



## **WORK STRESS AND ITS MANAGEMENT**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

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*Stress is a prevalent and costly problem in today's workplace. About one-third of workers report high levels of stress. One-quarter of employees view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. Three-quarters of employees believe the worker has more on-the-job stress than a generation ago. Stress is the major cause of turnover in organizations. With continued stress at the workplace, workers will develop psychological and physiological dysfunctions and decreased motivation in excelling in their position. This research paper focuses on the understanding work stress, its effect and causal factors and methods for managing it.*

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#### **INTRODUCTION:**

##### **What is stress?**

Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset balance in some way. When someone senses danger whether it's real or imagined the body's defences kick into high gear in a rapid, automatic process known as the "fight-or-flight" reaction, or the stress response.

## **Definition of stress**

**Stress** is an organism's response to a stressor such as an environmental condition or a stimulus. Stress is a body's way to react to a challenge. According to the stressful event, the body's way to respond to stress is by the sympathetic nervous system which results in the Fight-or-Flight response. Stress typically describes a negative condition or a positive condition that can have an impact on an organism's mental and physical well-being.

Stress can hit anyone at any level of the business and recent research shows that work related stress is widespread and is not confined to particular sectors, jobs or industries. HSE's formal definition of work related stress is:

**"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work."**

Stress is not an illness it is a state. However, if stress becomes too excessive and prolonged, mental and physical illness may develop. Well-designed, organised and managed work is generally good for us but when insufficient attention to job design, work organisation and management has taken place, it can result in work related stress. Work related stress develops because a person is unable to cope with the demands being placed on them. Stress, including work related stress, can be a significant cause of illness and is known to be linked with high levels of sickness absence, staff turnover and other issues such as more errors.

There is a difference between pressure and stress. Pressure can be positive and a motivating factor, and is often essential in a job. It can help us achieve our goals and perform better. Stress occurs when this pressure becomes excessive. Stress is a natural reaction to too much pressure.

## **Effects of Stress on Person's Health**


If a person in a stressful situation, his body launches a physical response. The nervous system springs into action, releasing hormones that prepare you to either fight or take off. It's called the "fight or flight" response, and it's why, when a person is in a stressful situation, it may be noticed that heartbeat speeds up, breathing gets faster, muscles tense, and start to sweat. This kind of stress is short-term and temporary (acute stress), and body usually recovers quickly from it.

But if stress system stays activated over a long period of time (chronic stress), it can lead to more serious health problems. The constant rush of stress hormones can put a lot of wear and tear on your body, causing it to age more quickly and making it more prone to illness. If stress is for a short period of time, following can be some physical signs:

- Headache
- Fatigue

- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty concentrating
- Upset stomach
- Irritability

When stress becomes long-term and is not properly addressed, it can lead to a number of more serious health conditions, including:

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- Depression
  - High blood pressure
  - Abnormal heartbeat (arrhythmia)
  - Hardening of the arteries (atherosclerosis)
  - Heart disease
  - Heart attack
  - Heartburn, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome
  - Upset stomach cramps, constipation, and diarrhoea
  - Weight gain or loss
  - Changes in sex drive
  - Fertility problems
  - Flare-ups of asthma or arthritis
  - Skin problems such as acne, eczema, and psoriasis

### **Causal factors of Stress**

Stress is actually a normal part of life. At times, it serves a useful purpose. Stress can motivate you to get that promotion at work, or run the last mile of a marathon. But if unable to handle stress and it becomes long term, it can seriously interfere with job, life, and health. More than half of Americans say they fight with friends and loved ones because of stress, and more than 70% say they experience real physical and emotional symptoms from it.

Life stresses can also have a big impact. Examples of life stresses are:

- The death of a loved one
- Divorce
- Loss of a job
- Increase in financial obligations
- Getting married
- Moving to a new home
- Chronic illness or injury
- Emotional problems (depression, anxiety, anger, grief, guilt, low self-esteem)
- Taking care of an elderly or sick family member
- Traumatic event, such as a natural disaster, theft, rape, or violence against you or a loved one.

Sometimes the stress comes from inside, rather than outside. One can stress oneself out just by worrying about things. All of these factors

- **Fear and uncertainty.** When one regularly hears about the threat of terrorist attacks, global warming, and toxic chemicals on the news, it can cause stress, especially because one feels like he has no control over those events. Fears can also hit closer to home, such as being worried that you won't finish a project at work or won't have enough money to pay bills this month.
- **Attitudes and perceptions.** How one views the world or a particular situation can determine whether it causes stress. For example, if your television set is stolen and take the attitude, "It's OK, my insurance company will pay for a new one," one will be far less stressed than if he thinks, "My TV is gone and I'll never get it back! What if the thieves come back to my house to steal again?" Similarly, people who feel like they're doing a good job at work will be less stressed out by a big upcoming project than those who worry that they are incompetent.
- **Unrealistic expectations.** No one is perfect. If one expects to do everything right all the time, one is destined to feel stressed when things don't go as expected.
- **Change.** Any major life change can be stressful -- even a happy event like a wedding. More unpleasant events, such as a divorce, major financial setback, or death in the family can be significant sources of stress.

### **Work Stress- An Overview**

- Work Stress also sometimes referred as Occupational stress is stress involving work. Stress is defined in terms of its physical and physiological effects on a person, and can be a mental, physical or emotional strain. It can also be a tension or a situation or factor that can cause

stress. Occupational stress can occur when there is a discrepancy between the demands of the environment/workplace and an individual's ability to carry out and complete these demands.

- Work related stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work. Often a stressor can lead the body to have a physiological reaction which can strain a person physically as well as mentally. A variety of factors contribute to workplace stress such as negative workload, isolation, extensive hours worked, toxic work environments, lack of autonomy, difficult relationships among co-workers and management, management bullying, harassment and lack of opportunities or motivation to advancement in one's skill level.
- Basically, stress is divided into eustress and distress as mentioned in above paragraphs. Eustress is positive or good stress, whereas distress is the stress reactions to those events or actions appraised as being negative. Stress-related disorders encompass a broad array of conditions, including psychological disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder) and other types of emotional strain (e.g., dissatisfaction, fatigue, tension, etc.), maladaptive behaviours (e.g., aggression, substance abuse), and cognitive impairment (e.g., concentration and memory problems). In turn, these conditions may lead to poor work performance, higher absenteeism, less work productivity or even injury. Job stress is also associated with various biological reactions that may lead ultimately to compromised health, such as disease, or in extreme cases death.

### **Gender and Workplace Stress**

Higher stress levels at workplace promote more illnesses in working women versus working men like:

- Sleeping problems
- Eating disorders
- Anxiety
- Depression

Abuse of substances like alcohol, cigarettes and drugs to cope with this stress related pressure are also more reported in women. Women also are more open about their experiences and seek more help, than man experiencing stress at workplace.



### Gender based stress differences

Combining housework, childcare, shopping and cooking with an outside job and trying to do everything on time is one of the biggest factors of women being more stressed at work, characterized mainly by feelings of guilt and hostility. 60% of women who have children under age six have an outside job and cope with family problems; single or married most of duties at home fall on shoulders of a woman

Stress can show itself in many different ways. Some of the items in this list may not be signs of stress if people always behave this way. Managers may need to manage staff exhibiting some of these signs differently. When one is particularly looking for changes in the way people behave that could be linked with excessive pressures.

Sr.No	Disorder	Male	
		Short Term	Long Term
1	Head and mental health	Anxious, changed moods, negative thoughts	Anxiety, depression
2	Heart, lungs and circulation	Changes in heart rate, increased blood pressure 'palpitations'	Hypertension (high blood pressure), heart disease
3	Skin	Sweating, blushing, reddening,	Eczema, psoriasis
4	Metabolism	Mobilisation of energy sources, increased cholesterol in blood	Inefficient energy use, increased fat deposition, insulin resistance, metabolic syndrome

5	Muscles and joints	Increased blood flow to muscles, muscle tension	Loss of muscle function and structure, stiffness, soreness, regional pain syndromes, osteoporosis
6	Digestive system and gut	'Butterflies' in stomach, dry mouth, suppression of digestion/nausea	Appetite suppression, impaired capacity to repair ulcers, chronic dysfunction of the gut such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome
7	Reproduction and growth	Suppression of reproductive and growth systems (hormones)	Reproductive abnormalities, decreased testosterone and erectile dysfunction, loss of libido
8	Immune system	Enhancement of specific immune responses e.g. to deal with wounding	Eventual immune suppression increased susceptibility to some infectious diseases

Sr.No	Disorder	Female	
		Short Term	Long Term
1	Head and mental health	More emotional, disturbed sleep patterns	Anxiety, depression

2	Heart, lungs and circulation	Changes in heart rate, increased blood pressure 'palpitations'	Hypertension (high blood pressure), heart disease
3	Skin	Sweating, reddening, blushing	Eczema, psoriasis
4	Metabolism	Increased cholesterol in blood, increased glucose availability	Increased insulin resistance, metabolic syndrome
5	Muscles and joints	Increased blood flow to muscles, muscle tension	Loss of muscle function and regional pain syndromes, osteoporosis
6	Digestive system and gut	'Butterflies' in stomach, dry mouth, suppression of digestion/nausea	Appetite suppression, impaired capacity to repair ulcers, chronic dysfunction of the gut such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome
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## **Sexual harassment as a cause of workplace stress**

Sexual harassment in the workplace is an important cause to workplace stress. In the workplace, women are more likely to experience sexual harassment compared to men; especially for those working in traditionally masculine occupations. In addition, a study indicated that sexual harassment negatively affects workers' psychological well-being. Another study found that level of harassment at workplaces lead to differences in performance of work related tasks. High levels of harassment were related to the worst outcomes, and no harassment was related to least negative outcomes. In other words, women who had experienced a higher level of harassment were more likely to perform poorly at workplaces.

## **Effects of Work Stress**

Workplace stress is quite normal, however if excessive symptoms of stress are shown then it interferes with productivity and performance and impacts physical and emotional health. Physical symptoms that may occur because of occupational stress include fatigue, headache, upset stomach, muscular aches and pains, chronic mild illness, sleep disturbances, and eating disorders. Psychological and behavioural problems that may develop include anxiety, irritability, alcohol and drug use, feeling powerless and low morale. The spectrum of effects caused by occupational stress includes absenteeism, poor decision making, and lack of creativity, accidents, organizational breakdown or even sabotage. If exposure to stressors in the workplace is prolonged, then chronic health problems can occur including stroke. An examination was of physical and psychological effects of workplace stress was conducted with a sample of 552 female blue collar employees of a microelectronics facility. It was found that job-related conflicts were associated with depressive symptoms, severe headaches, fatigue, rashes, and other multiple symptoms. Studies among the Japanese population specifically showed a more than 2-fold increase in the risk of total stroke among men with job strain (combination of high job demand and low job control). Along with the risk of stroke comes high blood pressure and immune system dysfunction. Prolonged occupational stress can lead to occupational burnout.

The effects of job stress on chronic diseases are more difficult to ascertain because chronic diseases develop over relatively long periods of time and are influenced by many factors other than stress. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that stress plays a role in the development of several types of chronic health problems including cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, and psychological disorders.

## **Prevention of Work Stress**

A combination of organizational change and stress management is often the most useful approach for preventing stress at work. Both organizations and employees can employ

strategies at organizational and individual levels. Generally, organizational level strategies include job procedure modification and employee assistance programs (EPA). Individual level strategies include taking vacation. Getting a realistic job preview to understand the normal workload and schedules of the job will also help people to identify whether or not the job fit them.

- Ensure that the workload is in line with workers' capabilities and resources.
- Design jobs to provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities for workers to use their skills.
- Clearly define workers' roles and responsibilities.

To reduce workplace stress, managers may monitor the workload given out to the employees. Also while they are being trained they should let employees understand and be notified of stress awareness.

- Give workers opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs.  
Improve communications-reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment prospects.
- Provide opportunities for social interaction among workers.
- Establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job.
- Combat workplace discrimination (based on race, gender, national origin, religion or language).
- Bringing in an objective outsider such as a consultant to suggest a fresh approach to persistent problems.
- Introducing a participative leadership style to involve as many subordinates as possible to resolve stress-producing problems.

Telecommuting is another way organizations can help reduce stress for their workers. Employees defined telecommuting as "an alternative work arrangement in which employees perform tasks elsewhere that are normally done in a primary or central workplace, for at least some portion of their work schedule, using electronic media to interact with others inside and outside the organization." One reason that telecommuting gets such high marks is that it allows employees more control over how they do their work. Telecommuters reported more job satisfaction and less desire to find a new job. Employees that worked from home also had less stress, improved work/life balance and higher performance rating by their managers.

