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STRESS: WHY and HOW to deal with it

Somehow, the words, stress and work seem to go together. The reason for this is obvious: most of us experience at least some degree of stress in our jobs. We are exposed to many different events and conditions that cause us to feel pressured or in danger of being pushed beyond our personal limits. Many different factors cause stress in our work situations. Most, though, seem to fall into two major categories: causes relating to **our jobs** themselves, and causes relating to our 'personalities'.

Work-related stressors

Which part of our jobs plays the most important role in us experiencing stress and strain? Greenberg and Baron (2002) elaborate on the causes, stating that the list is too long to do justice to it within the limitations of a few pages. The list is long – too long for us to do full justice to it here. However, several of the most important of these factors are, according to the above authors are:

1. Work demands: (Some jobs are more stressful than others)

A careful survey involving more than 130 different occupations indicate that several jobs

(E.g., physician, office manager, foreman or waitrons) are quite high in stress. In contrast, others (e.g., maid, craft worker, farm laborer) cause much less. Additional research takes these findings one-step further, explaining which parts of various jobs tend to make them either low or high in stressfulness.

For example, the greater the extent to which specific jobs require **decision-making and responsibility** for perfect operation of devices and/or materials, the need for continuous exchange of information with others,

or physical threatening conditions, the more stressful they tend to be. It may be wise to considering stress-related factors of a new job offer e.g. the level of strain it will involve, and your ability to handle such pressure. Given the powerful impact of stress upon our physical and mental well being it is probably wise to look before you leap!

2. Conflict between Work and Home

The situation often occurs where someone does their work so well (for example, negotiating contracts

with suppliers), that they are given more and more assignments involving traveling. They are away from home and their families more and more often. Their spouses and children, though, have very different reactions to their growing success. They miss their presence

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and often put increasing pressure on them to make some drastic changes, so as to be at home more often. They find themselves being **pulled in opposite directions** by the needs and expectations of different groups: their family and their company. The result is most often that they experience a considerable degree of **role conflict and associated stress**. The demands of their role as a rising young executive conflict sharply with the demands of their roles as a spouse and parent.

Family ties are something of a “two-edged sword.” On the one hand they do often conflict with work assignments, but could also be an important source of **comfort and support**, and assist someone in overcoming at least some of the harmful effects associated with stress.

3. Stress from uncertainty

This occurs when individuals are uncertain about several matters relating to their jobs and personal life: the scope of their responsibilities, the limits of their authority, specific production requirements, the criteria used in evaluating their work, relationship uncertainties, etc. We hate virtually all forms of uncertainty and experience varying degrees of stress.

4. Overload and underload: Doing too much or doing too little

Being asked to do too much (over demanding work) at work can be stressful. So too, is the opposite – being asked to do too little. In fact, there seems to be a considerable grain of truth in the following saying: “The hardest job in the world is doing nothing – you can’t take a break.” Such **underload** (or under-challenging) leads to boredom and monotony, and can cause significant amounts of stress. Japanese managers are known to punish unproductive workers by taking their work away!

Underload could refer to having too little work or getting **no stimulation** out of the work you are doing. The most desirable, and least stressful jobs seem to be ones that keep you busy, but do not cause you to feel that you will be unable to cope.

5. Having the destiny of others in your hands

In general, individuals who are responsible for other people, e.g. motivate them, reward or **punish them**, and make decisions about them, often experience higher levels of stress than those who do other forms of work. In

fact, they often experience tension and anxiety, and often even develop ulcers or experience **hypertension**. The reasons behind this are complex, but it is possibly related to the fact that they must witness the distress of persons who receive negative feedback because of them, and thus are passed over for promotion, or laid off, or even fired. It is also their task to deal face to face with the many **human conflicts** in human relations at work.

6. Stress from loneliness and isolation

If we have to face stressful conditions, it’s better to do so along with others (and with their support) rather than alone. One reason for this is possibly that social support often acts as a **stress-buffer**. Another reason could be that others could help us, through verbal reflection, advice and their mere presence as well as ability to cope better when exposed to stress.

7. The inability to be in control

Most persons want to feel that they have at least some control over their own fate. Thus, when they are prevented from offering input into decisions relating to them, they feel left out, and unable to control their own future. This could cause considerable stress. Permitting employees to **participate in decisions** affecting their jobs may be quite beneficial. Not only does it enhance their attitudes towards their work; it helps counter an important source of work-related stress as well.

8. Other work-related causes of stress

Stressful **working conditions** such as an unsanitary environment, unpleasant co-workers and/or managers, negative **appraisals**, low **pay**, extreme temperatures, dangerous tasks, loud noise, isolation or crowding, etc. can all act as stressors at work. Stress often also derives from **change** within an organization. Changes in company policy, re-organizations in internal structure, mergers, and major changes in management can all generate high levels of pressure and stress among employees.

Personal-related stressors

Stressful **life events** often result in people having to cope with difficult changes, according to Greenberg et al, which cause their personal health and well being to suffer. Some of the events that seem to produce such effects are listed in Table 1, below. It seems quite clear that the greater the number and intensity of stressful life events endured by an

individual in a given period of time, the greater the likelihood of him/her **developing serious illness**. For example, persons who report life events totaling 150 to 300 points (see table) during one year, have a 50 percent chance of becoming seriously ill within the next twelve months. Those who experience events totaling more than **300 points have a 70 percent** chance of these outcomes occurring.

TABLE 1 Stressful Life Events.

(Numbers to the right provide an index of relative stressfulness; 100=maximum stress.)

Life Events	Scale Value (Range = 1-100)
Death of a spouse	100
Divorce	73
Separation (Marital)	65
Death of close family member	63
Major personal injury or illness	53
Marriage	50
Fired from job	47
Retirement	45
Death of close friend	37
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
Trouble with in-laws	29
Spouse begins or stops work	26
Trouble with boss	23
Change in residence	20
Change in sleeping habits	15
Change in eating habits	15
Vacation	13
Christmas	12
Minor violations of the law	11

People seem to differ greatly in their susceptibility to the stress produced by the events listed in the table above. Whilst some are seriously negatively affected, others are quite **resistant** and continue to function effectively in the face of one personal disaster after another.

People who are resistant to the trauma of stressful life events seem to achieve more **purpose and meaning** in their lives than those who are less capable of dealing with such trauma. Similarly, they believe that they **can influence** their own lives and its outcomes more than others, they see change as an **opportunity** for development rather than a threatening burden.

The major effects of stress

1. Stress and Health: The Silent Killer

Prolonged exposure to stress can be harmful to one's health. Growing evidence (See Greenberg et al) indicates that stress plays a role in a wide range of common illnesses. In fact, many now believe that from 50 to 70 percent of all **physical illnesses** are at least partly **caused by stress!** In addition, stress appears to play a role in the following major health problems: high blood pressure, hardening of the arteries, ulcers, and diabetes. (Please note: this in no way implies that stress is the only cause, or the most important cause, of such ailments.)

2. Stress and Behavior at work

Exposure to strong or prolonged stress exerts many effects upon behavior in work settings. (1) Performance on many tasks are in fact affected by stress, and (2) such performance usually declines steeply when stress levels rise. In addition, stress is related to both **absenteeism and turnover**.

3. Alcohol, Drugs, and Stress

Stress is unpleasant. For this reason, most people seek to reduce or avoid it whenever possible. Some, however, adopt a divergent strategy. Instead of attempting to deal directly with stress, they seek to **withdraw or escape** from it. One of the major tactics these people use to accomplish this goal is simply to retreat into an alcoholic or drug-dependent state.

4. Burnout

Most people are exposed to some degree of stress in their work, yet still manage to cope. They avoid total panic, feelings of helplessness, and despair. A few, however, are not so lucky. They are gradually worn down (or worn out!) by stress. Over time they become **exhausted** (both emotionally and physically), grow cynical, and develop **negative attitudes** toward their work, other people, and life in general.

Burnout can be defined as a syndrome of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to intense stress. People suffering from this reaction have low energy, and are **always tired**. In addition, they often report many symptoms of physical strain, such as frequent headaches, nausea, back pain, sleep disturbances, and changes in eating habits. In sum, burnout represents what may best be described as an **erosion of the human spirit**. People suffering from this syndrome feel incapable of accomplishing anything, have little concern for others, lack interest in virtually everything (including their own lives), and frequently feel fatigued, irritable, and **depressed**.

Burnout victims may choose to **quit** their jobs and withdraw from their present careers. The loss to society in terms of expertise, training, and talent can be great. Secondly, individuals suffering from burnout may simply decide to **change jobs**, without leaving their career or field. The danger, however, is that they will bring their cynicism, exhaustion, and despair with them to a new organization, and so disrupt its effective functioning. Third, the victims of burnout may choose to move from the jobs and careers for which they were trained into purely administrative roles. In this way they **escape from work** activities they now find intolerable, and can minimize their contacts with their former field. Finally, individuals experiencing burnout may choose to remain on their jobs and mark time until retirement. In short, they may become "**dead wood**" – totally counter-productive members of the organization.

Personal Tactics for Managing Stress

Fortunately, though, we can conclude on a more positive note. Burnout does often mark the end of productive careers. Yet, if its victims recognize its presence and take appropriate steps to counter its influence, **it can be reversed**.

Possible therapeutic steps:

Admit that there is a problem

Reorder priorities and **goals**

Establish a network of **social support**

Devine life into work and social/family segments

Cultivate **hobbies** and outside interests

Develop yourself by acquiring the **skills** to 'cope', e.g. negotiation skills and others.

Focus on **physical fitness**, meditation exercises, religious activities and other "Stress tolerance" activities.

Consider **change of job**. (If it is the right one, it could produce positive results.

Organizational Strategies for Managing Stress

Changes in organizational **structure, function**

and jobs can sometimes cause workers to experience significantly less destructive stress. By **decentralizing** the decision-making process (a process in which authority is spread more widely throughout an organization), employees can be afforded greater participation in decisions, especially ones involving their jobs.

Stress resulting from boring, repetitive tasks can be lessened through **job enlargement**, while from feelings of helplessness or lack of control can be reduced by **job enrichment**.

The organization can provide training to employees that will both provide them with better coping skills while at the same time increase their **negotiation**, management, presentation, conflict-handling and interpersonal **skills**.

(Reference: 2002, Greenberg, J & Baron, R A; Behavior in Organizations, 8th Ed. Prentice Hall, N.Y.)

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