

UNDERSTANDING STRESS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stress is a very common term among us. At a quick glance, being under stress is quite synonymous with being under pressure. But, is it? Have we ever felt like there is so much to do in very little time? Have we ever felt burned out? Have we ever experienced physical, mental and emotional fatigue? If we have, then these situations are normal in a working environment. Sometimes there is nothing left in us to make the extra effort. However, sometimes we have no problem in finding the extra "uumph" to go the mile. Basically, these are the situations and conditions stress can do to us. Stress can be constructive and, at the same time, can be destructive.

Stress is closely related to one's profession. Physicians, surgeons, office managers and air traffic controllers usually face a great deal of stress whereas farmers, craft workers, and college professors face relatively low levels of stress. In later parts of this paper we will discuss how stress can be handled individually and organisationally.

The main objective of this paper is to bring us closer towards the understanding of stress. The fact is, stress is a part of life that cannot be denied. Whether we like it or not, we constantly undergo stress. The only difference is the degree of severity of stress. The level of stress will vary from time to time. Therefore, the understanding of stress will assist us in managing and coping with stress more effectively. Hence, enhancing the level of performance and productivity.

2. WHAT IS STRESS?

Physicists may have their own definition of stress. However, we are more interested in defining stress from a behaviourist's standpoint. **Stress** results in a certain pattern of physiological changes such as gastrointestinal, glandular and cardiovascular disorders. In a more simplified version, stress can be defined as a state of tension experienced by individuals facing extraordinary demands, constraints and opportunities; collectively known as stressors - the sources of pressure and tension that cause stress.

The physiological changes induced by these stressors will result in excessive flow of the hormone called adrenalin which consequently causing physical and psychological changes. These changes will subsequently influence performance. However, the influence could be either constructive or destructive. Consider figure 1.

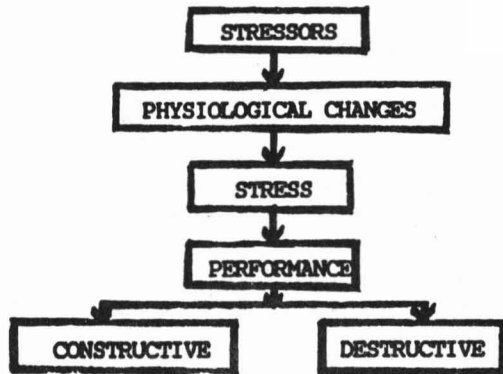
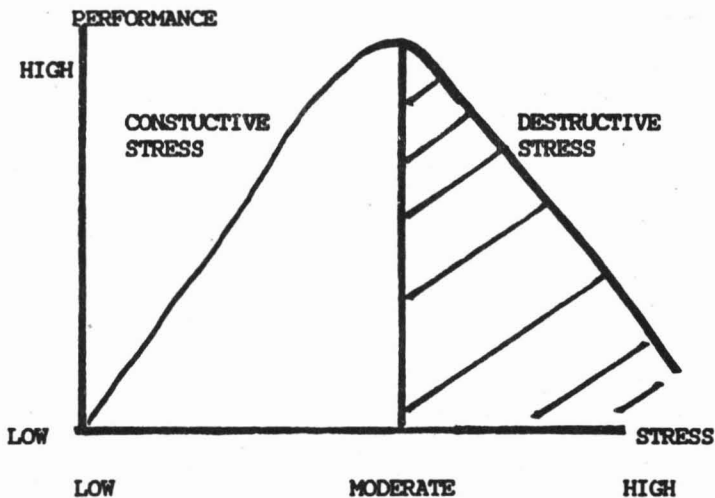


FIGURE 1. THE FLOW OF STRESS.

3. STRESS AND PERFORMANCE

Earlier, I have mentioned how stress affects performance. It was also pointed out that there are two types of stress namely; constructive and destructive stress. Consider figure 2



Constructive stress acts in a positive way for the individuals and/or the organisations. In order to bring the best out of individuals it is vital to identify the right stimulus in such a way to inflict the desired level of constructive stress. The formulation and identification of organisational goals and objectives is an

example of inflicting constructive stress into our subordinates/employees. Athletes constantly set long and short term objectives in their training program so as to “supply” them the right amount of constructive stress. Another example of constructive stress is by continuously assessing student’s performance so that the stress created will serve as a catalyst towards achievement.

Destructive stress, on the other hand, is dysfunctional for the individual and/or the organisation. Whereas low to moderate levels of stress can elevate performance, excessively high stress can overload and breakdown a person’s physical and mental systems which consequently will lead to individual and/or organisational burnout and morale deterioration. Ridiculous datelines, irrational expectations and impractical demands may contribute to excessive stress. Hence, too much stress will not enhance performance but will only hinder and frustrate personal development and organisational growth.

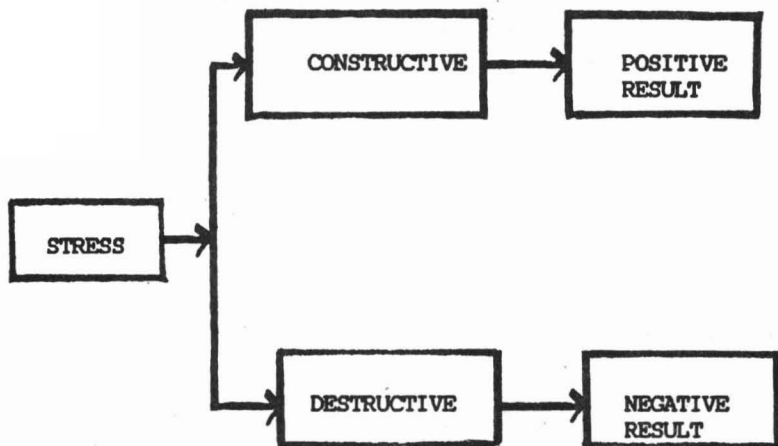


FIGURE 3. TWO TYPES OF STRESS.

CAUSES OF STRESS.

Basically, we have named three common stressors which are demand, opportunities and constraints. In addition, Mansfred Kets de Vries identified three categories of factors (stressors) which contribute to stress:

- i) The organisation’s design; including its physical environment, technology and role pressures

- ii) Interpersonal variables such as leadership style and extent of group cohesion and participation and
- iii) Individual career characteristics, such as occupational level, career stage, and stage of adult development.¹

Role conflicts is also a major source of stress. Role conflict arises when individuals are not able to do what they want to do or having to do things they do not want to do, do not believe in, or cannot do.

Role ambiguity, too, is a major source of stress. When an individual has insufficient information about his job or role, he is said to be experiencing stress due to role ambiguity. Kahn and his associates suggest that role holders must know:-

- a) the expectations of others
- b) the activities which fulfill these expectation and how best to perform them
- c) the potential consequences of performing or not performing the activities
- d) the kinds of behaviour which will be rewarded or punished
- e) the nature and likelihood of rewards and punishment
- f) the kinds of behaviours that will satisfy or frustrate the individual's personal needs.²

In addition to role conflicts and role ambiguity, a variety of aspects of the work environment can cause stress. These include:³

a) **Responsibility for others.**

The who must work other people, motivate them, and make decisions, that will affect their careers experience more stress than those who do not have such responsibilities.

1. M. Kets de Vries, **Organisational Stress: A Call for Management Action**, *Sloan Management Review* 21 (1979): 3-14.
2. The discussion of roles is based, in large part, R. L. Kahn, D. M. Wolfe, R. P. Quinn and J. D. Snoek, **Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity**, New York: John Wiley 1964.
3. Stoner, James A. F; Wankel, Charles; **Management**; Prentice-Hall International Edition, 1986 pg. 536.

b) Lack of participation in decisions.

People who feel that they are not involved in decisions that influence their jobs experience relatively high levels of stress.

c) Performance evaluations or appraisal.

Having one's performance evaluated can be stressful, especially when it affects one's job or income.

d) Working conditions.

Crowded, noisy, or otherwise uncomfortable working conditions can be a source to stress.

e) Change within an organisation.

Stress can result from any major change within an organisation - an alteration in company policy, a reorganisation, or a change in leadership for example.

5. EFFECTS OF STRESS

Effects of stress caused by stressors can be classified into two classes namely individual and organisational stress reactions.

5.1 Individual Stress Reactions.

a) Cardiovascular Reactions.

- high blood pressure
- hypertension
- elevated serum cholesterol
- rapid heart beat
- coronaries.

b) Gastrointestinal reactions.

- ulcer
- colitis

c) Allergy-Respiratory Reactions

- asthma
- skin disorders

d) Oral Reactions

- alcoholism
- obesity
- "pill-popping"
- excessive smoking
- excessive coffee drinking

e) Emotional Distress Reactions.

- depression
- suicide
- agitation
- insomnia
- job tension

5..2 Organisational Stress Reactions.

- lower job satisfaction
- job tension
- turnover
- absenteeism
- strikes
- accident proneness
- output problem (quality and quantity)

6. COPING WITH STRESS

6.1 Individual strategies.

Undoubtedly, some individuals and/or organisation manage stress effectively. While others don't. Some individuals excel under stress while others breakdown. There are some techniques that individuals and organisations can practise in order to reduce stress. A comprehensive approach spelling out the word **COPE**, however, has helped many deal constructively with stress.

control the situation
open to others
pace yourself
exercise and relax.⁴

4. Kreitner, Robert; **Management Third Edition; Houghton Mifflin and Company 1986, A7.**

a) Control the situation

- avoid unrealistic deadlines
- do your best, but know your limits. You cannot be everything to everyone.
- learn to identify and limit your exposure to stressful situations and people.

Open to others

freely discuss your problems, frustrations, and sources of uptightness, with those who care about you.

- when faced with a tough situation, smile! a sincere smile often can defuse emotion and build a bridge a goodwill.
- develop social support networks. Individuals who have the support of and loved ones experience fewer symptoms of stress than do those without social support.

c) Pace Yourself

- plan your day on a flexible basis.
- don't try to do two or more things at the same time.
- counter unproductive haste by forcing yourself to slow down.
- think before reacting
- live on a day-to-day basis rather than on a minute-by-minute basis.

d) Exercise and relax.

- engage in regular noncompetitive physical activity (e.g. jogging, swimming and biking).
- when feeling uptight relax for a few minutes by following these simple step:-
 - i) sit comfortably with eyes closed in a quiet location.
 - ii) slowly repeat a peaceful word or phrase over and over to yourself your mind (a mental picture of a peaceful scene will also work)
 - iii) Avoid distracting thoughts by keeping a passive mental attitude. Meditation, or TM, is one popular form of meditation which involves sitting

comfortably with twice a day. Studies show TM to be related to reduce heart rate, lowered oxygen consumption, and decreased blood pressure.

6.2 ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGIES

a) **Emphasis on wellness.**

Organisations of today are giving more emphasis on employees' physical and mental strength. Maybank for example, spent millions of ringgits in order to provide recreational activities for their employees. Managers should realise that employees who are physically and mentally fit can cope with stress better compared to those who are not.

b) **Family-sensitive work program.**

Stress can also arise due to conflicting family responsibilities. Reprogramming the work schedules for example, flextime, job sharing opportunities and provisions for child care can reduce the stress.

c) **Programs to develop stress management skills.**

Many organisations are providing relaxation training, training in coping, social skills and other programs to enhance employee stress management skills.

The PSPP (Pusat Sumber Penyelidikan dan Pendidikan) of MARA Institute of Technology (ITM)) from time to time conduct courses or seminars in order to educate and train the employee of ITM hoping that employees will have adequate information to new concepts and techniques to help individuals to deal with demands, constraints and opportunities for the consistently changing environment.

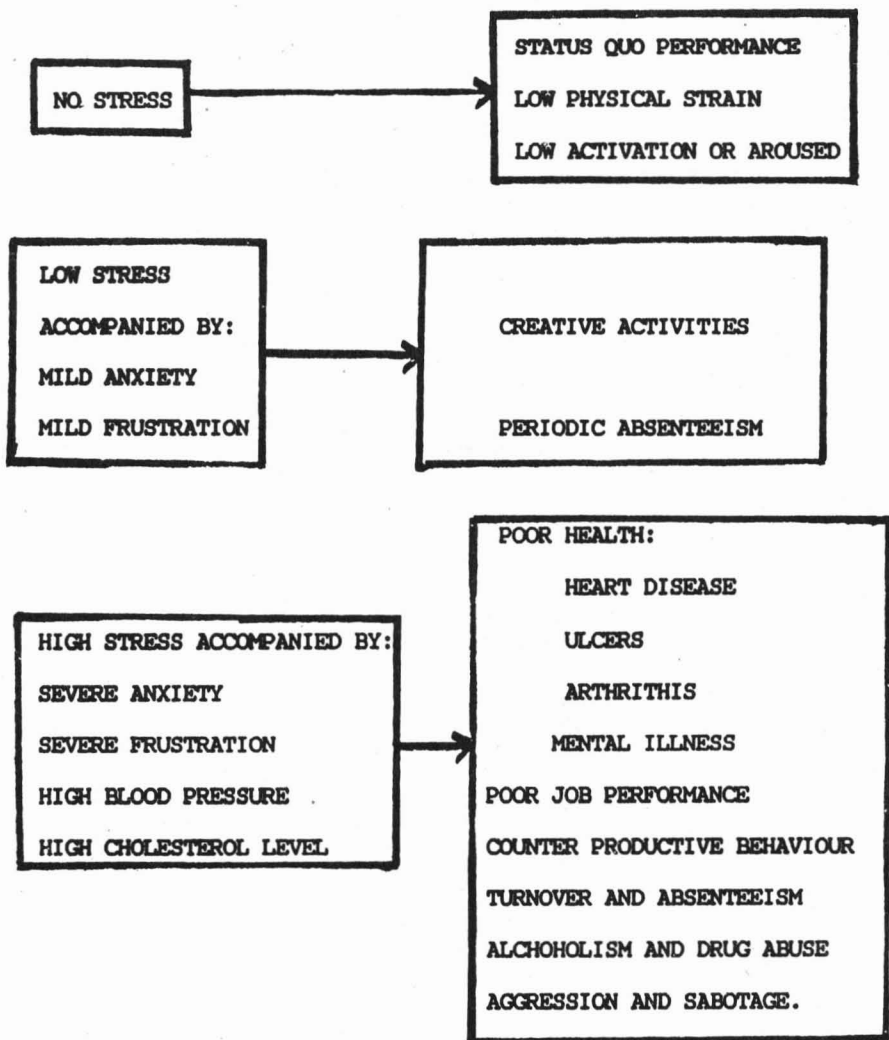
Other strategies may include

- constantly reviewing and updating the selection and placement programs and policies.
- information concerning effective career management.
- job redesign.

6.0 CONCLUSION

It is a fact that stress is a part of an individual's life and consequence of an organisation's strive for growth and excellence. Managing stress effectively from an individual's or organisation's perspective will definitely lead to encouraging and favourable results.

To sum things up, the following are the consequences of work-related stress.⁵



5. Daft, Richard L.; Steers, Richard M.; *Organisations - A Micro ♦ Macro Approach*; Scott, Foreman and Company; 1986 pg. 163

In understanding the variation in stress tolerance level by individuals, Dr. Looker and Dr. Gregson in their article "Confrontation With Hairy Horrors" (Sunday Star, August 6, 1989), stated that there are basically two types of individuals: Type A and Type B individuals. Type A individuals have beliefs, attitudes and expectations that engage them in a constant struggle to gain control over their environment. Type B individuals, on the other hand, are calm, content, controlled, easy-going and good listeners. In short, Type B individuals have the tendency to cope with stress better and therefore have a higher level of stress tolerance.

In conclusion, the state of mental health plays an integral role in the ability of an individual to handle or cope with stress. Kornhauser noted that: "Poor mental health occurs whenever conditions of work and life lead to continuing frustration by failing to offer means for perceived progress towards attainment of strongly desired goals which have become indispensable elements of the individual's self-esteem and dissatisfaction of life, often accompanied by anxieties, social alienation and withdrawal, a narrowing of goals and curtailing of aspirations in short poor mental health."⁶

6. *A. Kornhauser, Mental Health of Industrial Worker, New York: Wiley, 1965; pg. 225*

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6. *Extracts from "Yoga and Relaxation Exercises" conducted by En. Wan Mohamad Wan Mahmood for "Kursus Pengurusan Instruktur Kesihatan dan Kecergasan" at MARA Institute of Technology Kelantan on June 1989.*