

Work place stress preventive and curative measures

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Abstract: Stress has been defined in different ways over the years. Originally, it was conceived of as pressure from the environment, then as strain within the person. The generally accepted definition today is one of interaction between the situation and the individual. It is the psychological and physical state that results when the resources of the individual are not sufficient to cope with the demands and pressures of the situation. Thus, stress is more likely in some situations than others and in some individuals than others. Stress can undermine the achievement of goals, both for individuals and for organisations.

I. Introduction

Stress affects an individual's physical and mental health, performance and inter-personal relationships. There are two types of stress, namely, Eustress and Distress. Factors that account for differences in job stress are gender, level of employee in the organization, income, occupation and family situation. Some of the symptoms of stress at workplace are as follows-

- Absenteeism, escaping from work responsibilities, arriving late, leaving early, etc.
- Deterioration in work performance, more of error prone work, memory loss, etc.
- Cribbing, over-reacting, arguing, getting irritated, anxiety, etc.
- Deteriorating health, more of accidents, etc.
- Improper eating habits (over-eating or under-eating), excessive smoking and drinking, sleeplessness, etc.

II. Sources/Causes of Stress

The factors leading to stress among individual are called as stressors. Some of the factors/stressors acting on employees are-

1. Organizational factors- With the growth in organizational stress and complexity, there is increase in organizational factors also which cause stress among employees. Some of such factors are-

- a. Discrimination in pay/salary structure
- b. Strict rules and regulations
- c. Ineffective communication
- d. Peer pressure
- e. Goals conflicts/goals ambiguity
- f. More of centralized and formal organization structure
- g. Less promotional opportunities
- h. Lack of employees participation in decision-making
- i. Excessive control over the employees by the managers

2. Individual factors- There are various expectations which the family members, peer, superior and subordinates have from the employee. Failure to understand such expectations or to convey such expectations lead to role ambiguity/role conflict which in turn causes employee stress. Other individual factors causing stress among employees are inherent personality traits such as being impatient, aggressive, rigid, feeling time pressure always, etc. Similarly, the family issues, personal financial problems, sudden career changes all lead to stress.

3. Job concerning factors- Certain factors related to job which cause stress among employees are as follows-

- j. Monotonous nature of job
- k. Unsafe and unhealthy working conditions
- l. Lack of confidentiality
- m. Crowding

4. Extra-organizational factors- There are certain issues outside the organization which lead to stress among employees. In today's modern and technology savvy world, stress has increased. Inflation, technological change, social responsibilities and rapid social changes are other extra-organizational factors causing stress.

Because April is National Stress Awareness Month, it's the perfect time to make changes in your life to reduce the level of stress you experience, improve your health, and make your life more enjoyable!

The World Health Organization estimates that 15 percent of the world's population will suffer from an anxiety disorder at some point in their lifetime.

III. Preventive Measures Of Workplace Stress

It is thus very essential to have effective stress management strategies in an organization so that the detrimental repercussions of stress on the employees as well as their performance can be reduced and controlled. Stress has a significant effect on job performance and interpersonal relationships among the employees. There is need to establish a staff support Centre at the university, where employees can be offered emotional and psychological support through professional counselling. Relationships can become very stressful if either person feels as if his/her boundaries aren't respected. Hold regular team or group meetings Encourage participative management, Offer training to employees Determine the content of each position (analyze positions and tasks).

Conduct an annual evaluation of employees' contribution to Group meetings are a chance to:

- clarify individual roles, responsibilities and powers.
- specify individual expectations, goals and objectives.
- give recognition, social support and feedback.
- stimulate dialogue with supervisors and colleagues.
- assess whether the workload respects employees' limits.

Participative management helps to:

- improve relationships between supervisors and employees.
- increase employees' participation in decisions.
- enhance employees' sense of belonging.

Enables employees to develop new knowledge and skills, which can be seen as a form of recognition and through which they can:

- avoid a qualitative work overload.
- advance their careers.
- Eventually assume more responsibilities. Power and autonomy.

An analysis of each position can:

- determine whether there is a work overload.
- clarify roles, responsibilities and powers related to each position.
- specify expectations, goals and objectives.
- reduce certain risks linked to the work environment and working conditions.

An annual evaluation of employees provides the opportunity to:

- clarify roles, responsibilities and powers.
- specify what is expected of employees, the goals and objectives to be reached.
- provide recognition, social support and feedback.
- communicate career goals and establish a career plan.

The 2001 Canadian Mental Health Survey, found that 51% of respondents felt that work was a major or moderate source. But not all stress is negative; research has shown that individuals function best in a work setting that places reasonable demands on them. One example of positive stress might be preparing for a job interview.

Many employers have instituted programs and policies to reduce stress or help employees deal with stress before it becomes a problem. Indeed, the 1999 Workplace and Employee Survey found that slightly more than one-quarter (26%) of employees had access to some type of employee assistance plan.

Leadership columnist Jena McGregor discusses a new study out of Harvard that challenges the common perception that leaders have higher stress levels than non leaders. Researchers tested the stress levels of leaders and non leaders and discovered that leaders had significantly lower levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) and lower reports of anxiety when compared to non leaders. In a second study, they found that leaders who held more powerful positions exhibited lower cortisol levels and reported less anxiety than leaders who held less powerful positions. Most interventions to reduce the risk to health associated with stress in the

workplace involve both individual and organisational approaches. Individual approaches include training and one-to-one psychology services—clinical, occupational, health or counselling. They should aim to change individual skills and resources and help the individual change their situation.

IV. Training Helps Prevent Stress Through

- Becoming aware of the signs of stress, using this to interrupt behaviour patterns when the stress reaction is just beginning. Stress usually builds up gradually. The more stress builds up, the more difficult it is to deal with analysing the situation and developing an active plan to minimise the stressors learning skills of active coping and relaxation, developing a lifestyle that creates a buffer against stress.
- Practising the above in low stress situations first to maximise chances of early success and boost self confidence and motivation to continue.
- A wide variety of training courses may help in developing active coping techniques—for example, assertiveness, communications skills, time management, problem solving, and effective management.

However, there are many sources of stress that the individual is likely to perceive as outside his or her power to change, such as the structure, management style or culture of the organisation. It is important to note that stress management approaches that concentrate on changing the individual without changing the sources of stress are of limited effectiveness, and may be counterproductive by masking these sources. For example, breathing deeply and thinking positively about a situation causing stress may make for a temporary feeling of well being, but will allow a damaging situation to continue, causing persistent stress and, probably, stress to others. The primary aim of the individual approach should be to develop people's skills and confidence to change their situation, not to help them adapt to and accept a stressful situation.

Curative measures of workplace stress:

The prevention and management of workplace stress requires organisational level interventions, because it is the organisation that creates the stress. An approach that is limited to helping those already experiencing stress is analogous to administering sticking plaster on wounds, rather than dealing with the causes of the damage. An alternative analogy is trying to run up an escalator that's going down! Organisational interventions can be of many types, ranging from structural (for example, staffing levels, work schedules, physical environment) to psychological (for example, social support, control over work, participation).

The emphasis on the organisation, 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 environment .

A risk assessment strategy—six stages:

1. **Hazard identification:** Reliably identify the stressors which exist in relation to work and working conditions, for specified groups of employees, and make an assessment of the degree of exposure
2. **Assessment of harm:** Collect evidence that exposure to such stressors is associated with impaired health in the group being assessed or of the wider organisation. This should include a wide range of health-related outcomes, including symptoms of general malaise and specific disorders, and of organisational and health related behaviours such as smoking and drinking, and sickness absence
3. **Identification of likely risk factors:** Explore the associations between exposure to stressors and measures of harm to identify likely risk factors at the group level, and to make some estimate of their size and/or significance
4. **Description of underlying mechanisms:** Understand and describe the possible mechanisms by which exposure to the stressors is associated with damage to the health of the assessment group or to the organisation
5. **Audit existing management control and employee support systems:** Identify and assess all existing management systems both in relation to the control of stressors and the experience of work stress, and in relation to the provision of support for employees experiencing problems.
6. **Recommendations on residual risk:** Take existing management control and employee support systems into proper account, make recommendations on the residual risk associated with the likely risk factors related to work stress.

Increasingly, legislation requires employers to assess and address all risks to employee health and safety, including their mental health (for example, the European Commission's framework directive on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work). Creating a safe system of work requires targeting equipment, materials, the environment and people (for example, ensuring sufficient skills for the tasks). It also requires having monitoring and review systems to assess the extent to which prevention and control strategies are effective.

Although associations between workplace factors and psychological ill health and associated sickness absence have been well documented, evidence based interventions to reduce these problems are scarce.

Successful interventions used training and organisational approaches to increase participation in decision making and problem solving, increase support and feedback and improve communication. These studies found that:

- [1.] Those taught skills to mobilise support at work and to participate in problem solving and decision making reported more supportive feedback, feeling more able to cope, and better work team functioning and climate. Among those most at risk of leaving, those undergoing the training reported reduced depression, staff facing organisational change that were taught skills of stress management, how to participate in, and control, their work showed a decrease of stress hormone levels.
- [2.] Staff taught verbal and non-verbal communication and empathy skills demonstrated reduced staff resignations and sick leave
- [3.] Physically inactive employees undergoing stress management training improved their perceived coping ability and those undergoing aerobic exercise improved their feelings of well being and decreased their complaints of muscle pain, but also reported reduced job satisfaction
- [4.] Employees undergoing one of seven training programmes emphasising one or more aspects of stress management—physiological processes, coping with people or interpersonal awareness processes—showed reductions in depression, anxiety, psychological strain, and emotional exhaustion immediately after the programme. There was a further reduction in psychological strain and emotional exhaustion at 9–16 months' follow up