot be ignored, scientific evidence suggests that certain working conditions are stressful to most people viz the excessive workload demands and conflicting expectations. Such evidence argues for a greater emphasis on working conditions as the key source of Occupational stress, and for Occupational redesign as a primary prevention strategy.

Job stress has been associated with poor mental and physical health. Job stress may be caused by a complex set of reasons. Some of the most visible causes of workplace stress are:

Job Insecurity

Organized workplaces are going through metamorphic changes under intense economic transformations and consequent pressures. Reorganizations, takeovers, mergers, downsizing and other changes have become major stressors for employees, as companies try to live up to the competition to survive. These reformations have put demand on everyone.

High Demand for Performance

Unrealistic expectations, especially in the time of corporate reorganizations, which, sometimes, puts unhealthy and unreasonable pressures on the employee, can be a tremendous source of stress and suffering. Increased workload, extremely long work hours and intense pressure to perform at peak levels all the time for the same pay, can actually leave employees physically and emotionally drained. Excessive travel and too much time away from family also contribute to an employee's stressors.

Technology

The expansion of technology—computers, PDA's, cell phones, fax machines and the Internet—has resulted in heightened expectations for productivity, speed and efficiency, increasing pressure on the individual worker to constantly operate at peak performance levels. Workers working with heavy machinery are under constant stress to remain alert. In this case both the worker and their family members live under constant mental stress. There is also the constant pressure to keep up with technological breakthroughs and improvisations, forcing employees to learn new things all the times.

Workplace Culture

Adjusting to the workplace culture, whether in a new company or not, can be intensely stressful. Making one adapt to the various aspects of workplace culture such as communication patterns, hierarchy, dress code if any, workspace and most importantly working and behavioral patterns of the boss as well as the co-workers, can be a lesson of life. Maladjustment to workplace cultures may lead to subtle conflicts with colleagues or even with superiors. In many cases office politics or gossips can be major stress inducers.

Personal or Family Problems

Employees going through personal or family problems tend to carry their worries and anxieties to the workplace. When one is in a depressed mood, his unfocused attention or lack of motivation affects his ability to carry out job responsibilities.

Job Stress and Women

Women may suffer from mental and physical harassment at workplaces, apart from the common job stress. Sexual harassment in workplace has been a major source of worry for women, since long. Women may suffer from tremendous



stress such as 'hostile work environment harassment', which is defined in legal terms as 'offensive or intimidating behavior in the workplace'. This can consist of unwelcome verbal or physical conduct. These can be a constant source of tension for women in job sectors. Also, subtle discriminations at workplaces, family pressure and societal demands add to these stress factors.

Uncertainty in workplace can cause high levels of stress. Lack of information or the actions of other people can negatively affect your ability to perform. Causes of uncertainty can be:

- Not having a clear idea of what the future holds
- Not knowing where your organization will be going
- Not having any career development plans
- Not knowing what will be wanted from you in the future
- Not knowing what your boss or colleagues think of your abilities
- Receiving vague or inconsistent instructions

All sorts of things can cause stress: your commute, daily concerns like relationships and money matters, and occasional events such as bereavement and moving house. Stressful aspects of the workplace include:

- a poor physical working environment;
- excessive working time and workload;
- internal politics;
- Excessive bureaucracy.
- Lack of Role Clarity

These issues arise in workplace everywhere but schools and universities can be particularly stressful places to work. Reports suggest that levels of stress in the education sector are well above the average for industry and society in general. Teachers and lecturers are subject to additional pressures such as:

- low public esteem;
- increasingly difficult parents and students;
- inspections; and
- Lack of control over the job.

SYMPTOMS OF WORK-RELATED STRESS

Defining a clear link between occupational causes, and the resulting symptoms is much harder for a condition such as stress than it is for a disease such as Mesothelioma (which is only caused by exposure to asbestos). Because many of the symptoms of stress are general - such as increased anxiety or irritability - it is easy for them to be ascribed to a characteristic of the worker, rather than to a condition of the work. However, there is mounting scientific and medical evidence that certain types of work and work organisation do have a measurable and verifiable impact on the health of workers. The range of symptoms includes the following:

Physical Symptoms, Mental Health Symptoms, Psychological Symptoms, Asthma, Irritability, Smoking, Ulcers, Depression, Heavy drinking, Heart disease, Anxiety, Eating Disorders, Diabetes, Burn out, Increased sickness Thyroid disorders, Withdrawal, Low self esteem, etc.,

Symptoms

The signs of job stress vary from person to person, depending on the particular situation, how long the individual has been subjected to the stressors, and the intensity of the stress itself. Typical symptoms of job stress can be:

- Insomnia
- Loss of mental concentration,
- Anxiety
- Absenteeism
- Depression,
- Substance abuse,
- Extreme anger and frustration,
- Family conflict
- Physical illnesses such as heart disease, migraine, headaches, stomach problems, and back problems.

You may believe you can simply work through your stress and recover when life calms down. In reality, stress will undermine your ability to get things done and can affect your physical and mental health. There are three groups of symptoms:



Physical Symptoms

- Sleep is disturbed and less restful.
- Complaints of general aches and pains may sound petty, but people living with stress often find aches lasting longer and developing into tense muscles and a general lethargy.
- Headaches and migraines become more frequent.
- You can become more susceptible to colds and flu.
- In the longer term, you may be at greater risk of heart attacks and stroke.

Mental and Emotional Symptoms

- You may find yourself often irritable and withdrawn.
- You may find it hard to maintain your concentration, and become increasingly forgetful.
- Anxiety and depression are conditions also commonly associated with stress.

Behavioural Symptoms

- You may increase your consumption of stimulants such as alcohol and nicotine.
- Your eating habits may change frequently.
- You can become less reliable – less punctual, more often absent from work or more accident-prone.
- Personal relations can become strained, often for no apparent reason.
- In isolation, these symptoms may be relatively minor but if you are experiencing a number of them, now may be a good time to attempt to identify the cause.

Strategies for combating Job Stress

Two key points

1. Job stress has multiple causes, and so has to have multiple solutions
2. Interventions with the individual worker alone will not solve the problems of occupational stress. Organizational change also has to occur.

Three levels of change

1. Individual
2. Small groups
3. Organizational / Structural

A well designed stress reduction program addresses all three levels. But note again, of the three, the organizational level is by far the most important.

Personal Intervention Strategies: these strategies are designed to help the individual employee cope more effectively with stress. Examples include

- Diet
- Exercise
- Cognitive techniques
- Assertiveness training
- Eap programs
- Relaxation training

Small group interventions

These strategies are intended to help workers develop more social support both on the job and at home. Examples include

- Supervisory training
- Family counseling
- Team building
- Sensitivity training around racism and sexism

Structural or organizational change

These strategies are directed towards improving the conditions of work. Examples include:

- Modifying shifts
- Reducing physical hazards
- Improving career ladders
- Modifying the use of training and technology
- Job rotation and enrichment
- Increasing skill levels
- Worker decision making



CONCLUSION

For all of us, every day seems to be full of stress. Stress has become an unavoidable part of modern lifestyle. Stress is the root cause of almost all health problems. Stress management exercises, which mainly include time management, breathing or relaxation techniques, offer wings to your stress so that it flies away. These exercises can hold back the stress from taking a toll mentally, physically and emotionally. When you are stressed, you believe that everything is emergency. The exercises for stress management can help you deal with stress before stress deals with you. Instead of erupting a fierce debate over 'life and stress', it is better to learn various types of exercises for stress management.

Stress is an inevitable part of our corporate lives. Due to stress, there can be many different health and psychological issues, which may adversely affect our personal lives as well. Stress may also hold us back from making use of our professional skills and abilities to their fullest. Considering all the bad results of stress, companies are conducting various programs and trainings regarding stress management at the workplace. With some stress management tips and techniques, it is possible to reduce the amount of stress, without lowering the amount of work done and productivity shown. There are some simple techniques that will help you get your attention away from stress, thus making you less stressed out.

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