Stress, Job and Personality

Dr.S. Rajagopalan

Editor-in-Chief, Shanlax International Journals, Madurai.

Abstract

This article high lights the nature of stress and gives suggestions to get over stress. The author has brought to lime light the factors that cause stress and differentiates interpersonal stress and work stressors. The study vindicated that stress affects one's personated

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Stress

Stress is an adaptive response to a situation that is perceived as challenging or threatening to the person's well-being Actress is the person's reaction to a situation, not the situation itself moreover, we experience stress when something is perceived to interfere with our well-being, that is, with our fulfillment, Stress has both psychological and physiological dimensions.

Psychologically, people perceive a situation and interpret it as challenging or threatening. This cognitive appraisal leads to a set of physiological responses, such as higher blood pressure, sweaty hands, and faster heartbeat. We often hear about stress as a negative consequence of modern living. People are stressed from overwork, job insecurity information overload, and the increasing pace of life. These events produce distress the degree of physiological, psychological, and behavioral deviation from healthy functioning." There is also a positive side of stress, called Eustress that refers to the healthy, positive, constructive outcome of stressful events and the stress response. Eustress is the stress experience in moderation, enough to activate and motivate people so that the\ can achieve goals, change their environments, and succeed in life's challenges. In other words, we need some stress to survive. However, most research focuses on distress, because it is a significant concern that hurt their job performance and increase their risk of mental and physical health problems. Consequently, our discussion will focus more on distress than on eustress.

General Adaptation Syndrome

The stress experience was first documented 50 years ago by Dr. Hans Selye, a pioneer in stress research. Selye determined that people have a fairly consistent physiological response to stressful situations. This response, called the general adaptation syndrome, provides an automatic defense system to help; us cope with environmental demands. There are three stages of the general adaptation syndrome: alarm reaction, resistance, and exhaustion. In the alarm reaction stage, the perception of a threatening or challenging situation causes the brain to send a biochemical message to various parts of the body, resulting in increased respiration rate, blood pressure, heartbeat, and muscle tension, as well as other physiological responses. At first, the

individual's energy level and coping effectiveness decrease in response to the initial shock. Extreme shock, however, may result in incapacity or death because the body is unable to generate enough energy quickly enough. In most situations, the alarm reaction alerts the person to the environmental condition and prepares the body for the resistance stage.

Resistance

The person's ability to cope with the environmental demand rises above the normal state during the resistance stage because the body has activated various biochemical, psychological, and behavioral mechanisms. For example, we have a higher than normal level of adrenaline during this stage, which gives us more energy to overcome or remove the source of stress. However, our resistance is directed to only one or two environmental demands, so we become more vulnerable to other sources of stress. This situation explains why people are more likely to catch a cold or other illness when they have been working under pressure,

Exhaustion

People have a limited resistance capacity, and if the source of stress persists, they will eventually move into the exhaustion stage as this capacity diminishes. In most work situations, the general adaptation syndrome process ends long before total exhaustion. Employees resolve tense situations before the destructive consequences of stress become manifest, or they withdraw from the stressful situation, rebuild their survival capabilities, and return later to the stressful environment with renewed energy. However, people who frequently experience the general adaptation syndrome have increased risk of long-term physiological and psychological damage.

The general adaptation syndrome describes the stress experience, but this is only part of the picture. To effectively manage work-related success, we must understand its causes and consequences as well as individual differences in the stress experience.

Stressors
The causes of stress

Stressors (the causes of stress, include any environmental conditions that place a physical or emotional demand on the person. There are numerous stressors in organizational settings and other life activities. Exhibit 7.2 lists the four main types of work-related-stressors: physical environment, role-related, interpersonal, and organizational stressors.

Physical Environment Stressors

Some stressors, such as excessive noise, poor lighting, and safety hazards, are found in the physical work environment. For example, a study of textile workers in a noisy plant found that their levels of stress measurably decreased when they were supplied with ear protectors. Another study reported that clerical employees experience significantly higher stress levels in noisy open than in quiet areas. Physical stressors also include poorly designed office space, lack of privacy

Role-Related Stressors

Role-related stressors include conditions where employees have difficulty un-understanding, reconciling, or performing the various roles in their lives, The four main role-related stressors are role conflict, role ambiguity, workload, and task control.

Role conflict – Role conflict occurs when people face competing demands. Inter role conflict exists when employees have two roles that conflict with each other. For example, sales staff in the U.S. banking industry experience inter-role conflict trying to balance the needs of their bank and the needs of customers. Role conflict also occurs when an employee receives contradictory messages from different people about how to perform a task (called intra role conflict) or work with organizational values and work obligations that are incompatible with his or her personal values (called person-role conflict). Role ambiguity—Ro\e ambiguity exists when employees are uncertain about their job duties, performance expectations, level of authority, and other job conditions. This ambiguity tends to occur when people enter new situations, such .is joining the organization 01 taking a foreign assignment, because the\ are uncertain about task and social expectations.

Workload – Work under load, receiving too little work or having tasks that do is a far more common stressor these days. Employees have either too much to do in too little time, or they work too many hours on the job. Long work hours lead to unhealthy lifestyles, which, in turn, cause heart disease and strokes. Work overload is such a problem in Japan that death from overwork has its own name karoshi.

Task control— Employees are more stressed when they lack control over how and when they perform their tasks as well as the pace of work activity. Work is potentially more stressful when it is paced by a machine or involves monitoring equipment, or when the work schedule is controlled by someone else. Information technology has this effect on office workers because they are always on call through e-mail, pagers, and cell phones. "I resent the fact that you can't get away today," says Pat Boyce, a medical equipment installer in Ohio who relies on his cell phone. "It's always there. You can be found at any time.

Interpersonal Stressors

Interpersonal stressors include ineffective supervision, office politics, and other conflicts we experience with people. Call center employees are stressed from uncooperative customers and high productivity quotas calls a day from rude and angry people ... it's hard to deal with at limes," concludes one call center employee. The trend toward teamwork also seems to generate more personal stressors because employees must interact more with co-workers.

Non-work Stressors

Work is usually the most stressful part of our lives, but it's not the only part. We also experience numerous stressors outside organizational settings. Employees do not park these stressors at the door when they enter the workplace. The stressors earn over and ultimately affect work behavior. Moreover, the stress model shown earlier in three main work, non- work stressors are time-based, strain-based, and role behavior conflict.

Strain-Based Conflict

Strain-based conflict occurs when stress from one domain spills over to the "other. Relationship problems, financial difficulties, and loss of a loved one usually top the list of these non-work stressors. New responsibilities, such as marriage, birth of a child, and a mortgage, are also ^stressful to most of us. Stress at work also spills over to an employee's personal life and often becomes the foundation of stressful relations with family and friends. One study found that fathers who experience stress at work engage in dysfunctional parenting behaviors, which then lead to their children's behavior problems in school.

Role Behavior Conflict

A third work-non-work stressor, called role behavior conflict, occurs when people are expected to enact different work and non-work roles. People who act logically and impersonally at work have difficulty switching to a more compassionate behavioral style in their personal lives. For example, one study found that police officers were unable to shake off their professional role when they left the job. This role conflict was confirmed by their spouses, who reported that the officers would handle their children in the same manner as they would people in their job.

Stress and Occupations

Several studies have attempted to identify which jobs have more stressors than others. One should view this information with some caution, however. One problem with rating occupations in terms of their stress levels is that a particular occupation may have considerably different tasks and job environments across organizations and societies. A police officers job may be less stressful in a small town, for instance, than in a large city where crime rates are higher and the organizational hierarchy is more formal.

A major stressor to one person is insignificant to another. In this respect, we must be careful not to conclude that people in high-stress occupations actually experience higher stress than people in other occupations. Some jobs expose people to more serious stressors, but careful selection and training can result in stress levels no different from those experienced by people in other jobs. The next section discusses individual differences in stress.

Individual Differences in Stress

Individual characteristics moderate the extent to which people experience stress or exhibit a specific stress outcome in a given situation. Two people may be exposed to the same stressor, such as having too many deadlines, yet they experience different stress levels or different stress symptoms.

People exposed to the same stressors might have different stress symptoms for three reasons. One reason is that each of us perceives the same situation differently. People with high self-efficacy, for instance, are less likely to experience stress consequences in that situation because the stressor is less threatening. Self-efficacy refers .to a person's belief that he or she has the ability, motivation, and situational-contingencies to complete a task successfully. Similarly,

some people have personalities that make them more optimistic, whereas others are more pessimistic. Those with pessimistic dispositions tend to develop more stress symptoms, probably because they interpret the situation in a negative light.

A second reason some people have more stress symptoms than others in the same situation is that people have different thresholds of resistance to a stressor. Younger employees generally experience fewer and less severe stress symptoms than older employees because they have a larger store of energy to cope with high stress levels. This explains why exercise and healthy lifestyles, discussed later in this chapter, are one way to manage stress. People who exercise regularly and have other healthy lifestyle behaviors are also less likely to experience negative stress outcomes.

A third reason people may experience the same level of stress and yet exhibit different stress outcomes is that they use different coping strategies. Some employees tend to ignore the stressor, hoping that it will go away. This is usually an ineffective approach, which would explain why they experience higher stress levels. There is some evidence (although still inconclusive) that women cope with stress better than their male counterparts. Specifically, women are more likely to seek emotional support from others in stressful situations, whereas men try to change the stressor or use less effective coping mechanisms. However, we must remember that these coping strategies are not true for all women or men.

Behavior Patterns

The effects of work stress occur in three main areas: physiological, emotional, and behavioral. Examples of the effects of excessive stress in these areas are as follows.

Physiological effects of stress include increased blood pressure, increased heart rate, sweating, hot and cold spells, breathing difficulties, muscular tension, and increased gastrointestinal disorders.

Emotional effects of stress include anger, anxiety, depression, lowered self-esteem, poorer intellectual functioning (including an inability to concentrate and make decisions), nervousness, irritability, resentment of supervision, and job dissatisfaction.

Behavioral effects of stress include decreased performance, absenteeism, higher 'accident rates, higher turnover rates, higher alcohol and other drug abuses, impulsive behavior, and difficulties in communication.

These effects of work stress have important implications for organizational behavior and organizational effectiveness. We examine some of these effects in terms of health and performance, including job burnout.

The Type A Personality

People with a Type A personality are involved in a never-ending struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time. Characteristics of this personality type include
- a chronic sense of urgency about time; an extremely competitive, almost hostile orientation;
- an aversion to idleness; and

- impatience with barriers to task accomplishment.

Two medical researchers first identified the Type A personality when they noticed a recurrent personality pattern in their patients who suffered from premature heart disease. In addition to the characteristics just listed, extreme Type A individuals often speak rapidly, are preoccupied with themselves, and are dissatisfied with life.

Evidence links Type A behavior with a vulnerability to heart attacks. Current research, however, suggests that the Type A personality description is too broad to predict coronary heart disease accurately. Rather, research indicates that only certain aspects of the Type A personality—particularly anger, hostility, and aggression—are strongly related to stress reactions and heart disease. For years, the conventional wisdom among medical researchers was that Type A individuals were two to three times more likely to develop heart disease than were Type B individuals. Type B individuals tend to be more easygoing and relaxed, less concerned about time pressures, and less likely to overreact to situations in hostile or aggressive ways. In sum, the Type B personality is considered to be the opposite of the Type A personality.

Stress and Health

Stress and coronary heart disease are strongly linked. Other serious health problems commonly associated with stress include back pain, headaches, stomach and intestinal problems, upper respiratory infections, and various mental problems. Medical researchers recently have discovered possible links between stress and cancer. Although determining the precise role that stress plays in individual cases is difficult, many illnesses appear to be stress-related.

Stress-related illnesses place a considerable burden on people and organizations. The costs to individuals seem more obvious than the costs to organizations. However, we are able to identify at least some of the organizational costs associated with stress-related disease. First, costs to employers include increased premiums for health insurance as well as lost workdays from serious illnesses (e.g., heart disease) and less-serious illnesses (e.g., headaches). Estimates are that each employee who suffers from a stress-related illness loses an average of 16 days of work a year. Second, over three-fourths of all industrial accidents are caused by a worker's inability to cope with emotional problems worsened by stress. Third, legal problems for employers are growing, as indicated in the Preview Case. The number of stress-related worker compensation claims is increasing. The link between the levels of stress in the workplace and worker compensation claims is clear. When employees experience higher amounts of stress, more worker compensation claims will be filed. Studies have shown similar patterns of results across many different industries.

Motivating individuals to perform better is always important, but attempting to do so by increasing the level of stress is shortsighted.

Stress and Job Burnout

Job burnout refers to the adverse effects of working conditions where stressors seem unavoidable and sources of job satisfaction and relief from stress seem unavailable. The burnout phenomenon typically contains three components:

- a state of emotional exhaustion; depersonalization of individuals; and
- feelings of low personal accomplishment.

Depersonalization refers to the treatment of people as objects. For example, a nurse might refer to the "broken knee" in room 107, rather than use the patient's name.

Most job burnout research has focused on the human services sector of the economy sometimes called the "helping professions." Burnout is thought to be most prevalent in occupations characterized by continuous direct contact with people in need of aid.

The individuals who may be most vulnerable to job burnout include social workers, nurses, physicians, police officers, air traffic controllers, teachers, and lawyers. Burnout also may affect managers, shop owners, or professionals who constantly face stressors with little or no relief. Evidence suggests that women, on average, are somewhat more likely to face burnout than are men. Surveys have indicated that 11 percent more women than men report that high stress has affected their health. A Northwestern Life Insurance study found that the job burnout rate was 36 percent for women versus 28 percent for men. Note also that the "high burnout" cell contains occupations that have traditionally attracted more women than men.

Individuals who experience job burnout seem to have some common characteristics. Three characteristics in particular are associated with a high probability of burnout.

- Burnout candidates experience a great deal of stress as a result of job-related stressors.
- Burnout candidates tend to be idealistic and self-motivating achievers.
- Burnout candidates often seek unattainable goals.

Job burnout thus represents a combination of certain individual characteristics and job situations. Individuals who suffer from burnout often have unrealistic expectations concerning their work and their ability to accomplish desired goals because of the nature of the situation in which they find themselves. Unrelieved stressful working conditions, coupled with an individual's unrealistic expectations or ambitions, may lead to physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. In burnout, the individual can no longer cope with job demands, and the willingness even to try drops dramatically.

Job burnout is a significant problem for organizations and their employees. Traditionally, some managers in certain occupations treated the potential for burnout as an "acceptable" risk that goes along with serving clients or customers. However, more organizations are recognizing just how counterproductive overwork and burnout can be. The steps being taken by some organizations to dispel the management "myths" that lead to burnout are reported in the Managing Communication Competency feature on the next page.

Personality and Stress

The problems caused by stress depend substantially on the type of person involved. Personality influences (1) how individuals are likely to perceive situations and stressors and (2) how they will react to these stressors.

Many personality dimensions or traits are related to stress, including self-esteem and locus of control. A personality trait may affect the likelihood that someone will perceive a situation or an event as a stressor. For example, an individual with low self-esteem is more likely to experience stress in demanding work situations than is a person with high self-esteem. The reason may he that individuals high in self-esteem typically have more confidence in their ability to meet job demands. Employees with high internal locus of control may take more effective action, more quickly, in coping with a sudden emergency (a stressor) than might employees with high degree of control. Individuals high in internal locus of control are likely to believe that they can moderate the stressful situation.

The Hardy Personality

A great deal of interest has emerged in identifying aspects of the personality that might buffer or protect individuals from the negative health consequences of stress. Personality traits that seem to counter the effects of stress are known collectively as the hardy personality. As a personality type, hardiness is defined as "a cluster of characteristics that includes feeling a sense of commitment, responding to each difficulty as representing a challenge and an opportunity, and perceiving that one has control over one's own life."34 The hardy personality is characterized by a sense of positive involvement with others in social situations; a tendency to attribute one's own behavior to internal causes and a tendency to perceive or welcome significant changes in life with interest, curiosity, and optimism. (Recall our earlier discussion in this chapter of change as a significant life stressor.)

A high degree of hardiness reduces the negative effects of stressful events. Hardiness seems to reduce stress by altering the way that people perceive stressors. The concept of the hardy personality-' provides a useful insight into the role of individual differences in reactions to environmental stressors. An individual having a low level hardiness perceives fewer events as stressful. A person with a high level of hardiness isn't overwhelmed by challenging or difficult situations. Rather, faced with a stressor, the hardy personality copes or responds constructively by trying to find a solution to control or influence events. This behavioral response typically reduces stress reactions, lowers blood pressure, and reduces the probability of illness.

Conclusion

Stress offsets one's smooth run of everyday life. A moderate degree of stress is essential to accomplish things. Stress and personality are correlated .One has to ponder over coping strategies to abate 'stress' little extent.

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