FIRST AID

FOR STRESS

34 Activities for Managing Stress in the Workplace

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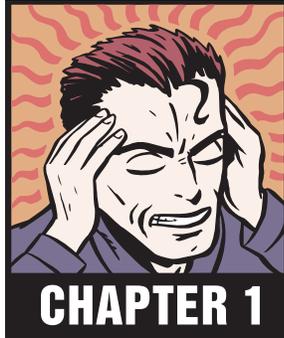
REACHING YOUR OWN DEFINITION OF STRESS

Contents

In this chapter we examine the origins and definitions of the concept of stress. We see how different approaches to defining stress form the foundation for our understanding of stress at work, the myths of stress are exposed and evaluated for their practical value, and stress and stress indicators are related to examples of stress at work.

Acknowledging the concept of stress

The word "stress" is on everyone's lips. We now know from numerous studies that stress affects all people, regardless of role, rank, status, or position in the workforce. As far back as 1974, endocrinologist and pioneer of stress research Hans Selye showed that, even then, there were in excess of 110,000 papers, projects, and magazine articles dealing with the subject of stress. Since then, the flow of interest has accelerated, and the number of reports about how stress affects people and organizations must now be in the millions. A common theme has emerged from all this activity: stress can reduce the quality of working life and undermine attendance and performance at work. In its organizational and economic contexts, stress, when excessive, can cripple the daily productivity and profit-making capabilities of industry. In personal terms, it can diminish employee motivation and, if ignored, lead to serious stress-related illness.

There has been, and still is, a lot of rumor and uninformed speculation about what stress is and how it affects people's motivation, mental health, well-being, and their ability to perform competently at work. Those who lead, manage, and motivate people's mental, emotional, and physical commitment in organizations need to know what stress is and how it should be handled in their businesses. It simply is not good enough for anyone to claim knowledge about stress from a position of ignorance. Ignorance about stress, its concepts, and its models can only lead to misunderstandings and mistakes.

Debunking Stress Myths

Knowledge of stress in the workplace is *the* key weapon in managing stress management, so the first task for any manager or trainer is to debunk the myths about stress that are prevalent in many organizations. By their very nature, myths are apocryphal stories and should not be accepted at face value. This means that anyone who is in a position of authority and who has responsibility for the development of others must be prepared to acknowledge and confront the myths about stress that may exist in the workforce.

Stress Myth 1:   Stress does not exist.

The oldest myth of all is that stress does not really exist and that it is something dreamed up by weak and spineless employees. Organizations used to try to defend this position for fear that the perception of a stressed workforce would reflect badly on their businesses. Some organizations just flatly denied that there was such a phenomenon as stress, or at least stress at work. The banking industry was guilty of this in the late 1980s, as were one or two other high-profile customer-focused enterprises.

The long history of research into stress at work debunks this myth. Stress, without question, does exist. As to stress at work, the multitude of surveys and studies of stress at work show that it is a serious issue for organizations and affects the quality of people's work as well as their productivity.

Stress Myth 2:   Stress is only for the weak-willed and feeble-minded.

This myth is still present but no longer prevalent among employees in most organizations. It used to be thought that if you experienced stress at work, or even had the courage to disclose it, you had a "stress problem." Describing it in this way implied that "normal" people did not have stress problems and that those who did were somehow intrinsically weak-willed and weak-minded. "They let us down," was an often-heard phrase on production lines, and in oil, banking, and customer service-based organizations. Now, employees and organizations increasingly have to face up to the realities and consequences of stress in the workplace.

Stress Myth 3:   Stress is not a problem in *this* workplace.

Studies into human stress, and stress in the workplace, have demonstrated the serious and challenging nature of stress and the potential damage it can do to workers and their performance. Being misinformed about stress based on "honest" ignorance is not a justifiable defense.

Recent case law related to stress and employer liability has shown that ignorance is not a sufficient defense for employers or managers to adopt. Employers must now take responsible action to discover whether stress is evident in their workplace and, if it is found, how it impacts their employees.

Whether from a position of innocence or ignorance, claiming that stress is not a problem in the workplace could turn out to be a costly practice. An effective way for an organization to ensure that stress is not a problem in the workplace is to adopt a code of best practice and to routinely carry out responsible and creditable stress auditing in the workplace. Then, and only then, can an employer say with any certainty that stress is not a problem among their employees.

If stress is a significant problem, adequate stress management interventions should be introduced to combat stress at work. Doing so provides a safeguard for the business and its workers. Justice will be done and have been seen to be done.

What is Stress?

Stress is generally thought of as something that is damaging to the individual. This perception of stress is primarily negative because it implies a deviation from the norm. It presents stress as being manifested in physiological, psychological, and emotional problems, rather than as a common and perfectly normal, natural phenomenon. However, since it can be difficult to define exactly what is "normal," the study and understanding of stress can be just as problematic. People in organizations need a clear understanding of the many approaches, definitions, and assumptions made about stress. Why? Because employee training and development in managing stress at work must proceed from a sound knowledge base.

Personal Perceptions of Stress

Everyone in any workforce has his or her own personal perceptions about stress. Each has his or her own way of describing what stress is and how it affects his or her relationships and performance at work.

Some employees say that "stress is like a light bulb filament — when you overload it, the filament blows." For others, stress resembles a chain. They say, "For me, stress is a chain. It takes the strain of working. It works well until too much is expected of me. Then it's the weakest link in the chain that breaks first." Still others consider stress to be more "like a rubber band, where you can stretch

yourself and then relax. But if you keep on stretching yourself, you run out of elasticity and you run the risk of snapping altogether." Yet another common view of stress is the bank account metaphor: "Stress is like a bank account. You can keep drawing on your account as long as you make deposits to replenish your reserves, but if you just keep drawing, you'll eventually wind up overdrawn and in the red, having spent all your reserves. That's when you get real personal problems and stress wrecks your life."

Such personal perceptions of stress help people make sense of what is happening to them in their personal relationships and working life.

The first place to start in our search for a fuller understanding of what we mean by stress is with a clear definition of the concept. Unfortunately, there is no common agreement about what is meant by the term "stress." This presents us with a substantial challenge. How do we deal with the problem of evaluating both stress itself and the contribution and efficacy of stress management interventions in the workplace? Superficial knowledge about stress only leads to confusion, controversy, and misunderstanding.

> *In spite of the importance of stress, there is little coherence in theory and research that annually emanates from magazines, technical books, and journals dealing with it. There are no agreed upon conventions concerning terminology. For example, some people employ the term "stress" where others use the terms, "anxiety," "conflict," "frustration," or "defense" to refer to exactly the same phenomenon. (Lazarus, 1966, p. 2, emphasis added)*

Clearing Up the Confusion Surrounding the Definition of Stress

Stimulus Definitions

The Concise Oxford Dictionary tells us that stress is "A constraining or impelling force of effort, demand, upon physical or mental energy."

This view construes stress as a stimulus — something external to the individual, group, or organization. In this context, stress has been variously defined as:

+ mental fatigue
+ unusual demand
+ stressful situation
+ overload/underload
+ stimulation overload
+ unpredictability of future events

+ role ambiguity
+ role conflict
+ role overload
+ role strain
+ situational stress.

Response Definitions

The second type of definition is the response definition. According to this view, "stress is probably best conceived as a state of the total organism under extenuating circumstances rather than as an event in the environment" (Appley and Trumball, 1967). In other words, stress is no longer seen as the stimulus itself, but rather as an individual's response to that stimulus.

The Balance Definition

The balance principle of stress incorporates the idea of equilibrium into the definition of stress. In this definition, stress is regarded as "strenuous effort to maintain essential functions at a required level" (Ruff and Korchin, 1964). From this perspective, the harder we find it to maintain balance in our lives, the more we are stressed.

The Role-Fit View of Stress

"Role-fit" definitions of stress have recently become popular. These are more complex and relate to the relationship between the person and his or her work environment. This view of stress attempts to incorporate elements of the individual and the environment in which he or she works.

> *Although the workforce is more knowledgeable and better educated than ever before, technological developments such as automation and robotics make it possible to simplify and routinize many jobs. Such social progress contributes to work stress, underutilization of individual abilities, and feelings of powerlessness and disaffection. Thus there is a growing mismatch between the talents and aspirations of many individuals and the jobs available to them. (Rudolph Moos, 1988; p. 193)*

A mismatch between the person and the job environment can lead to stress and strain. In this context, stress refers to any aspect of the job environment which poses a threat to the individual.

Two types of job stress may threaten the employee: Job demands, which the individual may not be able to meet, master, or sufficiently counter; and insufficient supplies or support in the work environment which may also induce stress and increase the need for coping skills. The difficulty of a job may exceed the person's abilities (threat–qualitative overload), and the pay (supplies) may not be enough to financially support the person's family or match his or her values and beliefs about what is regarded as a fair wage for the work done (inequity).

Stress Indicators

"Strain" is the main indicator of excessive stress and is seen as a deviation from the normal responses of the individual employee. Strain can be complex and its expression involves psychological, physiological and behavioral factors for each person.

Some typical examples of strain include:

+ *Psychological strain* — job dissatisfaction; anxiety and conflict; depressed mood; frustration and anger.
+ *Physiological strains* — high blood pressure; high cholesterol; abnormal heart rate; breathing difficulties.
+ *Behavioral strain* — excessive alcohol consumption; cigarette smoking; overeating or undereating; consumption of illegal drugs.

How you define and measure stress affects:

+ How you "see" stress
+ How the workforce understands stress
+ The way in which your organization builds and delivers stress management initiatives at work.

Summary

+ We must accept that stress in the workplace exists and work to understand what it means.
+ Our definitions of stress inform or misinform us about what stress is and is not.
+ Definitions of stress have, in many cases, led to controversy and misunderstanding about the nature of stress.
+ Stress definitions range from the simple and naïve to the complex and comprehensive.
+ Stress can be defined as being a stimulus, a response, or a relationship between a person and his or her environment.
+ Stress can usefully be defined as an "umbrella" term under which a wide range of issues and aspects of human functioning and performance at work can be understood and managed.
+ Our definitions of stress guide our understanding and stress management interventions at work.

INTERVENTION 6

DEMANDS AND COPING PROFILE

Purpose

People have to cope with a wide range of demands made upon them each and every day. Most of the time, they cope sufficiently well and stress is not a problem for them in many areas of their lives. However, if stress is bothersome, people often tend to regard their experience of stress as not serious enough to require management, training, mentoring, or counseling help.

Those people who do need professional help tend to choose stress management training or a stress counseling clinic for three reasons:

1 The stress they experience is unwanted and in some way disabling.

2 Excessive and significant demands are being made on them.

3 The personal coping style they currently have available seem to be ineffective in combating the demands being made on them.

It is therefore helpful for people to map out those situations in which they can already cope with the personal or work-related demands being made on them, as well as those in which stress is bearable, unbearable, or insufferable. This is essential to good stress management and allows us to provide positive feedback to people, as well as identify areas with them for personal change.

Materials

+ **Handout 1: Demands and Coping Profile (DCP)**.

+ Sufficient paper and pens.

+ Tape recorder (optional).

Technique

1 Welcome the individual or group to your stress management session. Spend some time answering any preliminary questions about stress management.

2 Obtain permission and commitment from the individual or group to work together with you. Share with them the view that they are already coping successfully with a wide range of demands everyday.

3 Tell them that you are going to describe a useful way to assess the demands being made upon them, the stress they experience, and their present methods of coping. Explain that the method is called "demands and coping profiling." Point out that it has helped other people in the past and that it may be useful for them.

4 Identify with participants those situations in which they can and do cope adequately, or even well, with the daily demands they face.

5 Map these out with the individual or group. Ask them to write them down, or draw pictures, or act the situations out with you.

6 When they have done this, feed their efforts back to them by saying something like, "So, each day you have to face these [particular demands]. You can cope with them [in this way] and that is OK for you. Is that right?" Alternatively, ask the individual or group to feed back to you in a similar way.

7 Now pinpoint those situations in which the individual or group experiences unwanted stress.

8 Introduce **Handout 1: Demands and Coping Profile (DCP),** and explain to the individual or group how useful it can be to make an explicit record of the demands they face, the coping strategies they adopt, and the degree and kind of stress they experience.

9 Deal with any questions or concerns raised at this stage. Then get the individual or group to complete the DCP and determine with them:

  + the type of stress that occurs
  + the specific demands made on them
  + the coping strategies they use and their consequences.

10 Map out and evaluate each step with regard to the demands being made on the individual or group, the coping strategies that they adopt, and the outcome of these strategies, both for themselves and others.

11 Take care to come to a shared understanding with the individual or group about their DCPs and then ask them, "Now that you have completed your DCP, what do you think it all adds up to?." If you have permission, keep a written or taped record of what the individual or group member says in the session.

12 Complete the session by asking the individual or group what they think or feel needs to be changed in order to make a difference in the amount of stress they are experiencing. Ask them to take the DCP home or into a quiet area and to complete it again, this time showing how they would like it to look in the future at a time when they are experiencing less stress. Review the results with them at a future stress management session.

If you are working with an individual, you may like to replay the recording or summarize the notes you made the first time he or she completed the DCP to remind him or her of his or her perceptions on that occasion.