

MANAGING WORKPLACE STRESS

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Abstract

Today workplace stress is becoming a major issue and matter of concern for the employees and 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 it is impossible to avoid stress and emotion. Experts opine that stress is the main cause for all the problems of the modern world that affects both the individual and organizational health. In the present-day competitive environment, all service oriented organizations believe their employees to be the most important assets of the company. Organizations recognize that stress management is a very essential and important tool for achieving bottom line growth. Organizations have to pay a very heavy price for stress because it affects productivity due to increased absenteeism, sick leave, medical costs, and high turnover rates. Indeed, recruiting and retaining employees are the major challenges for any organization today. Hence, the employer should identify the root cause of stress in the organization and provide a stress-free environment to the employees. Employer must organize stress management programs at the workplace, which should deal with employee's physical and mental well-being.

Key words: *Workplace Stress, Causes of stress, Stages, Symptoms, Stress Prevention, Stress risk assessment.*

Introduction

Stress is the body's reaction to harmful situations -- whether they're real or perceived. When one feel threatened, a chemical reaction occurs in body that allows him to act in a way to prevent injury. This reaction is known as "fight-or-flight," or the stress response. During stress response, one's heart begins to race, breathing quickens, muscles tighten, and blood pressure rises. One has ready to act. It is how one protects himself.

Stress means different things to different people. What causes stress in one person may be of little concern to another. Some people are better able to handle stress than others. And, not all stress is bad. In small doses, stress can help to accomplish tasks and prevent from getting hurt. Our bodies are designed to handle small doses of stress. But, we are not equipped to handle long-term, chronic stress without ill consequences.

Work Place Stress

Workplace stress can be defined as the most harmful physical and 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 and mental stress is required for a normal and healthy growth. A little degree of stress at workplace energizes the employees psychologically and physically, as it motivates them to learn new skills and 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 and health leading to lack of interest in job, reduced productivity, more incidences of sickness, frequent absence, and poor morale of employees. Stress also affects the growth and profit of any organization. The direct cost of stress in the organization is frequent absence of employees, replacement of staff, loss of service, or 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, and more health insurance costs.

Causes of Stress at Workplace

- **Physical** :Lighting, noise, temperature, vibration, and air pollution
- **Individual** : Role conflict, workload, and family problem
- **Group** : Lack of unity, inadequate support, and conflict among team members
- **Organization** :Culture, structure (inappropriate divisions), and leadership influence (style and impact of the leader)

Stages of Stress

Experts have classified stress into three different stages. Such as alarm stage, resistance stage, and exhaustion stage. Each stage has its unique symptoms

- **Alarm stage:** This is the initial stage when the employee starts feeling the stress and then, as the pressure level gradually increases the body prepares to challenge it. The signs of stress at this stage are continuous irritability and anxiety, sleeplessness/ restlessness, and inability to concentrate.
- **Resistance stage:** In this stage, the employee refuses to accept the stressor and at the same time attempts to find suitable ways to control stress. In this stage, the pressure will start dropping from high level. The signs of stress at this stage are absenteeism or slowness of work, tired and exhausted for no reason, social withdrawal with pessimism, angry, indifferent, defiant, increased use of coffee, alcohol, tobacco, etc.
- **Exhaustion stage:** In this stage of stress, the employee will be affected psychologically, physically, and emotionally leading to stress-related illnesses. The signs of stress at this stage are continuous sadness or depression, continuous mental and physical fatigue, and continuous stress-related illnesses like headache, stomachache, bowel problems, etc.

The Symptoms of Stress

Stress can affect all aspects of our life, including emotions, behaviours, thinking ability, and physical health. No part of the body is immune. But, people handle stress differently, symptoms of stress can vary. Symptoms can be vague and may be the same as those caused by medical conditions. So it is important to discuss them with the doctor. The following are the symptoms of stress.

Emotional symptoms of stress include:

- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated, and moody
- Feeling overwhelmed, like you are losing control or need to take control
- Having difficulty relaxing and quieting your mind
- Feeling bad about yourself (low self-esteem), lonely, worthless, and depressed
- Avoiding others

Physical symptoms of stress include:

- Low energy
- Headaches
- Upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation, and nausea
- Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- Chest pain and rapid heartbeat
- Insomnia
- Frequent colds and infections
- Loss of sexual desire and/or ability
- Nervousness and shaking, ringing in the ear, cold or sweaty hands and feet
- Dry mouth and difficulty swallowing
- Clenched jaw and grinding teeth

Cognitive symptoms of stress include:

- Constant worrying
- Racing thoughts
- Forgetfulness and disorganization
- Inability to focus
- Poor judgment
- Being pessimistic or seeing only the negative side

Behavioural symptoms of stress include:

- Changes in appetite -- either not eating or eating too much
- Procrastinating and avoiding responsibilities
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes
- Exhibiting more nervous behaviors, such as nail biting, fidgeting, and pacing

Stress Prevention

The organization must make sure that the roles and responsibilities of the employees must be defined clearly. The organization should conduct a stress prevention program for the employees, which should consist of the following:

- Stress awareness among the employees
- Top management's commitment
- Employees' participation and interest
- Definite program objective

Stress Risk Assessment

Work-related stress risk assessment allows measurement of the current situation in the workplace using surveys and other techniques promoting active discussion with the employees to help decide upon the practical improvements to facilitate stress-free environment in the workplace. The health and safety executive is given a five-step work-related stress risk assessment to aid in the diagnosis of problems and provide a framework for workplace stress prevention. The five steps of stress risk assessments are:

- **Identify hazards:** The organization should identify the potential hazards like culture, demands, control, support, relationship, role, and change. It can be identified through both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- **Identify who might be harmed and how:** The organization should identify the persons affected by stress and find out how they are affected.
- **Evaluate the risk:** The organization should evaluate how the hazards affect the employee's health. The organization should ask questions such as - what action has already been taken and what more is required to be done? Etc.
- **Record the findings:** The organization should record their findings so that they can be used to monitor the progress.
- **Monitor and review:** The organization should review the risk assessment program especially the significant changes occurring within the organization.

The purpose of risk assessment is to help the organization determine what measures should be taken to prevent stress in the workplace.

Individual Stress Management

Individual stress management is very important to reduce workplace stress. The following measures can help an employee manage stress effectively.

- **Self -awareness:** This is very important aspect that the employee should recognize his limitations and health problems and be aware of the symptoms of stress.
- **Positive thinking:** The employee should have a positive approach towards stress management like maintaining motivation, increasing his zeal through rewards and avoiding people who try to exert a negative influence on him.

- **Get organized:** This includes keeping the work area organized, planning the work in the right way, setting priorities in work, managing time cleverly, and being serious about deadlines.
- **Take care of health:** This refers to diet, taking food on time, drinking more water, avoiding smoking and alcohol, attending regular fitness programs such as walking, swimming, doing aerobics and weigh exercises.
- **Learn to relax:** This includes practicing a few relaxation techniques regularly in the workplace like taking five minutes break away from work, reading books and novels, watching movies, listening to music, developing a good network of family and friends, involving in social activities, practicing regular relaxation and controlled breathing exercises like yoga and getting involving in spiritual activities.

Conclusion

Stress in workplace is an issue for everyone. Unhealthy levels of stress cannot only affect the person experiencing it but also work colleagues, as well as the person's family and friends. Workplace stress is primarily an organizational issue although it is shaped and influenced by personal characteristics and behaviours. An individual success or failure in controlling stress depends on his physical and psychological strength. If he faces stress with a positive attitude, it will create a lot of positive energy to achieve the task. The commitment of the organization and the individual are very important factors in managing stress effectively. The cost of stress is very expensive because it affects the individual, the organization, and the society at large.

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