

A Literature Study about the Causes of Stress, Its Consequences, and Management

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Abstract: Stress has become an issue of great concern over the last decade .It is an extensive alarm across all professions and is a generally reported cause of occupational illness , absenteeism, sabotage, strikes and turnover. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that by 2020 five of the top ten medical problems worldwide will be stress related. This paper is a review of literature about stress, its causes, consequences, and management. .

Keywords: absenteeism, occupational illness, sabotage, stress, turnover.

1. INTRODUCTION

The preceding century has been regarded as a period of incredible change in human history. Philosophers and scientists have given various names to this period. Peter Drucker has called it “The Age of Discontinuity” John Galbraith has called it “The Age of Uncertainty”, Alvin Toffler called it “The Age of Future Shock” and Karl Albrecht called it “The Age of Anxiety”⁶. A peculiar disease has found its way into lives of people of the industrialized nations of the world. The most common diseases among the people are headache, heart attack, high blood pressure, skin disorders, stomach ulcers, and acidity. Not only this but psychiatric illnesses and sub syndromes of diseases like depression, insomnia, and nervousness are very common to the people in the present world. Experts named “stress” as one among the important cause of all those diseases. The time magazine cover story in June 1983 called stress as “the epidemic of the 80’s. The same magazine reported in October 1998 that “the age of stress” was the 90’s. World health organization survey conducted on 1996 also referred stress as a worldwide epidemic. In 1992 United Nations, report labeled stress “the 20th century disease”¹⁹.

And Now a recent survey by The American Psychological Association shows that Americans biggest health concern is not heart disease, or stroke or diabetes; it’s fear of losing memory And what factor affecting memory do people feel is rising each year? **Stress**, said almost 40% of those surveyed for a report. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that by 2020 five of the top ten medical problems worldwide will be stress related ¹⁷. So Stress became the 21st century buzzword. It is unavoidable in the present day work and non-work lives. According to United Nations Report in 2009, about 2 million workers die annually due to occupational injuries and illnesses due to stress. This is more than double the figure for warfare deaths (6, 50,000 per year). In addition; it is not just the employees who pay the price. There is a cost to employers in reduced productivity and performance. Every year in Japan, around 30,000 deaths occur because of Karoshi, which means death by over work. Under Japanese law, when a worker dies from brain or heart disease and his overtime working hours exceed 100 hours in the month before death, or the average monthly overtime is more than 80 hours for two to six months before death, over work is seen as the cause¹³. According to the world health organization (WHO) in 2012, 90% of the world population was affected by stress, because we live in a time of great demands to update, and the constant necessity of dealing with new information. The result is the deviation in the person. Harris Interactive on behalf of the American Psychological Association between August 3 and 27, 2010 conducted a survey on stress online within the United States. This report shows that Americans are struggling to balance work and home life and make time to engage in health behaviours, with stress not only taking a toll on their personal physical health, but also affecting the emotional and physical well being of their families³. Researchers and experts say that the scenario is not too different in

India. The National Programme for control and treatment of occupational disease claims that around 1.9 million Indians suffer from and 1, 20,000 Indians die of occupational health hazards due to stress¹⁵.

II. ORIGIN OF THE WORD STRESS

The word 'Stress' is derived from a Latin word stringere, meaning to draw tight. From the viewpoint of physical sciences, the phenomena of stress are evident in all materials when they are subjected to "force, pressure, strain, or strong-effort". The important persons behind the study of "stress" are Walter Cannon and Hans Selye .

Walter Cannon (1871-1945), the Harvard Physiologist best known for inventing the concepts of "homeostasis" pioneered the initial understanding of stress but did not use the word stress in the way we use it today¹⁴. He investigated the sympathetic nervous system as it reacts to heat and noticed that the body responds in a predictable sequence. He was interested in the physiological responses produced by our emotional reactions to experiences. This interest developed out of his research into peristalsis (how food moves through the digestive tract). Cannon discovered that peristalsis was inhibited in his stuff (mainly domestic cats) whenever they became enraged or distressed. Because of this discovery, he began to question why and how emotions and digestion might be associated. To find out, he developed a new experiment that involved placing cats in safe cages and then bringing in dogs to sniff and bark at them. He found that cats threatened in this way have high level of hormone adrenaline in their blood samples .It was already known at the time that animals injected with adrenaline showed a particular physiological response that included increases in blood pressure and blood sugar, pupil dilation, inhibited digestion and piloerection. To explain this Cannon drew on a Darwinian perspective and adaptation to develop a model he called as the 'fight or flight response'

Hans Selye (1907-82) is called as the Father of stress. Hans Selye first used the word stress in 1930's, who tortured rats to see what effect it would have on their bodies. He identified three stages of reaction- alarm, resistance, and exhaustion called the 'stress response'. Alarm stage is the body's initial response to the stressor. In this stage, the body prepares itself for quick response by such means as increased heart rate and blood pressure and a release of glucose to provide energy for action. If the stressor is 'prolonged, the second stage is resistance. Being in the resistance stage has to be accompanied by regular recreation, relaxation and rest if it is not to become harmful. The third stage is that of exhaustion. By this term selye meant that the body cannot go on coping with stress indefinitely. Being in the exhaustion stage leads to chronic illness⁵.

The concept of stress was initially borrowed from engineering. Selye wanted to transfer the engineering model of 'stress and strain' to the study of living things. 'Stress' in engineering terms is the force that is applied to an object, and 'strain' is the deformations that object experiences. Selye's idea was to apply this to mammalian systems where the stress was the external event, while strain was the way that the body responded. However, because of his poor English he mixed up the words stress and strain.

According to selye, "stress is the lowest common denominator in the organism's reactions to every conceivable kind of stressor exposure, challenge, and demand or, in other words, the stereotype, the general features in the organism's reaction to all kinds of stressors"¹².

Stress is placed on anything that is given special emphasis or significance, especially where this leads to, or involves, psychological, emotional, and physical strain or tension. Apart of it is consequently subjective, in that different reactions are produced in different individuals by the same set of circumstances. Simply we can explain stress as the body's general response to environmental situations. It is anything that changes our physical, emotional, or mental state while encountering various stimuli in our environment.

Definitions of stress:

Stress is essentially the rate of wear and tear on the body. It is the non-specific response of the body to any demand'.

Hans Selye, The Stress of Life, McGrawHill, 1956/1976,p.55.

Stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other demands placed on them'.

The Health and Safety Executive (2006)

Stress will generate among human beings where a particular relationship between a person and the environment, that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/her well-being.

Lazarus and Folkman (1980)

III. CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS

Every material steel, rock, or wood has its own limit up to which it can withstand stress without being damaged. Similarly, human beings can tolerate only certain level of stress¹⁵. Stress is highly individualistic in nature. Some people have high levels of tolerance for stress and thrive very well in the face of several stressors in the environment. Yet others may have very low level. In fact, some individuals will not perform well unless they experience a level of stress, which activates and energizes them to put forth their best efforts. For every individual there is an optimum level of stress under which he or she will perform to full capacity. The people feel stimulated, excited, and challenged by the opportunities presented by a demand. If a person have high energy in response to the demands made of us, the performance level rises up to a peak. Here the person is experiencing 'Healthy Stress'. If the stress experienced is below the optimum level, then the individual gets bored. That means when a person feel too little stress because he/she have no demands or pressures on us to act, they feel indolent and demotivated. The person gets bored and motivational level reaches a low point. It leads to low performance and dull health. We can say that the person is in 'understress'. If on the other hand the stressors in an individual's environment are too many or too intense and it continues for too long the person become overstretched and performance decreases. We can say that person is in 'overstress'. It leads to low performance, bad decisions, health problems like insomnia and psychosomatic illnesses. Organisational performance and individual health are at their peak at optimum levels of experienced stress²¹. The inverted U shaped curve is shown in **Fig 1.1**.

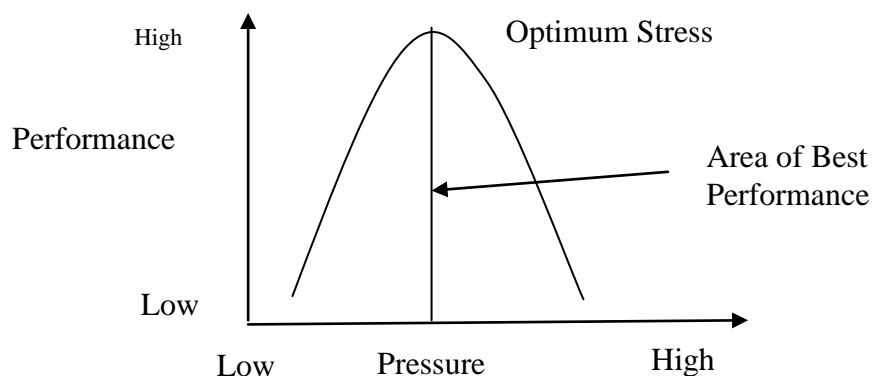


Table 1.1

<i>Stress level</i>	<i>Low stress</i>	<i>Optimum stress</i>	<i>High stress</i>
Reactions	Boredom/apathy	High energy	Exhaustion
Behaviors	Low motivation Careless mistakes Psychological withdrawal Physical withdrawal	High motivation High participation	Nervousness Bad judgment
Performance	Low performance	High performance	Poor performance
Health effects	Dull health	Good health	Psychosomatic illness

Source- Uma Sekaran - Organisational Behaviour text and cases, Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Ltd, 1997, p-90

While the optimum level of stress is different for different persons, each person can judge and find out how much stress is useful for him or her to operate in a productive manner. As Hans Selye says, "stress is not necessarily something bad; it all depends on how you take it". However keeping the optimum level of stress is very difficult, if the person is unaware of

this. Learning how to deal with and manage stress is critical to maximizing job performance, staying safe on the job, and maintaining physical and mental health.

Stress occurs when an individual perceives an imbalance between the demands placed on them on the one hand, and their ability to cope on the other. It often occurs in situations characterized by low levels of control and support. An individual can experience stress from work and non-work lives. Factors that causing stress related to non-work lives are death of spouse or of a close friend, family problems, prolonged illness in the family, owing a new home, change in social activities, sleeping habits, eating habits etc. Another factor related to non-work lives is personality traits. Type 'A' people are impatient, ambitious, competitive, aggressive, and hard working. They set high goals and demands of themselves and others and they are particularly prone to stress inducing anticipatory emotions such as anxiety. Those who experienced much stress at work place are carried to the home. As if stress and strains experienced in the non-work lives carried to the work place.

In short, we can say that those who experienced stress, that is distress (negative stress), from work as well as non-work lives have negative impact on them, their families, and the firms they serve and even to the society.

The consequence of distress/negative stress for the individuals can be categorized into four. They are interpersonal, cognitive, physiological, behavioral and health aspects. The intrapersonal aspects of stress are feelings of anxiety, anger, boredom, apathy, nervousness, anger, irritability, and sometimes-aggressive behaviour. The cognitive aspects include poor concentration, short attention span, mental blocks, and inability to make decisions. The physiological aspects can be seen in increased heart and pulse rate ,high blood pressure, dryness of throat, and excessive sweating .The behavioral aspects are evident in such things as accident proneness, drinking ,excessive eating ,smoking, nervous laughter ,impulsive behaviours, depression and withdrawal behaviours. The health aspects could be stomach disorders, asthma, eczema, and other psychosomatic disorders. Besides, the mental health (the ability to function effectively in one's daily life), will also decline as excessive stress is experienced. The consequence of distress for the families are resorting to drinking or withdrawal behaviours will have an adverse effect of their family life. The bad consequences of stress to organizations are low productivity, absenteeism, turnover, strikes, and sabotage. Desired results cannot be expected from employees who are burnt out, exhausted, or stressed, as they lose their energy, accuracy, and innovative thinking. By this, employers may lose more working days, thereby a decrease in productivity and hence an increase in cost of production.

IV. CAUSES OF STRESS

There is a wide variety of sources of stress in life in general and there are many potential source of stress attached to work. It is a tedious effort to find out the sources of stress of each profession. For that, researchers have attempted to break down the experience of work into its constituent components in order to identify which of the sources are primarily responsible for stress. Examples for such works are Warren & Toll, 1997(checklist of pressure points at work)⁹ and Cartwright & Cooper, 1997 (six categories of workplace stressor)⁷.These are listed in Table 1.2 and Table 1.3.

Table 1.2 Checklist of pressure points at work (Warren and Toll, 1997)

Sources	Illustrative factors
1. Factors intrinsic to the job	Nature of work, overload/ under load, specific demands in job, extent of decision making, level of involvement, job satisfaction, variety and pace of work, work place environment and conditions, travel, rewards: pay, appraisal, acknowledgement.
2. Role in the organisation	Clear/vague boundaries, shared/conflicting expectations, clarity of job description, extent of responsibility clear or not, Belief in the business, any conflict with values/methods.
3. Career prospects	Career development, promotion, fear of redundancy, retirement, relocation, organisation's view of career path, thwarted ambition, extent of influence, job security/insecurity
4. Relations within the organization	Colleagues, manager, subordinates, people in the organisation, people who influence our careers, those we need to do our job. Manager: how he or she manages you, approachable or not, his or her own stress levels Culture: expected behaviour, extent of communication and consultation, Internal politics

	and power relationships, management style, Organisation's level of stress Change: confusion about new technology, expansion, diversification, slimming down
5. The home/work interface	Conflicting demands, one interfering with the other, time constraints, life events

Source: *Elearn- Managing Yourself*, Elsevier Publications Ltd, 2009, p-97

Table 1.3 Six categories of workplace stressor (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997)

Category	Subcategories
1. Factors intrinsic in the job itself	Working conditions (noise, vibration, temperature, light) Workload (too high, too low, too variable) Work hours (long shifts, night shifts) New technology (requirements for ongoing training, rapid obsolescence of skills) Risks and hazards (threat of personal injury, need for constant vigilance) Lack of control (over one's work, over one's time)
2. Organisational roles	Ambiguity (unclear demands) Conflict (incompatible demands) Overload (too many demands)
3. Work relationships	Responsibility (for people, for things, too much, too little) With supervisors (bullying, autocratic, abusive) With peers and subordinates (demanding, abrasive)
4. Career development	Job insecurity (temporary or contract employment, economic and political climate, nature of work, relocation) Promotion (impossible, too slow, too rapid)
5. Organisational factors	Communication (too much, too little, too incoherent) Culture (sexist, racist, ageist, unsupportive) Leadership (autocratic, laissez-faire) Politics (personal competition, intergroup conflict)
6. Work-Home Interface	Resources (lack of time, money, energy) Behavioral Conflict (incompatibility of roles and norms) Emotional Interference (taking work problems home, taking home problems to work)

Source: Cary L. Cooper, Philip J. Dewe, Michael P. O' Driscoll, *Organisational Stress-A Review and Critique of Theory, Research, and Applications*, Sage Publications, 2001, p-28

V. STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress Management Interventions arose in the 1960's with the growth of the community mental health and crisis intervention movement. There have been literally thousands of articles written about stress management. A search of the PsychInfo database shows 3433 articles published between 1958 and 2004 on various applications of stress management⁶. Stress Management can be defined as interference intended to decrease the force of stressors in the work place. It describes

a system of beliefs and practices focused on the so-called ‘fight-or-flight’ or ‘stress’ response to threat. This biological mechanism is hugely important to survival in both humans and animals. The theory of stress management is based on the belief that this survival response, generate too often or for too long, is in fact most dangerous to health. Our body has a limited capacity to respond to stress. Therefore, it is important for individuals to optimally “manage” their stress to operate as fully functioning human beings. There are two major approaches to reduce stress. They are Individual approaches and Organisational approaches. The aspects are as follows

a) Individual Approaches:

An employee can take personal responsibility for reducing his or her stress level. Individual Strategies that have proven effective include implementing time management techniques, increasing physical exercise, relaxation training, and expanding the social support network.

b) Organizational Approaches:

An organization can practice stress management techniques like delegation, daily/weekly meetings with the superior as well as subordinates, Role Analysis Technique, Employee Assistance Program, Counseling, establishment of corporate wellness program & stress management workshops¹.

Stress Management starts with identifying the source of stress in life. Many organizations now-a –days have begun to use the stress management workshops. There are a couple of ways firms try to alleviate stress on their employees. Some methods are as follows.

- **Individual intervention:** This involves monitoring the stressors, Finding out the causes, finding out the appropriate stress management techniques, Implement it and Follow-up.
- **Delegation:** Many tasks can be delegated to subordinates without losing effectiveness. It helps the person to be a relief from attending more function that is critical. At the same time, it serves as training to prepare those at lower levels to stride into higher-level positions in appropriate way.
- **Employee assistance program (EAP):** It includes in-house counseling programs on managing stress. This includes counseling employees who seek assistance on how to deal with alcohol and drug abuse, managing personal finance, handling conflict s at the workplace, dealing with martial and other family problems, dealing with other kind of stresses, and coping with health problems.
- **Role Analysis Technique (RAT):** It helps the employees to know what the job entails and what the expectations are. Splitting the work to various components clarify the role of the employees for the entire system. Role overload, Role ambiguity, and Role conflict can be noticeably reduced through this technique.
- **Job Relocation Assistance (JRA):** This is offered to employees who are transferred, by finding alternative employment for the spouse of the transferred employees in the new place, having arrangements with school admission, if so desired by them.
- **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT):** This focus on teaching clients new ways to change their negative beliefs and assumptions about themselves, the world, and the future.
- **Rational Emotive Therapy (RET):** A particular cognitive based technique for dealing with stress. The major approach is to confront irrational beliefs and faulty thinking which lead to unpleasant or harmful consequences².
- **Career Counseling:** This helps the employee to obtain professional advice regarding career paths that would help the individual to achieve their ambitions.
- **Positive Reappraisal Strategy(PRS):** This is a form of cognitive restructuring so that one sees the stressful situation in amore positive light(seeing a glass half full as opposed to half empty).This kind of strategy has been associated with improvements in mood after stressful events¹¹.
- **Benefit Finding Strategy(BFS):** The ability by those who have experienced major stressors to find the benefits and advantages in the experience(to hear people who have experienced major stressors such as floods or natural disasters talking on television about how it has had the positive advantage of building friendships and community bonds)¹¹.

Some Organizations offer stress management training courses frequently. We can define stress management training as the teaching of techniques by psychologists, counselors, and trainers to individuals and groups to help people improve their coping. These courses involve Personality Development, learning leadership skills, time management skills, communication skills, conflict management, and practicing meditation & yoga.

Personality Development Courses help the individual to find out whether they are Type A or Type B. Those who are in Type A category are more stressful than Type B. The nature of the Type A person is to engage in several concurrent, analogous activities with a keen sense of urgency. They are likely to impose a lot of self-induced stress on themselves. They are highly competitive and aggressive in nature. Stress management courses help the individual to identify their type of personality and thereby produce appropriate modification wherever required.

Improving Leadership skills helps the superiors as well as subordinates to reduce job stress. There are eight leadership styles in the MMDI TM based on the theories of Briggs and Jung. The leadership styles are participative, Ideological, Change-oriented, Executive, Action-oriented, Visionary, Theorist, Goal-oriented. An effective leader is one who has a unique mix of preferences of eight styles or uses a balance of all the styles. It depends upon the context and culture. Stress management training helps the individuals to become a successful and efficient leader.

Time Management is essential for coping with the pressures of modern working life. Good time management at work means doing high quality work, not high quantity. Prioritize the task according to the importance will help to manage time properly. Learning how to manage one's time effectively will help relaxed, focused and in control.

Excellent Communication skills can reduce the negative emotions. Stress management courses help the employees to learn the techniques to communicate effectively while they are in under pressure. Stress strikes at any situation when we are in a meeting with superiors / subordinates or an argument with spouse. We cannot cope up it by taking time out to meditate or go for a run. Here is the significance of Assertive communication. It means speaking up for you in a thoughtful, tactful way. It helps you express yourself about things that matter to you. This reduces stress by helping you feel more in control of a situation. To be more assertive, focus on what you say and how you say it. Using the right body language helps to communicate more assertively.

Conflict Management is the practice of identifying and handling conflict in a convincing, reasonable, and well-organized manner. Stress management training courses helps the individuals to achieve skills such as effective communication, problem solving, and discussing with a focus on interests. Organizational conflict arises due to incompatible evaluation/reward system, scarce resources, status inconsistencies, task interdependence, overlapping authority, incompatible goals, and time horizons.

Yoga & Meditation is a very effective method of relaxation. The essence of meditation is to concentrate our thoughts by focusing completely on just one thing. There are number of meditation techniques like Breathing Exercises, Focusing on an object, Focus on a sound, and Imagery.

However, Studies have shown that a coping method that is suitable in one situation may not be useful in another. Coping is a central element of the transactional theory of stress.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as 'constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and /or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person'. The transactional theory of stress distinguishes between two types of appraisal, primary and secondary. Primary appraisal is the process of assessing what is at risk: that is, the threat or challenge posed by the stressor. This then influences Secondary appraisal, in which the individual considers their coping options and the resources they have available. Another popular classification of coping methods by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) are Problem-focused coping or Emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping involves making plans or taking actions to help change the situation or reduce its impact. Emotion focused strategy do not change the situation but are focused on regulating the emotions.

Researchers over the years have developed lists of different coping methods and questionnaires to measure the different types. They reviewed 400 different ways of coping and 100 ways of classifying them. On the other hand, they classified them into 12 distinct families of coping strategies. These are listed in the below table with examples¹¹.

Table 1.4 Twelve distinct families of coping strategies

Coping Families	Example
Problem solving	Direct action or planning
Information seeking	Reading, observation, asking others
Helplessness	Confusion, cognitive exhaustion
Escape	Cognitive and Behavioural avoidance, denial or wishful thinking
Self-reliance	Emotional regulation, emotional expression
Support seeking	Seeking contact or comfort or instrumental help
Delegation	Maladaptive help seeking, complaining, whining or self-pity
Isolation	Avoiding others, social withdrawal
Accommodation	Distraction, cognitive restructuring, acceptance
Negotiation	Compromising, bargaining, persuasion or priority setting
Submission	Rumination, intrusive thoughts
Opposition	Aggression, blaming others

Source: Graham Davey-Applied Psychology, British Psychological Society, and Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011, p-178

VI. CONCLUSION

Stress has become a common problem in all sectors. It is a fact that every individual are facing stress on daily basis both in the work and non-work lives. Since the body has a limited capacity to respond to stress, it is important to manage the optimum level of stress to gain the best performance. It is a fact that we cannot remove the negative stress fully, but can reduce it if the organization and employees takes it seriously. Much of the stress at work is caused not only by work overload and time pressure but by lack of rewards, praise and more importantly, by not providing individuals with the autonomy to do their job as they would like. Organisations must begin to manage people at work differently; treating them with respect and valuing their contribution, if we are enhance the psychological well being and health of employees in the future. Relaxation, meditation, physical exercises, time management are some common stress management techniques practiced by individuals. Organisations also take initiative to conduct and practice stress management workshops /techniques respectively. Not all stress are bad, Learning the type and causes of stress is important for an individual .Then only he/she can manage it effectively to maintain the physical and mental health and thereby become a productive employee. One should always keep Hans Selye's words in mind that *"It is not stress that kills us it is our reaction to it. Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one"*.

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