

COPING STRESS: THE MANTRA OF SUCCESS

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ABSTRACT

Stress in working environment has been receiving immense attention over the years. This is because the consequences of stress are manifold in terms of psychological health, physiological health and ultimately on performance. Counteracting stress and overcoming it successfully depends upon each person's capacity and threshold level. However, coping strategies to stress act as a great mantra for the employees at various stages of life, to attain success by withstanding it victoriously. The paper examines stress in working environment and suggests measures for coping it.

Introduction

Stress has become an important buzzword in the present day context because of its genuine and justifiable persistence in various walks of life. Work pressures, tight schedules, unacceptable peers, critical bosses, inefficient subordinates coupled with host of other irritants have a cumulative effect in making the life of an executive miserable and stressful. However, perception of events create different reactions physically and psychologically activates stress. It is therefore highly individualistic in nature. So what is stressful situation to one may be a pleasant situation for another. In the words of John et. al., (1987), it is certainly wrong to conclude that stress is always bad. There is also a positive, pleasant side of stress caused by good things, which is called as 'Eustress'. Another form of stress namely 'distress' is unhealthy for the individual and the organization as it leads to performance and other behavioural problems.

In fact, there is growing evidence that undue stress is related to major causes of heart diseases, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, stroke, suicidal tendencies and death. Therefore, it has become a topic of interest to medical professionals, social scientists, psychologists, business executives and even academicians. It is a known fact that the call centre industry is the one which has a maximum attrition rate compared to other service industries. Certainly the call centre industry promises to become a big white-collar labour intensive business. Though the pay and perks are lucrative, they definitely

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come at a stiff price. Peculiar working hours with shifts, showing artificial politeness to demanding and abusive customers, constant alertness, continuous use of voice, computers and telephones do not suit for the physique of the ordinary individuals. Those, whose body clock does not adjust to this routine, complain of insomnia, anorexia, nausea, stomach upset, and body ache. While peers and friends from other professions work during the day, call centre employees are obliged to do the reverse; social life of these professionals also takes a heavy toll. The pressure and demands of the job are so high that more than 70 per cent of the people over there feel stressed.

So, keeping this viewpoint, a micro study was undertaken in one of the call centres to understand the aspects of stress on those employees. This paper tries to highlight the causes of stress and coping strategies for it.

Objectives

- To understand the dynamics of stress and factors responsible for generating high stress.
- To identify the impact of high stress on people's behaviour.
- To understand stress at workplace.
- To understand stress coping and stress management effectively.

Scope and Methodology

For the purpose of this study, 'Manipal Informatics', a separate division of Manipal Press Ltd., which started its service on 1st April 2002 in Manipal, Udupi district, registered under Software Technology Parks of India, was selected. And 300 agents who have worked here for more than 6 months were selected and data was collected through predesigned questionnaire and interviews and later was tabulated and interpreted.

Causes of Stress (Conceptual Study)

Understanding the causes of stress, namely stressors enable us to tune our life to stress coping strategies.

1. Emotional Disturbances

Emotions are responsible for all the pleasures and the sufferings of life. Chopra and Sharma (2001), in their study mention that, emotional stress factors include fears and anxieties with which we struggle. Worrying unnecessarily about undone task or future uncertainties also trigger emotional stress factors.

2. Extra-organizational stressors, Organizational Stressors, Group Stressors and Individual Stressors

Extra-organizational stressors include things such as societal/technological change, economic and financial conditions, family relocations and the like (John and Michael, 1980). As per John and Ganster (1993), organizational stressors like change in administrative policies, strategies, organizational structures, organizational processes and working conditions and such chronic occupational demands can lead to stress. Luthans (1998) expressed that, group stressors like lack of cohesiveness, lack of support interpersonal and inter-group conflict as well as organizational politics (Ferris et. al., 1996) are the potential source of stress in the work environment. A personality patterns, personal efficacy and psychological hardiness may all affect the level of stress in individuals.

3. Survivor Syndrome

When the organization undergoes downsizing, according to Caudron (1996), the survivors might have feeling of insecurity and role ambiguity that might lead to tension and conflict.

Chemical Reactions

Chemical stressors are less under our control since we tend to consume it through food, water, smoke and other beverages.

4. Decision Stress

People normally experience ambiguity and conflicting job demands and too much responsibility with too little authority.

Apart from the above reasons the other problems in life such as commuting problems, phobia, onset of disease, experiencing pain and environmental situations are also stimulators of stress.

A study by Singh (1987) revealed that three motivational climates namely, 'Achievement', 'Expert influence' and 'Extension' increased satisfaction and decreased role stresses. On the other hand, climates of control, affiliation and dependency have opposite effect. Studies have also shown that if employees are given a sense of control over their work environment, such as, being given a chance to be involved in the decision making processes that affects them, this will reduce their work stress (Jackson 1988).

Thus, manager's functioning within an organization is to a large extent influenced by the stress experienced by him. The manner in which he is able

to handle the stress to some extent depends on his/her internal and external orientation.

Major Findings

1. Stress At Workplace

An attempt was made to analyze stressors in the work place and the relevant data have been furnished in Table 1 by applying percentages.

Table 1
Stressors at Work Place

<i>Determinants of Stress (Hassles or Stumbling blocks)</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Dis- agree</i>	<i>Stron- gly Disagree</i>
<i>(In Percentages)</i>					
1. Situations in Call Centres making the respondents workaholic	26	43	20	11	-
2. Perception of the importance of their services to the organization	6	38	4	52	-
3. Deadlines and time pressure	40	37	10	10	3
4. Trouble with work colleagues and boss	23	30	20	13	14
5. Trouble with client/customer	20	20	35	20	5
6. Technical breakdowns and associated with tasks not stimulating	16	28	12	24	20
7. Too many jobs to do at once and do not know where career is heading	22	38	22	12	6
8. Spouse is not supportive about work and family life adversely affects the work	18	33	28	11	10
9. Symptoms of stress (irritability, loss of appetite, physical stress of any kind)	56	31	-	13	-
10. Non-availability of time to pursue hobbies/interests and personal likings	22	50	19	9	-
11. Call centres have quick grievance redressal arrangements	12	18	30	22	18
12. Annual health check-ups and stress reduction programmes like yoga, meditation conducted in call centres	-	-	20	30	50
13. Feeling of tiredness, boredom and depression at the end of the day	12	33	28	17	10
14. Empowerment to participate in decision making process	8	34	26	14	18
15. Get sufficient breaks for relaxation and refreshing	10	15	15	35	25

Table 1 is self-explanatory. Majority of respondents have shown a tendency of negativism which itself is an indication that they are terribly facing work stress.

2. *Impact of high stress on people's behaviour*

About 48 per cent of the respondents felt that their behaviour is changed ever since they started working in call centres. Some of them experienced sleeplessness, under eating or overeating, forgetfulness, confusion and the like. 20 per cent of the respondents who never had drinking habit resorted to alcoholism either on weekends or at the end of the day, which clearly indicates behavioural deviations, which are harmful. Behaviour is the major influencing factor for employee productivity and achievement of organizational goals. Behavioural change might trigger aggressive behaviour on the part of the employees leading to interpersonal conflicts and lack of organizational citizenship behaviour. There is research evidence indicating a relationship between 'stress, absenteeism and turnover' (Lyman and Steers, 1973). The call centre employees are very much in news presently for all the wrong reasons such as offences like rape, customer cheating, data stealing, forgery and the like.

Coping strategies for stress

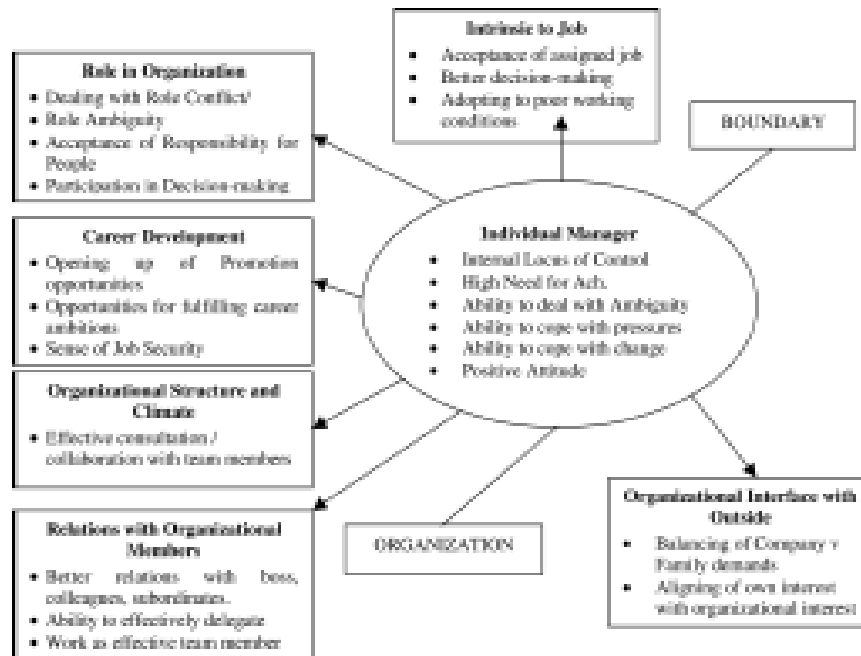
Many studies have suggested various coping strategies for stress. Goal setting, organizational behaviour modification, group dynamics, management of conflict, communication skills, political strategies, leadership styles, organization processes and design, decision making skills, control techniques, management of change and organization development techniques suggest ways to manage and cope more effectively with stress. Several theories are also being developed on the ways to cope with stress (Jeffrey, 1992). It is also proved that at the individual level certain activities like exercise, relaxation, behavioural self-control, cognitive therapy (Meichenbaum, 1992) and networking (Luthans et. al., 1985) work the best.

The following models enable to understand how to cope with stress at the individual, group and organizational levels.

The manager with his internal strengths can make positive influence on the working environment. The Fig. 1 clearly depicts how an individual with his personality attributes like internal locus of control, high need for achievement and positive attitude counteracts the negative impact of stress.

Fig. 2 which delineates the negative repercussions of 'Reacting', while it is always easier to choose The right path, i.e., 'Responding' even though difficult to choose leads to improved health, problem solution and the overcoming of stress through mindfulness or awareness.

Figure 1
Managing Executive Stress: An approach to Self Development – A Model

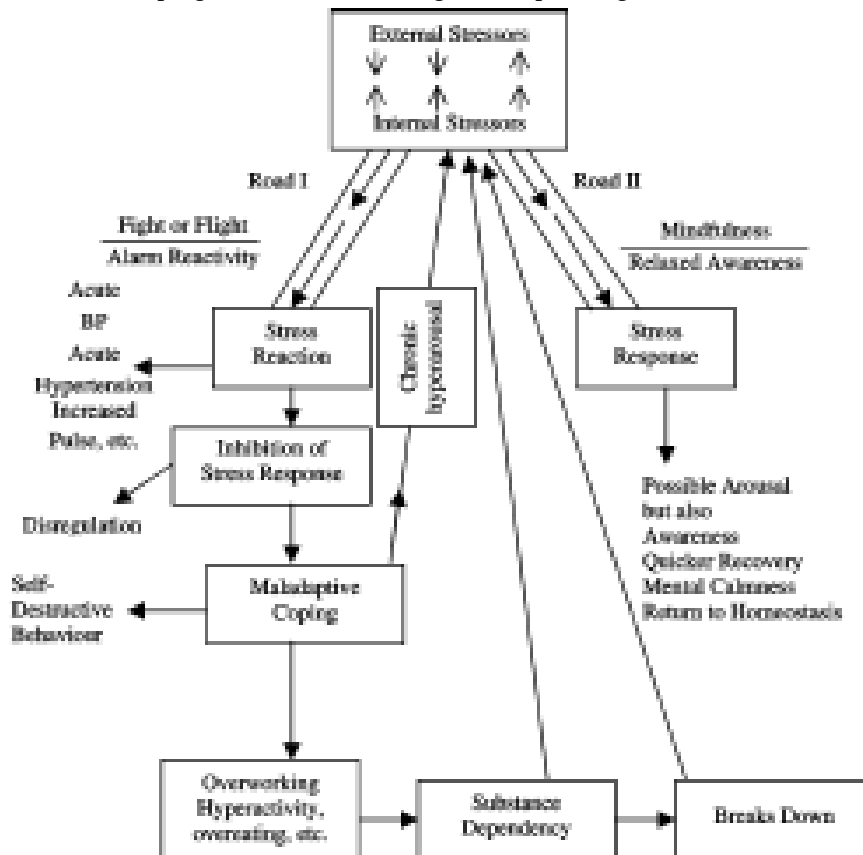


Source: Daisy (2002).

Few Suggestions

- Since call centre job is tiring, it requires longer breaks for the employees to feel refreshed.
- Work pressure should be equitably distributed to the employees.
- Separate formal grievance redressal committee and suggestion scheme to the HR managers to sort out the problems and demands of the workers should be set up.
- Annual health checkups and life style modification programmes must be conducted at call centres.
- Stress reduction programmes like yoga, meditation, relaxation and deep-breathing techniques must be imparted at call centres at formal level.
- Arrangement of monthly get together, recreation, games and talent shows will rejuvenate the employees from monotony and tardiness.
- Recognition of employees' performance by instituting awards and incentives act as morale booster, which can divert depression and disappointment in them.

Figure 2
Coping with Stress: Reacting Vs. Responding – A Model



Source: Kabat Zinn 1990, from Rita Agarwal (2001).

- A department can be created which can deliver the service of employee bill payment, investment advice and portfolio management.
- Employee must resort to hobbies and other extra curricular activities during their free time to feel relaxed and happy.
- Effective time management and setting priorities to deal with the problems and having stable relationships help to fight out stress.

Conclusion

An individual must be well versed with the information about the job to understand whether he/she makes a proper fit into it. No matter whatever job the person opts, the stress factor is bound to be there at different

intensities, based on individuals take towards it. It is necessary to aggressively seek coping strategies, which fit to particular situation or to person so as to achieve success throughout.

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