
UNIT 15 STRESS MANAGEMENT: NATURE, CONSEQUENCES AND MANAGEMENT*

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15.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, the student should be able to:

- Understand the meaning and nature of stress management;
- Describe potential sources of stress and its consequences;
- Discuss individual and organisational approaches toward managing stress; and
- Discuss the Karmayoga approach to reduce stress.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of human resource policies and practices, the dimension of stress management has shot into prominence. Earlier studies on stress were initiated by Walter Cannon and Hans Selye who used animal studies as the basis for work-related stress (Cannon, 1939 & Selye, 1956). Their main thrust was to assess and measure the physiological responses of animals to external influences such as weather conditions including heat and cold, prolonged stay and surgical procedures. Their continued observations over a long period of time became the basis of the study of stress in human beings. Selye in his book *The Stress of Life* (1956), for example, observed that stress in human beings is the result of distinct life stressors. More traditionally, stress is associated with certain uncertainties that are experienced by an individual in his life and work. Its causes can be attributed to factors like failures, disappointments, humiliations etc. Recent evidence suggests that external factors do not have much role to play in causing stress in humans, instead their effect is the outcome of the perceptions and emotional feelings of the individuals.

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Meaning of Stress

In simple words, stress is a pressure or tension resulting from internal or external compulsion. It is something which causes mental tension or strain. Oxford Dictionary of English (Indian edition) defines stress as “a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances.”

Robbins, Judge and Sanghiteine view stress as a “dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, demand, or resource related to what the individual desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important” (Robbins, et.al., 2007). This indeed is a complicated definition.

According to Ivancevich and Matterson (1986), “Stress is the interaction of the individual with the environment. It is an adaptive response, mediated by individual differences and/or psychological process; that is a consequence of any external (environmental) action, situation or event that places excessive psychological and/or physical demands upon a person”.

Besides affecting work efficiency, stress can lead to physical discomfort, emotional strain, and relationship conflicts. Needless to emphasise, employees who are experiencing a high level of stress may become victims of depression and accidents. But so long as one works in a detached spirit, one’s mental balance is not disturbed.

15.2 NATURE OF STRESS

Some important aspects of the nature of stress are briefly discussed here.

1. *Positive and negative aspects of stress*

Working people in organisations (public as well as private) have different ways of reacting to stress. In one situation, stress (not excessive) may be a motivating factor for an employee. Although stress is analysed in terms of negative consequences, it has also some positive role to play in human life. Thus, stress can work as a healthy motivator.

Stress is an opportunity when it offers potential gain. Many professionals often see stress as a positive influence to rise to the occasion and perform at their best. They see the pressures of heavy workload as positive challenge that enhances the quality of their work and the satisfaction they get from their job. However, excessive and prolonged pressure and demands that exceed the employee’s perceived resources, capabilities and skills to cope should not be understood as a ‘healthy pressure’ or ‘good stress’ but rather as negative stress.

2. *Linkages of stress with demands and resources*

The second stress is associated with demands and resources. Demands are expressed as pressing requirements, pressures or even uncertainties that individual employees encounter in the workplaces. For example, the demand of working beyond the permissible hours, causes stress.

On the other hand, resources are means that are employed as devices for resolving the demands. When demands are not met, because of certain constraints, stress

builds up. For example an employee faces pressure of strain or tension when he undergoes annual performance review of his work or job, even though this may be good enough to get him a promotion or a higher responsibility. An extremely poor review might even result in dismissal of the person from the service. There must be uncertainty over the outcome (result). It is mentioned here that level of stress varies from one employee to another. However, unselfish performance of actions does not cause stress.

3. *Stress as an additive phenomenon*

Third, stress is regarded as an additive phenomenon (Selye, 1956). Stress builds up when each new and persistent stressor adds to an individual's stress level. So a single stressor may be relatively unimportant, but if it is added to an already high level of stress, it can cause severe tension. When we desire to analyse the total amount of stress an individual is under, we have to sum up his opportunity stresses, constraint stresses, and demand stresses. In this way, when stressors are reviewed individually stress is found to be an additive phenomenon.

15.3 SOURCES OF STRESS

What are the factors that act as potential sources of stress? In other words, we have to analyse sources that create stress for employees in the organisation. There are three categories of potential stressors: environmental, organisational, and personal. In addition to these three sets of factors, we have to understand as to what causes stress for an individual. When stress is experienced by an individual, its symptoms can appear as physiological and behavioural outcomes.

Environmental factors

There is a growing consensus that stress is caused by a dynamic interaction between the employees and their environment, and is often triggered by a variety of uncertainties. In other words, environmental factors have an important role to play in causing stress. It should be noted that all organisations (public as well as private) today confront a dynamic and changing environment. This forces these organisations to adapt or face closure problem. Economic crises (eg. stock market collapse) create economic uncertainties and shocks. When the economy is contracting, for example, people become increasingly anxious about their job security.

Likewise, political uncertainty tends to create stress among Indians working in foreign countries like the United States and Australia. Terrorism is an increasing source of environmental-induced stress in the twenty-first century. The events of 9/11 and subsequent colour-coded terror alerts have increased stress for persons working in skyscrapers. Attending large public events have heightened concerns about security in the United States.

Technological change is another environmental factor that can induce stress. With the use of mobile phones and computers, business competition has also comparatively increased considerably. However, it is realised that technological changes and innovations are a threat to several employees and cause them stress.

Organisational factors

Certain organisational factors contribute to an increase in job stress; some of these are : pressures to finish the work in a short period, increase in workload, and a demanding and insensitive boss. Individuals with more challenging jobs have less anxiety, depression and physical illness than those with less challenging jobs. Role conflict and ambiguity over job expectations also cause work-related stress. A classic structural source of stress is when the unity of command is broken and employees have to interact and deal with more than one head. Other organisational factors that cause employee stress include excessive rules and regulations, ambiguous communication and unpleasant working conditions such as extreme temperatures, poor lighting, or lack of toilet and water facilities. In addition, interpersonal demands cause unnecessary pressures by other working individuals. Such role conflicts may give rise to expectations that could be very difficult to satisfy. Further, poor social support from friends and colleagues add to stress, particularly among employees who are prone to high blood pressure.

Personal factors

Personal factors also create stress for employees. This category includes factors related to an employee’s personal life. Typically, these factors pertain to family disputes, personal, social and economic problems, personality distinctions, etc. Stress symptoms in this personal category show that individuals hold family and personal relationships exceptionally dear.

Since employees share their personal problems at the workplace, a complete understating of employee stress needs consideration of these personal issues. Some employees are economically poor and have wants that exceed their financial resources. Thus lack of financial resources is a big problem and acts as a stimulating factor for generating mental stress of the employees.

Personal factors that cause stress are lack of sleep, poor eating habits and inadequate physical exercises. Day to day challenges such as managing peer pressure, high cost of health treatment and failed relationships also force persons to remain stressed.

Check your progress 1

Note: 1) Use the space given below for your answers.

2) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. Explain the meaning and nature of stress.

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2. Discuss the sources of the stress.

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15.4 CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS

Since the 1980s, stress has been widely recognised as one of most problematic health problems. What symptoms indicate that an employee is experiencing a high level of stress? It should be noted that stress is highly individualistic phenomenon in nature. Some individuals have enough energy to tolerate stress and thrive in the face of life stressors. Certain employees do not do well in their job unless they experience the challenge of stress.

An employee who is experiencing a high level of stress may become depressed, accident prone, or argumentative. He has great difficulty in making routine decisions. Globally, stress and depression are the top causes of illness and disability. Stress symptoms can be grouped under three general categories: physiological, psychological, and behavioural (Schuler, 1980).

Physiological indications

Early research on human stress became a concern of health specialists. This research led to the conclusion that there is a link between physiological symptoms and stress. The evidence suggests that stress could lead to heart attacks, high blood pressure and changes in metabolism. But there was no clarity as to the linkage between stress and particular physiological symptoms. Traditionally, researchers concluded that there were few, if any, consistent relationship (Beehr & Newman, 1978) between them. This is attributed to the complexity of the symptoms and the difficulty of objectively measuring them. However, evidence in some studies suggests that stress may have harmful physiological effects.

Psychological indications

Psychological symptoms are of greater significance and can cause dissatisfaction and dismay. Job-related stress is a major contemporary challenge affecting occupational health and safety. Job dissatisfaction, in fact, is “the simplest and most obvious psychological effect” of stress (Beehr & Newman, 1978). Here it may be added that stress has other psychological symptoms which include tension, strain, anxiety, worry, nervousness, etc. Evidence also suggests that when employees are asked to do jobs in which there is role ambiguity, stress and discontent increase.

Behavioural symptoms

Much of the present-day concern with stress has been directed at behavioural symptoms. Behaviour-related stress shows also in a number of ways. Stress symptoms or outcomes in this category include changes in productivity and turnover, changes in eating habits, increased smoking or consumption of alcohol, rapid speech and sleep disorders (Cropanzano, Rupp & Byran, 2003). Research on stress-performance relationship suggests that some stress is necessary for optimal performance, but too much stress can have negative consequences, including lower performance.

15.5 MANAGING STRESS

Many approaches and techniques have been developed and applied in the domain of stress analysis. More recently, research has been conducted on the prevention of stress and its management. A number of self-help approaches to stress-prevention and resilience-building have been developed, drawing mainly on the theory and practice of cognitive-behavioural therapy (Robertson, 2012).

Meaning of stress management and its approaches

Before we discuss the approaches that deal with the managerial aspects of stress, the term ‘stress management’ requires a definition. It is defined as “a wide spectrum of techniques and psychotherapies aimed at controlling a person’s level of stress, especially chronic stress,” usually for the purpose of improving everyday functioning (from Wikipedia). This definition is quite comprehensive and includes negative as well as positive consequences of stress. In the terminology advocated by Hans Selye, ‘eustress’, is a stress whose consequences are helpful. Stress management and prevention must involve the development of strategies that comprehensively address the antecedents of work stress (psychological and organisational hazards) and their effects on employee health.

With a view to developing an effective stress management strategy, it is necessary first to identify the factors that are vital to a person controlling his stress, and to identify the intervention techniques which effectively target these factors. Lazarus and Folkman’s explanation of stress focuses on the transaction between people and their external environment known as the ‘Transactional Model’. This model maintains that stress may not act as stressor if a person does not see the stressor as a threat but rather as a positive or challenge stress. However, the stress effect is reversed once stress is handled properly.

There are a few approaches that a manager or administrator can consider with a view to reducing stress levels.

Individual approaches

Individual approaches to addressing job stress have been influenced by J.E. Newman and T.A. Beeh. Under these approaches, an employee can resort to individual strategies that have proven effective. These, among others, comprise time management techniques, increasing physical exercises and the social support network.

Under the individual approaches, time management techniques are of considerable importance. In this context, an understating and use of basic time management principles can help individuals overcome anxiety and strain. Some important time-management maxims are: “(i) making daily lists of activities to be accomplished; (ii) prioritising activities as per importance and urgency; (iii) scheduling activities according to the priorities set; and (iv) knowing one’s daily cycle and handling the most demanding parts of job during the high part of cycle when one is most alert and productive” (Tracy, 2004).

Physical exercises also, to a large extent, reduce stress levels. Exercises such as running, walking, jogging, swimming, and riding a bicycle have long been resorted to and suggested by physicians as ways to deal with strain and stress.

Personal tension that causes stress can be reduced through methods such as meditation and pranayama. The point is to gain a state of deep relaxation in which one feels physically and mentally detached from the immediate environment. Deep relaxation for 15 to 20 minutes a day releases tension and produces in man a sense of detachment. Focussed, rhythmic monosyllabic vibrations, when internalised, can augment positive energy that reduces stress.

Stress levels can also be brought down through social support network. Evidence suggests that having friends, family, or work colleagues play a catalyst role in reducing stress. As a matter of fact social support network works as a means for stress reduction. Employee counselling can also provide stress relief.

Organisational approaches

An organisation can take responsibility for reducing stress levels. Management strategies that have proven effective in this respect include improved personnel policies, specifically relating to recruitment, training and placement. Emphasis has to be given to increased employee involvement, improved organisational communication, more employee sabbaticals, establishment of corporate wellness programmes and clubs for recreation.

Effective organisational communication plays an important role in moderating the stress-response relationship. It is a means to shape employee perceptions. It reduces uncertainty by lessening role-ambiguity and role conflict.

In organisations, particularly in the private sector, certain jobs are more stressful than others, but it is found that employees differ in their response to stressful situations. In general, employees with a little experience succumb to stress conditions. It is important that personnel policies take into account recruitment and placement of individuals. With training and advanced courses, individual's capability and self-efficacy can increase and can lessen job-related stress.

Employees do better when they have specific and challenging tasks and get adequate feedback on how well they are progressing. Specific goals can reduce stress to a large extent. Further, goal feedback not only reduces uncertainties about actual work performance but also provides relief from stress. It is important that employees are given an opportunity and say in the decisions that directly affect their working. This may result in the reduction of role stress.

Enriching and redesigning jobs can afford an opportunity to the employees of owning responsibility and of giving more autonomy in job performance. Consequently, the employee gets ample control over job performance and that indirectly contributes to stress relief.

Some of the well-known organisations have started wellness programmes that focus on the employees' total physical and mental condition (Leonard, 2001). These programmes help employees abandon bad habits like smoking and alcohol use. The idea behind such programmes is that employees should take personal responsibility for their physical and mental health. Typically, these organisationally supported wellness programmes increase employee's self-efficiency and lessen job strain and stress.

Karmayoga approach

Karmayoga means unselfish performance of work. *Karmayoga* is an alternative approach to stress relief. The Bhagavad Gita emphasised the need for performing action in a spirit of detachment. When we cultivate the spirit of detachment from results of our action, stress level subsides.

The Gita advocates detachment from desires and not an abandonment of action or work. So long as we work in a detached spirit, our mental balance is not disturbed. This evenness of mind in success or failure, possessed by one who is engaged in the performance of his proper duties, would reduce levels of stress. Therefore, one should strive for yoga which is skill in action.

While doing his work, an employee will be deflected from disinterestedness if he thinks of fame or money or any such extraneous consideration. Therefore, the fruit of action should not be the motive. We must work with a perfect serenity with an indifference to results. He who acts liberated from anger, sensitiveness and attachment and passion, does not face stress than one whose action is dictated by his whims. Victory or defeat, success or failure, should not disturb the doer as there are willed by the Universal Spirit. Whatever happens, the individual should accept it without attachment or aversion. The question of employee stress does not arise when *Karmayoga* approach is followed. A similar advice is given by the famous raj rishi, Roman emperor Marcus Auerilius in his monumental work, *Meditations*.

Check your progress 2

Note: 1) Use the space given below for your answers.

2) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1. Elaborate the consequences of the stress.

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2. Discuss different types of stress management.

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15.6 CONCLUSION

Employee stress is recognised as an increasing problem in public and private organisations, although job stress should not necessarily imply poor work performance. Nor can it be a certain negative influence on employee performance.

In some cases, evidence suggests that low to moderate levels of stress enables several employees to perform their jobs better by increasing their work intensity and ability to react. Experiencing challenges in employees' work can energise them psychologically and physically and encourage them to learn new skills. Feeling challenged by one's work is an important ingredient in developing and sustaining a psychologically healthy work environment. The evidence also suggests that a high level of stress, or even a moderate stress, sustained over a long period, eventually takes its toll, and causes decline in performance. As stress causes anxiety and induces physical and mental problems, it must be managed effectively.

15.7 GLOSSARY

- Stress** : A dynamic condition in which an individual is faced with pressure of physical or mental strain or tension.
- Demands** : Responsibilities, pressures, including uncertainties that persons face in the workplace.
- Wellness programmes** : Organisationally supported programmes that focus on the employees' physical and mental health.

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15.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Your answer should include the following points:

- Stress is a pressure or tension resulting from internal or external compulsion.
- Stress is something which affects the mental health of human being.
- Positive and negative aspects of stress
- Linkages of stress with demands
- Resources stress as an additive phenomenon

2. Your answer should include the following points:

- Environmental factors
- Organisational factors
- Personal factors

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1. Your answer should include the following points:

- Physiological indications
- Psychological indications
- Behavioural symptoms

2. Your answer should include the following points:

- Individual approaches
- Organisational approaches
- Karmayoga approach