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## STRESS MANAGEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

*The opportunities in the new millennium is closely associated with the challenges in the work place not only to excel but to maintain the optimum level of efficiency. This article highlights the consequences of stress at the work place and hence the need for both the employees and the management to ensure a healthy relationship within the organisation.*

### Introduction

In recent years there has been profound changes in job profiles. Diversification and increase in specialisation has brought more demands on the employees in terms of skills, knowledge and performance levels. The pressure is not only to excel but to maintain the optimum level of efficiency. Besides the employees have also been experiencing increased job insecurity as evidenced by large scale retrenchment, 'VRS' or 'golden handshake'. The terminology matters but little, its the 'Democle's sword' that they see hanging above. The resultant effect is occupational stress. It is the bane of modern life, especially the modern working life. The quantum of stress may vary from organisation-to-organisation, task-to-task or person-to-person, but the fact of the matter is, stress is the common denominator in every work situation.

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Stress, the concept that was first introduced to life success by endocrinologist Hans Selye (1936) is defined as a response of an individual to events that threaten or challenge. The threat or challenge may be experienced due to the individual's perception of imbalance in the environmental demands on him or his capabilities to meet them or it may be due to the homeostatic imbalances in the body. Stress occurs especially when the consequences of failure to meet the demand is impertinent to the individual.

Thus the performance linked raise or promotion can cause severe stress, if an employee feels that he is unable to meet the performance deadline unlike wanting the raise or the promotion desperately. Another employee may not attach much importance to these incentives and may remain unperturbed at the failure to meet the deadline. However, he may feel the pressure only when his very job is threatened, which he cherishes.

On the one hand stress is experienced due to over load or too much demand on the capabilities of the employee. Substantial research shows that stress may also occur due to the little demand on the employee. An employee who is posted to a place, where he has very little to do may view the transfer as a punishment, sensory isolation, restriction, stimulus impoverishment, social isolation and confinement can induce stress.

While stress occurs due to such negative factors, almost any change in the environment or personal schedule even when the change is pleasant can cause stress. Positive stress or 'eustress' can occur due to promotion for instance, because it brings with it new responsibilities, decision making perhaps travel and displacement, all of which calls for newer adjustments, in other words - stress.

Therefore, stress is not a single entity. It is a complex concept which has wide ramifications, at the individual as well as organisational level. Although certain amount of stress has been found to be beneficial and act as a motivator, the wider implications of stress which is known to have a destabilising effect on both the employee and the organisation has been a cause for concern. There has been a growing body of research on occupational stress, probing into the antecedents and consequences of employee stress.

The cost of stress in U.S.A., mostly in terms of health related effects has been estimated to be more than 10% of their Gross National Product, annually (Greenberg and Baron, 1999). In Japan, a strange phenomenon called 'karoushi' or sudden stress death has been reported among its employees. In India too, the increasing number of coronary heart disorders (CHD) and other psychosomatic disorders among the working population that too at an age,

previously unheard of, along with the growing rate of depression and suicides among the high flying executives who work under tremendous work pressure, deadlines and competition, rings an alarm bell.

## Need for Stress Management

Occupational stress manifests in varied ways. Stress affects task performance. Although it was traditionally believed that the relationship between stress and performance is curvilinear, i.e., at first stress enhances performance and beyond some point additional stress reduces performance, it is true only in certain cases. Growing evidence suggests stress exerts mainly negative effects, even when it is moderate. However, its precise impact depends upon several different factors like complexity of task, individual characteristics, previous experience, motivational level, etc., making generalisation about the stress effect on performance difficult.

Existing evidence shows that decisions made under high stress contribute to more errors either by making decisions before examining all available alternatives or examining them in a less systematic manner. Studies show that during stressful conditions decision making is centralised, i.e., left to higher authorities, which could prove quite costly. On the other hand, leaders have been found to adopt a more egalitarian approach, allowing subordinates to take decisions making to diffuse responsibility and share blame which could be fatal for the organization.

The effect of stress on employee health perhaps is most discussed and researched. According to medical experts, both are very closely related. Some authorities estimate 50% - 70% of all physical illness occur due to stress. The following are stress related disorders - CHD, stroke, backache, arthritis, ulcers, headache, cancer, diabetes, cirrhosis of liver and lung disease. Besides these degenerative disorders, stress also plays a part in infectious diseases by increasing susceptibility to infection. Cohen and Williamson suggest, several mechanisms play a role. Stress may influence the immune system by affecting hormonal balance within the body or the neural mechanism that regulate various aspects of immune system for e.g. production of W.B.C.

Moreover, stress may bring about a behavioural change and alter social contacts. Some individuals may indulge in unhealthy practices like smoking, drinking and drug abuse, which can not only prove to be health hazards, but affects the family life and leaves him isolated which further increase his stress. Thus he finds himself in an inescapable vortex.

Occupational stress spill over to the organisation in terms of absenteeism, employee turnover, lowered performance and lost man-hour, cost in terms of

health services and accident compensation, breakages and losses due to accidents, etc.

Therefore, it is as much the responsibility of the organisation as it is of the individual to take steps to alleviate stress. Stress is certainly manageable. Only strategies in stress management must be incorporated both by the individual and the organisation. The procedures are either geared towards helping employees change their environment to make it more healthy, by imparting training in assertiveness, time management, delegation of duties etc. or aim at helping them cope with environment that cannot be changed. These involve various natural and psychological techniques like valuation, yoga, meditation, biofeed back, etc.

However, stress management cannot be a one time affair, it is an ongoing process. Organisation on their part can (a) organise stress management training from time-to-time (b) have counsellor on their rolls and fix certain schedules for practising the techniques during working hours (c) adopt scientific recruiting procedures and assign jobs that match the capabilities of the employee.

Employees on their part need to diligently follow the techniques of stress management and take certain personal initiative to reduce stress, like facing the reality of what they can, what they cannot achieve in their career, updating knowledge and skills regularly and fostering relationship and build social support network and themselves.

Thus, although stress is a reality of life, succumbing to it need not be. Employees and organisation can work together to keep it at a manageable level. This will ensure good health of both the employee and the organisation.