
**STRESS AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTH- STRATEGIES FOR
REDUCING STRESS**

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ABSTRACT

Modern life is full of hassles, deadlines, frustrations, and demands. For many people, stress is so commonplace that it has become a way of life. Stress isn't always bad. In small doses, it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But when you're constantly running in emergency mode, your mind and body pay the price. You can protect yourself by recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress and taking steps to reduce its harmful effects. Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. When you sense danger—whether it's real or imagined—the body's defenses kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the “fight-or-flight-or-freeze” reaction, or the stress response. The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. In emergency situations, stress can save your life—giving you extra strength to defend yourself, for example, or spurring you to slam on the brakes to avoid an accident.

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STRESS

The stress response also helps you rise to meet challenges. Stress is what keeps you on your toes during a presentation at work, sharpens your concentration when you're attempting the game-winning free throw, or drives you to study for an exam when you'd rather be watching TV.

But beyond a certain point, stress stops being helpful and starts causing major damage to your health, your mood, your productivity, your relationships, and your quality of life.

“Sometimes it's important to work for that pot of gold. But other times it's essential to take time off & to make sure that your most important decision in the day simply consists of choosing which color to slide down on the rainbow.”

Douglas Pagels, These are the gifts I'd like to give to you Today workplace stress is becoming a major issue & a matter of concern for the employees & the organizations. It has become a part of life for the employees, as life today has become so complex at home as well as outside that is impossible to avoid stress. Experts opine that stress is the main cause for all the problems of the modern world that affects both individuals & organizational health.

In the present day competitive world, all service organizations recognize that stress management is a very essential & important tool for achieving the bottom line growth. Organizations have to pay a very heavy price for stress because it affects the productivity due to increased absenteeism, sick leave, medical costs % high turnover. Indeed, recruiting & retaining employees are the major challenges for any organization today. Hence the employer should provide stress free environment to the employees. He must organize stress management programs at the workplace, which should deal with the employee's physical & mental well-being.

According to Douglas:

“Stress is defined as a any action or situation that places special physical or psychological demands upon a person.”

According to Van Fleet(1988):

“Stress is caused when a person is subjected to unusual situations, demands, extreme expectations or pressures that are difficult to handle.”

Workplace stress can be defined as the most harmful physical & emotional responses that occur within a human being when the requirements of the job do not match his capabilities, resources, or even needs. Some experts argue that moderate amount of both physical & mental stress is required for a normal & healthy growth. A little degree of stress at workplace energizes the

employees psychologically & physically, as it motivates them to learn new skills & master their jobs resulting in increased productivity. The problem arises only when stress is not managed properly.

Excessive workplace stress will affect the employee's motivation & health leading to lack of interest in job, reduced productivity, more incidences of sickness, frequent absence & poor morale of the employees. Stress also affects the growth & profit of any organization. The direct cost of the stress in the organization is frequent absence of employees, replacement of the staff, loss of the service, or the production time. The indirect cost of stress in the organization is reduced productivity, low morale, less innovation, lower customer service, increased errors, high staff turnover, increased recruitment cost, poor time keeping, & more health insurance costs.

STAGES OF STRESS

Normally, stress does not affect the body all of a sudden; it slowly penetrates into the system till the entire system is thrown out of the gear. So the employees should identify the symptoms of stress & take appropriate treatment in the initial stage itself. Experts have classified stress into three different stages such as

1. Alarm stage
2. Resistance stage
3. Exhaustion stage

Alarm stage:

This is the initial stage when the employees start feeling the stress & then, as the pressure gradually increases the body prepares to challenge it. The body undergoes various physiological changes including muscle tension & increased heart & breathing rates. At this stage, it is very difficult for the body to sustain for a long time due to more physical activities. The signs of stress at this stage are continuous irritability & anxiety, sleeplessness/restlessness, & inability to concentrate.

Resistance Stage:

In this stage, the employee refuses to accept the stressor & at the same time attempts to find suitable ways to control stress. In this stage, the pressure will start dropping from high level. The employee explains to the boss the hurdles in the task & what will be expected outcome from the task. Once the solution is found, the body stress level moves to the exhaustion stage. If solution is not found, high pressure will continue & the employee will be affected by emotional problems

that lead to burnout. If the employees see the task as a challenge, the burnout will not take place. The signs in the resistance stage are absenteeism or slowness of work, tired & exhausted for no reason, social withdrawal with pessimism, angry, indifferent, defiant, increased use of coffee, alcohol, tobacco, etc.

Exhaustion Stage:

In this stage of the stress, the employee will be affected psychologically, physically, & emotionally leading to stress related illness. The signs stress in this stage are continuous sadness or depression, continuous mental & physical fatigue, continuous stress related illness like headache, stomachache, bowel problems, etc. A feeling of loneliness gives room for self-destructive thoughts that is highly dangerous.

The Different Kinds of Stress

Stress management can be complicated and confusing because there are different types of stress-- acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress -- each with its own characteristics, symptoms, duration, and treatment approaches.

Stress is generally a response to one's environment and/or set of circumstances. Some stress may have physiological roots which can be determined by physical examination. However, most stress is manageable with changes in lifestyle, developing new patterns of thinking as well as diet and exercise. Unmanaged, stress can be extremely damaging both physically and psychologically.

Frequently stress is related to our perception of our lives and life situation. While we may have busy or demanding lives, it is often our view of our lives that dictates our level of stress. It has been shown that it is not our situation itself that causes stress, it is our perception of our situation. Our perception of our situation may not reflect the reality of our situation. Stress can be therefore be effectively managed by changing our thought processes or altering how we view things.

Acute Stress

Acute stress is the most common form of stress. It comes from demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Acute stress is thrilling and exciting in small doses, but too much is exhausting. A fast run down a challenging ski slope, for example, is exhilarating early in the day. That same ski run late in the day is taxing and wearing. Skiing beyond your limits can lead to falls and broken bones. By the same token, overdoing on

short-term stress can lead to psychological distress, tension headaches, upset stomach, or other symptoms.

Fortunately, acute stress symptoms are recognized by most people. It's a laundry list of what has gone awry in their lives: the auto accident that crumpled the car fender, the loss of an important contract, a deadline they're rushing to meet, their child's occasional problems at school, and so on.

Because it is short term, acute stress doesn't have enough time to do the extensive damage associated with long-term stress. The most common symptoms are:

1. Emotional distress--some combination of anger or irritability, anxiety, and depression, the three stress emotions;
2. Muscular problems including tension headache, back pain, jaw pain, and the muscular tensions that lead to pulled muscles and tendon and ligament problems;.
3. Stomach, gut and bowel problems such as heartburn, acid stomach, flatulence, diarrhea, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome;
4. Transient over arousal leads to elevation in blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, dizziness, migraine headaches, cold hands or feet, shortness of breath, chest pain.

Episodic Acute Stress

There are those, however, who suffer acute stress frequently, whose lives are so disordered that they are studies in chaos and crisis. They're always in a rush, but always late. If something can go wrong, it does. They take on too much, have too many irons in the fire, and can't organize the slew of self-inflicted demands and pressures clamoring for their attention. They seem perpetually in the clutches of acute stress.

It is common for people with acute stress reactions to be over aroused, short-tempered, irritable, anxious, and tense. Often, they describe themselves as having "a lot of nervous energy." Always in a hurry, they tend to be abrupt, and sometimes their irritability comes across as hostility. Interpersonal relationships deteriorate rapidly when others respond with real hostility. The work becomes a very stressful place for them.

The cardiac prone, "Type A" personality described by cardiologists, Meter Friedman and Ray Rosenman, is similar to an extreme case of episodic acute stress. Type A's have an "excessive competitive drive, aggressiveness, impatience, and a harrying sense of time urgency." In addition

there is a "freefloating, but well-rationalized form of hostility, and almost always a deep-seated insecurity." Such personality characteristics would seem to create frequent episodes of acute stress for the Type A individual. Friedman and Rosenman found Type A's to be much more likely to develop coronary heart disease than Type B's, who show an opposite pattern of behavior.

Another form of episodic acute stress comes from ceaseless worry. "Worry warts" see disaster around every corner and pessimistically forecast catastrophe in every situation. The world is a dangerous, unrewarding, punitive place where something awful is always about to happen. These "awfulizers" also tend to be over aroused and tense, but are more anxious and depressed than angry and hostile.

The symptoms of episodic acute stress are the symptoms of extended over arousal: persistent tension headaches, migraines, hypertension, chest pain, and heart disease. Treating episodic acute stress requires intervention on a number of levels, generally requiring professional help, which may take many months.

Often, lifestyle and personality issues are so ingrained and habitual with these individuals that they see nothing wrong with the way they conduct their lives. They blame their woes on other people and external events. Frequently, they see their lifestyle, their patterns of interacting with others, and their ways of perceiving the world as part and parcel of who and what they are.

Sufferers can be fiercely resistant to change. Only the promise of relief from pain and discomfort of their symptoms can keep them in treatment and on track in their recovery program.

Chronic Stress

While acute stress can be thrilling and exciting, chronic stress is not. This is the grinding stress that wears people away day after day, year after year. Chronic stress destroys bodies, minds and lives. It wreaks havoc through long-term attrition. It's the stress of poverty, of dysfunctional families, of being trapped in an unhappy marriage or in a despised job or career. It's the stress that the never-ending "troubles" have brought to the people of Northern Ireland, the tensions of the Middle East have brought to the Arab and Jew, and the endless ethnic rivalries that have been brought to the people of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Chronic stress comes when a person never sees a way out of a miserable situation. It's the stress of unrelenting demands and pressures for seemingly interminable periods of time. With no hope, the individual gives up looking for solutions.

Some chronic stresses stem from traumatic, early childhood experiences that become internalized and remain forever painful and present. Some experiences profoundly affect personality. A view of the world, or a belief system, is created that causes unending stress for the individual (e.g., the world is a threatening place, people will find out you are a pretender, you must be perfect at all times). When personality or deep-seated convictions and beliefs must be reformulated, recovery requires active self-examination, often with professional help.

The worst aspect of chronic stress is that people get used to it. They forget it's there. People are immediately aware of acute stress because it is new; they ignore chronic stress because it is old, familiar, and at times almost comfortable.

Chronic stress kills through suicide, violence, heart attack, stroke, and, perhaps, even cancer. People wear down to a final, fatal breakdown. Because physical and mental resources are depleted through long-term attrition, the symptoms of chronic stress are difficult to treat and may require extended medical as well as behavioral treatment and stress management.

This information is presented for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for informed medical advice or training. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat a mental health problem without consulting a qualified health or mental health care provider. It does not matter whether or not pleasant or unpleasant things cause the stress. It does not matter whether or not it results in good or bad things. Stress is the automatic state that results when the body is told to make changes in order to adapt to any demand.

How Does Stress Affect Health?

The human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can be positive, keeping us alert and ready to avoid danger. Stress becomes negative when a person faces continuous challenges without relief or relaxation between challenges. As a result, the person becomes overworked and stress-related tension builds.

Stress that continues without relief can lead to a condition called distress -- a negative stress reaction. Distress can lead to physical symptoms including headaches, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, chest pain, and problems sleeping. Research suggests that stress also can bring on or worsen certain symptoms or diseases.

Stress also becomes harmful when people use alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to try to relieve their stress. Unfortunately, instead of relieving the stress and returning the body to a relaxed state,

these substances tend to keep the body in a stressed state and cause more problems. Consider the following:

- Forty-three percent of all adults suffer adverse health effects from stress.
- Seventy-five percent to 90% of all doctor's office visits are for stress-related ailments and complaints.
- Stress can play a part in problems such as headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, arthritis, depression, and anxiety.
- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) declared stress a hazard of the workplace. Stress costs American industry more than \$300 billion annually.
- The lifetime prevalence of an emotional disorder is more than 50%, often due to chronic, untreated stress reactions.

Strategies for reducing stress include:

- **Identify what's causing stress.** Monitor your state of mind throughout the day. If you feel stressed, write down the cause, your thoughts and your mood. Once you know what's bothering you, develop a plan for addressing it. That might mean setting more reasonable expectations for yourself and others or asking for help with household responsibilities, job assignments or other tasks. List all your commitments, assess your priorities and then eliminate any tasks that are not absolutely essential.
- **Build strong relationships.** Relationships can be a source of stress. Research has found that negative, hostile reactions with your spouse cause immediate changes in stress-sensitive hormones, for example. But relationships can also serve as stress buffers. Reach out to family members or close friends and let them know you're having a tough time. They may be able to offer practical assistance and support, useful ideas or just a fresh perspective as you begin to tackle whatever's causing your stress.
- **Walk away when you're angry.** Before you react, take time to regroup by counting to 10. Then reconsider. Walking or other physical activities can also help you work off steam. Plus, exercise increases the production of endorphins, your body's natural mood-booster. Commit to a daily walk or other form of exercise — a small step that can make a big difference in reducing stress levels.
- **Rest your mind.** According to APA's 2012 Stress in America survey, stress keeps more than 40 percent of adults lying awake at night. To help ensure you get the recommended

seven or eight hours of shut-eye, cut back on caffeine, remove distractions such as television or computers from your bedroom and go to bed at the same time each night. Research shows that activities like yoga and relaxation exercises not only help reduce stress, but also boost immune functioning.

- **Get help.** If you continue to feel overwhelmed, consult with a psychologist or other licensed mental health professional who can help you learn how to manage stress effectively. He or she can help you identify situations or behaviors that contribute to your chronic stress and then develop an action plan for changing them.

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