Research Article

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS, CAUSES, SIGN AND MANAGEMENT: A VIEW

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ABSTRACT

Occupational Stress is defined in terms of its psychological and physiological effects on a person (or thing. Stress is mental, physical or emotional strain or tension or it is a situation or factor that can cause this. Work-related stress is now generally acknowledged a global issue in all professions and all workers in all countries. It is also widely acknowledged that it has a high cost in terms of human distress and impaired productivity. Stress can undermine the achievement of goals, both for individuals and for organizations. While it will not be possible for organizations to remove all these stressors it is important that they work with employees and managers to identify which aspects of the working environment are causing most difficulties and work together for improvements. As Occupational Health aims at the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of all workers in all occupations, patterns of prevention have to be devised and implemented to face the challenges that a changing world of work is bringing. Increasing emphasis has to be placed on improving working conditions and work organization in relation to stress at work and on practical measures to cope with stressful work situations. This article presents some strategies to prevent and reduce stress both at the organizational level as well as individually. The occupational stress problem in India is still an open question, waiting to be solved.

INTRODUCTION

Work stress is recognized world-wide as a major challenge to workers' health and the healthiness of their organizations (**ILO 1986; 1992**). Stress can be brought about by pressures at home and at work. Employers cannot usually protect workers from stress arising outside of work, but they can protect them from stress that arises through work. Stress at work can be a real problem to the organization as well as for its workers. Good management and good work organization are the best forms of stress prevention. If employees are already stressed, their managers should be aware of it and know how to help.

Healthy Job

A healthy job is likely to be one where the pressures on employees are appropriate in relation to their abilities and resources, to the amount of control they have over their work, and to the support they receive from people who matter to them. As health is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity but a positive state of complete physical, mental and social well-being (**WHO, 1994**), a healthy working environment is one in which there is not only an absence of harmful conditions but an abundance of health promoting ones.

These may include continuous assessment of risks to health, the provision of appropriate information and training on health issues and the availability of health promoting organizational support practices and structures. A healthy work environment is one in which staff have made health and health promotion a priority and part of their working lives.

Causes of Stress at Work Place

A systematic review of the evidence for work factors associated with psychological ill health and associated absenteeism (**Michie and Williams, 2003**) found the key factors to be:

1. Long hours worked,
2. Work overload and pressure
3. The effects of these on personal lives
4. Lack of control over work and lack of participation in decision making
5. Poor social support
6. Unclear management and work role and poor management style

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Table 1 Stress-Related Hazards

Work content	Job Content	Workload and Work pace	Working Hours	Participation and Control	
Work context	Monotonous, under-stimulating, meaningless tasks	Having too much or too little to do	Strict and inflexible working schedules	Lack of participation in decision making	
	Lack of variety	Working under time pressures	Long and unsocial hours	Lack of control (for example, over work methods, work pace, working hours and the work environment)	
	Unpleasant tasks		Unpredictable working hours		
	Aversive tasks		Badly designed shift systems		
	Career Development, Status and Pay	**Role in the Organization**	**Interpersonal Relationships**	**Organizational Culture**	**Home-Work Interface**
	Job insecurity	Unclear role			
	Lack of promotion prospects		Inadequate, inconsiderate or unsupportive supervision	Poor communication	Conflicting demands of work and home
	Under-promotion or over-promotion	Conflicting roles within the same job	Poor relationships with co-workers	Poor leadership	Lack of support for domestic problems at work
	Work of 'low social value'		Bullying, harassment and violence		
	Piece rate payments schemes	Responsibility for people	Isolated or solitary work		
	Unclear or unfair performance evaluation systems	Continuously dealing with other people and their problems	No agreed procedures for dealing with problems or complaints	Lack of clarity about organizational objectives and structure	Lack of support for work problems at home
	Being over-skilled or under-skilled for the job				

Table 2 Signs of Stress

Work performance	Withdrawal	Regression	Aggressive behavior	Other behaviors	Physical signs
Declining/inconsistent performance	Arriving late to work	Crying	Malicious gossip	Out of character behaviour	Nervous stumbling speech
Uncharacteristic errors	Leaving early	Arguments	Criticism of others	Difficulty in relaxing	Sweating
Loss of control over work	Extended lunches	Undue sensitivity	Vandalism	Increased consumption of alcohol	Tiredness/lethargy
Loss of motivation/commitment	Absenteeism	Irritability/moodiness	Shouting	Increased smoking	Upset stomach
Indecision	Resigned attitude	Over-reaction to problems	Bullying or harassment	Lack of interest in appearance	Tension headaches
Lapses in memory	Reduced social contact	Sulking	Poor employee relations	Accidents at home or work	Hand tremor
Increased time at work	Elusiveness/evasiveness	Immature behavior	Temper outbursts	Reckless driving	Rapid weight gain or loss

The workplace factors that have been found to be associated with stress and health risks can be categorized as those to do with the content of work and those to do with the social and organizational context of work. Those that are intrinsic to the job include long hours, work overload, time pressure, difficult or complex tasks, lack of breaks, lack of variety, and poor physical work conditions such as space, fresh air, temperature and light. Most of the causes of work stress concern the way work is designed and the way in which organizations are managed. Because these aspects of work have the potential for causing harm, they are called 'stress-related hazards'. The literature on stress generally recognizes nine categories of stress-related hazards and these are listed in Table 1. One should keep in mind, though, that some of these hazards may not be universal or may not be considered harmful in specific cultures.

Stress Management

Schultz and Schultz (2010) have stated that,it is in a manager's best interest to keep stress levels in the workplace to a minimum. Managers can act as positive role models, especially in times of high stress, by following the tips outlined in this article.

If a respected manager can remain calm in stressful work situations, it is much easier for his or her employees to also remain calm (Hardy, 1998). According to Boman *et al.*, (2003) there are a number of organizational changes that managers and employers can make to reduce workplace stress. These include in Figure 1.
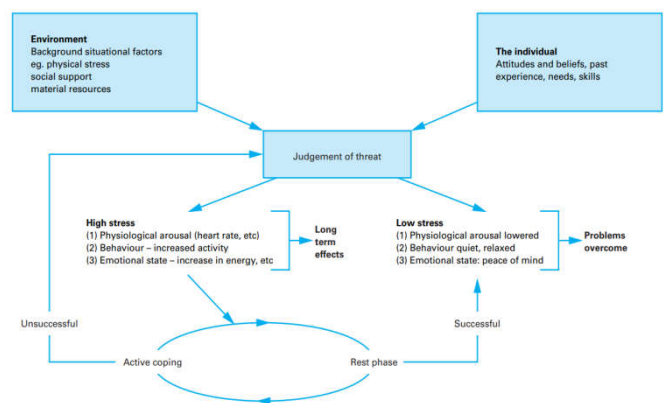

Figure 1 Model of Stress and its Management

Most interventions to reduce the risk to health associated with stress in the workplace involve both individual and organizational approaches. Individual approaches include training and one-to-one psychology services—clinical, occupational, health or counseling. They should aim to change individual skills and resources and help the individual change their situation. The techniques listed in Figure 2 mirror the active coping (fight/flight) and rest phases (habituation) of the stress model presented earlier in Figure 1.
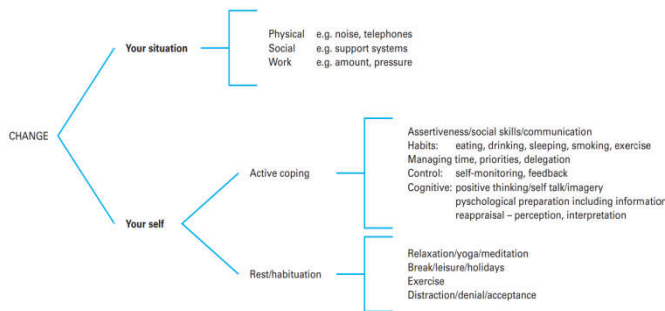

Figure 2 Techniques of Managing Stress

The emphasis on the organization, rather than the individual, being the problem is well illustrated by the principles used in Scandinavia, where there is an excellent record of creating healthy and safe working environments (Williams *et al*., 1998 and Gardell and Gustavsen, 1980). Training helps prevent stress through:

- Becoming aware of the signs of stress
- Using to interrupt behaviour patterns when the stress reaction just beginning. Stress usually builds up gradually. The more stress builds up, the more difficult it is to deal with
- Analyzing the situation and developing an active plan to minimize the stressors
- Learning skills of active coping and relaxation, developing a lifestyle that creates a buffer against stress
- Practicing the above in low stress situations first to maximize chances of early success and boost self confidence and motivation to continue.

The analysis of stressful hazards at work should consider all aspects of its design and management, and its social and organizational context (Health and Safety Executive, 2000). Assessing the risk of stress within the workplace must take into account:

- The likelihood and the extent of ill health which could occur as a result of exposure to a particular hazard
- The extent to which an individual is exposed to the hazard
- The number of employees exposed to the hazard.

CONCLUSION

In a globalised world characterized by intense competition, one cannot ignore the impacts of work related stress on the employees and the organizational productive capacity. It is therefore imperative that due consideration is given to the management of stress so as to promote a healthy workforce which ultimately culminates into a healthy and prosperous nation. These guidelines on work-related stress will surely help employers and employees to have a better understanding of the causes and effects of stress and on how to manage stress at work. However, work stress remains a real challenge. As organizations and their working environment keep changing, so do the stressors employees may face. It is recommended that there should be continuous monitoring for stress problems at the workplace.

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