



## Managing stress at the organisational level through new age therapies

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### Abstract

Stress was originally defined as a neutral general adaptive syndrome or non-specific response to demands. Increasingly, it has acquired a negative connotation, implying excessive demand or pressure. It is difficult to distinguish stress from its causes and effects. Organizational stressors like policies, structures, physical conditions, and processes also develop stress. A good number of new age therapies besides traditional ways are available for managing stress at the organizational level.

**Keywords:** Creative visualisation, general adaptation syndrome, music therapy, sound therapy, stress management

### Introduction

Concern in the USA about stress developed as early as 1936 when it was observed that the health of laboratory animals exposed to various stressors (for example, irregular sleep patterns, changed biorhythms, and so on) suffered. Soon, doctors and therapists related various executive ailments like ulcers, high blood pressure and anxiety to the pressures and strains in life. More research indicated that there was a mind- body connection, and when the mind was under constant pressure and anxiety, the body reacted.

The term 'stress' can be credited to the pioneering work of Hans Selye, the accepted father of stress, who discovered that tissue damage is a non-specific response to virtually all noxious stimuli. He called this phenomenon the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) which he later termed as stress. GAS has three stages alarm, resistance and exhaustion. In the alarm stage, an outside stressor mobilises the internal stress systems of the body. A stressor' is anything which triggers off a reaction, putting the body into a heightened state. These may be related to the environment (noise, pollution), working styles (getting needlessly worked up), not living according to body/mind needs (lack of exercise, no relaxation), diet (too much coffee, tea and the like), and, most important, one's attitude. A number of physiological and chemical reactions take place in the body as a result of stress such as increase in respiration and heart rate, rise in blood pressure, muscle tension and a heightening of the senses. At this stage, the body prepares for a fight or flight' response.

If the stressor continues, then GAS moves into the resistance stage during which the body calls upon the needed organ or system to deal with the stressor. If the stressor still persists despite resistance, the reserves of the adaptive mechanisms during the second stage may get drained, and exhaustion will set in. When this occurs, there may be a return to the alarm stage and the cycle starts all over again with another organ or system. If the defenses wear away, the individual experiences a variety of illnesses like headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure and ultimately the failure of the cycle may lead to death. The third stage is the most severe and presents the greatest threat both to individuals and to organisations.

Let us, however, remember that along with these physiological reactions, there are psychological and

behavioural reactions as well. If resistance does not succeed and the stress persists, negative emotions and feelings of helplessness are likely to be expressed.

Bunhans has proposed three models of stress:

- 1. The Engineering Model:** The engineering model presents stress as the load or demand placed upon a person which exceeds the limit of the individual's capacity to adapt to it. In this model, people operate in situation, such as during probation, working with children with special educational needs or in areas of multiple deprivation, which may give rise to demands beyond their adaptive limits.
- 2. The Medical Model:** The medical model focuses on physiological and psychological responses which can arise as a consequence of stress. Large number of symptoms, such as depression, tension, irritability, insomnia, loss of appetite, and weight loss are essential components of stress. But it is also clear that these symptoms are not unique to stress and may be attributed to other medical conditions.
- 3. The Interactive Model:** This model perceives stress as interactive and situational. It recognises that on the one hand managers may exert pressures on employees; while on the other, individual teachers react in different ways and bring a variety of adaptive resources to help them cope with those pressures.

### Linkage of Stress and Job Performance

The escalating demands of 21st century work causes stress and overwhelm, thereby undermining the productivity and effectiveness.

When we face the continuous demand of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we commonly think that there is something wrong with us. We feel crippled as we simply do not have tools and work habits to deal powerfully with this faster, more complex environment. In October 2002 issue, Fortune magazine reported that "stress in work place is sky rocketing" and had reached "second levels". Experts say job stress is linked to one's sense of control. Less control means more stress. Current research shows that, in the face of escalating work demands, people feel overwhelmed and anxious- under mixing their confidence and effectiveness.

The National Institute for Occupational Health and Safety recently disclosed that the number of American workers who consider stress to be a major problem in their lives has more than doubled during the past ten years. A Reuters survey found that two-thirds of managers worldwide suffer from increased tension and one-third from ill health because of information overload. In a recent study measuring workers' emotions about their jobs, human resources consultants Tower Perron reported that more than half of the emotion was negative, with the biggest single factor being workload, but also a sense that work doesn't satisfy their deeper needs.

A manager should know that much of the sick time that occurs in his company is directly or indirectly related to stress. Research indicates that stress accounts for as much as 75% of all time lost from work owing to illness and accidents. Ailments are indicators of stress that can contribute to lost productivity.

Productivity and effectiveness decrease as stress level increases. Employees can learn to stay within the productivity zone.

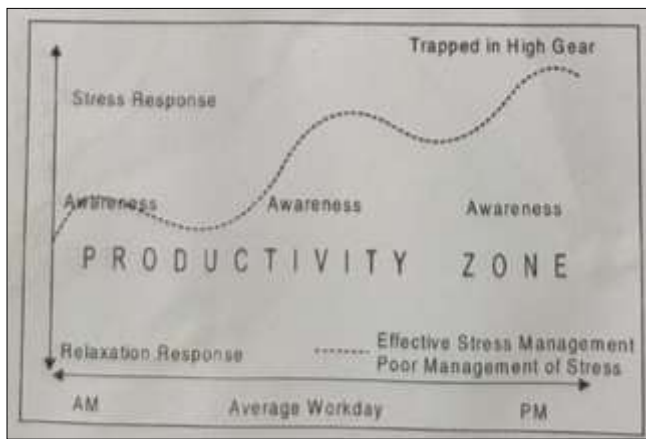


Fig 1: The relationship between stress and productivity

**Organisational Causes**

There are many changes taking place in the companies, many new products and services are being launched and many new challenges are being faced by employees.

The UK's Health and Safety Executive lists six key stress factors in the organizations:

- a. The demands of the job
- b. The control staff has over how they do their work
- c. The support they receive from colleagues and superiors
- d. Their relationships with colleagues
- e. Whether they understand their roles and responsibilities
- f. How far the company consults staff over workplace changes

The causes of work-related stress fall into several categories:

1. **Work Practices:** Stress arising out of work practices have the following causes:
  - People are unable to exert control or influence over the demands placed upon them.
  - Lack of clear job description or chain of command.
  - A high degree of uncertainty about job security or career prospects.
  - Temporary work and fixed term contracts.
  - Lack of understanding of leadership.

- Cuts in Government and local Government funding leading to increased work loads.
- Long hours cultures.
- No recognition or reward for good job performance.
- No opportunity to voice complaints.
- Heavy responsibilities with no authority or decision-making discretion.
- No opportunity to use personal talents or abilities. Inadequate time to complete tasks.
- Chances for small error or momentary lapse of attention to have serious or even disastrous consequences.

**2. Pressure**

- Pressures piling one on top of another.
- Prolonged pressures.
- Confusion caused by conflicting demands.

**3. Harassment or Bullying**

- Prolonged conflict between individuals.
- Exposure to prejudice regarding age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity or religion.

**4. Management Techniques**

- Human resource management.
- Lean Production.
- Business process re-engineering and Total Quality management, which is described in managers handbooks as 'Management by Stress'.

**5. Environment and Technology**

- Unpleasant or hazardous working conditions.
- Technology controlling workers, for example 'power dialling' systems used in telephone banking where there are no gaps between calls and staff have no control.

**Group Causes**

Stress an account of group causes arises because of the following reasons:

1. **No social support:** When an individual gets social support from group members, it satisfies his social needs and he feels happy and relieved but if it is the other way round it is very depressing and is bad for individual.
2. **Lack of Group cohesiveness:** Absence of group cohesiveness causes stress. When group cohesiveness is less, there is low morale, less communication, more conflict. Group cohesiveness means "the degree to which members are attracted to a group, are motivated to remain in the group, and are mutually influenced by one another".
3. **Conflict:** When there are discussions and interactions amongst individuals, sometimes there are conflicts, which become the source of stress for the individual.

**Personal Causes**

Stress because of personal causes arises on account of the following reasons:

There are many factors which are connected and related to personal life of an individual which contribute towards enhancing stress like coping with daily life, financial difficulties, type of personality, social system, social control, cultural differences, career challenges etc.

- Death: of spouse, family, and friend.
- Health: injury or illness.
- Crime: Sexual molestation, smuggling, and burglary, pick-pocketing.
- Self-abuse: drug abuse, alcoholism, self-harm.
- Family change: separation, divorce, new baby, and marriage.
- Argument: with spouse, family, friends, co-workers, boss.
- Physical changes: lack of sleep, new work hours.
- New location: vacation, moving to a new house.
- Money: lack of it, owing it, investing it.
- Environment change: in school, job, house, and town.
- Responsibility increase: new dependent, new job.

### General Causes

The general causes which generate stress are:

- Threat
- Fear
- Uncertainty

### Organizational Stress Coping Strategies

The following techniques can help in managing stress at the organizational level:

1. Counselling: It is the discussion of a problem with an employee to help the employee cope with stress. Through counselling employees; mental health is released of emotional tensions.
2. Meditation and Yoga.
3. Job redesign: Properly designed jobs and work schedules can help release and ease stress in the individuals and the organisation.
4. Time Management
5. Role Clarity
6. Right Objectives
7. Build emotional, physical success to reduce stress at all levels
8. Positive thinking
9. Learning from mistakes.
10. Use four steps to problem solving viz.
  - Brain Solution
  - Think of the consequences
  - Choose a solution
  - Evaluate the choice.
11. Set realistic goals in organization.
12. Don't dwell on your weaknesses.
13. Visualize what you want to happen.
14. Improving your working and living environment.
15. Be clear about the ends where you have to reach.

### New Age Therapies for Reducing Stress

- **Sound Therapy:** This therapy employs sound in an organized or rhythmic form to disentangle the stressed out nerves and brain, relaxing the mind-body as a whole. Certain sounds have telling effect upon the state of our brain. Most of the sounds heard in the world today are 'discharging' sounds, draining the brain of its vital energy. Sound therapy is a method of beneficially recharging the brain and distributing the latent energy throughout the nervous system. Usually, the effect of therapeutic sound upon a person is one of vitalizing, harmonizing and healing at almost every level of being: Sound therapy is one of the most preferred techniques for relieving negative effects of stress.

Apart from specially created sounds, we can access and utilize the natural sounds all around us. Nature has a vast reserve of soothing and rhythmic sounds. We seem to overlook the sounds of ocean, breeze, rusting of leaves, bubbling sounds of a waterfall and even the sound of silence. Listening to the note they transmit, then going deeper into the sounds and listening to the note behind them and letting the sounds resonate through our entire body washes tensions and worries.

In Indian spirituality, chanting or listening to mantras are considered to be greatly relaxing and uplifting. It has been proved that meditating on the sound of 'OM' can have therapeutic effects on nerves, muscles, circulation and brain. Sound therapy is found to be extremely beneficial in almost all stress related problems. It can be helpful for:

- Easier, more effective sleep.
- Regaining vitality and a sense of well being It gives relief from tiredness.
- Deep relaxation, relief from anxiety and consequent healing of stress-related disorders such as high blood pressure, hypertension, digestive problems.
- Correctional stammering and other speech defects induced by psychological disturbances Hyperactivity and behavioural problems in children can also be effectively treated by therapeutic sounds. A balanced body vibration ensures reduction in stress effects and metabolism rate. This can diminish artificial craving for food under stress.
- Increasing mental focus and consecration.
- **Walking for Stress Relief:** Tension, anxiety and anger can be enormously overwhelming feelings. They can ruin our outer existence and suppressing them can affect our inner being. But such negative emotions can be effectively reduced by taking long walks in open environments.

Walking provides with an excellent opportunity to recharge and invigorate our body with extra intake of oxygen and release of muscle tensions. Through long walks, important organs such as heart, lungs, digestive system, and muscles get thoroughly exercised, facilitating blood circulation.

The act of walking is recognized as a therapy with multifaceted benefits. Walking is also an effective and handy stress buster.

Regular walking sessions can make us feel surer about ourselves and improve our physical and mental discipline apart from keeping our body healthy.

Though walking, we release our blocked energy and negative feelings and thoughts.

- **Music Therapy:** Music or sound coordinated in a rhythmic manner is known to appeal to our inner being so powerfully that it can effect healing in our body. The science of yoga reveals that body is made of vibrating energy, music, whether vocal or instrumental and sends out various forms of vibrating sound-energy to its surrounding. People are generally attracted to the types of music appealing to their inherent body vibration. Some people love to listen to the high and racy vibrations of jazz, but to some others it's the slow and pleasant sound of flute that appeals most.

The sound of music, when coordinates well with one's inner vibration, untangles the knotted and stressed out nerves, soothes the mind-body, and promotes well-being in human as well as other species. Music can be a source of emotional enjoyment, whether one performs or just experiences it as a passive listener.

- **Autogenic Training for Stress:** Autogenic training is a European method of relaxation based upon passive concentration and body awareness of specific sensations. Since the last century it has been successfully applied in relieving most stress-related disorders. The affected person learns to use the techniques in relieving stress symptoms such as anxiety, tension, sleep disorder and examination stress as well as in chronic stress induced medical conditions. The technique's disease alleviating capabilities has given it the status of a therapy in the western part of the world. Though autogenic training is effectively used for reducing stress, it is contra-indicated for persons suffering from diabetes, hypoglycaemia, heart conditions, and high or low blood pressure.
- **Biofeedback:** Biofeedback is a technique in which stress affected persons are taught to improve their health and physical performance by altering their brain blood pressure, muscle tension, heart rate and other bodily functions. Under stress, these functions become unusual. Patients are taught to use signals from their own bodies, recognize the anomalies and redirect them accordingly. This technique of bio-feed-back' came into being in late 1960s following successful laboratory tests on patients.

Biological functions such as body temperature fluctuations, heart rate, sweat gland activity, and brainwave activity are commonly measured and used in similar way to help people learn to control their physical functioning. At present, biofeedback techniques are widely used for an increasing number of stress induced disorders. Some of these ailments are migraine headaches, stress and strain, chronic pain and movement disorders, high blood pressure/hypertension and cardiac conditions.

- **Creative Visualisation:** In 1970's Carl Simonton developed a visualization technique that helped individuals with cancer and other tumors to contribute to their own healing. Since then, many other self-healing visualization techniques have been developed. This system constitutes visualizing nerve relaxing imageries such as beautiful and peaceful places a beach, a placid lake, a garden full of blossoms or chirping birds in boughs.

One such visualization technique-the 'Wave Imagery'-innovated by Phyllis Krystal, tells about how to 'ride' the waves, bringing relaxation in just a minute. For example, imagine you are on a beach, lying on the warm sands. The waves are rolling in and each one draws closer- then the waves start to wash over your body before they ebb out. As each wave falls away from you and returns into the sea, your tension, anxiety and stress are washed away in the process. With each wave you feel a little more relaxed.

- **Craniosacral Balancing:** It is understood that human body is immensely complex and requires enormous amount of internal organization for its smooth functioning. Craniosacral Therapy is a subtle and profound healing form, which aims at organizing the body's inherent life force and the natural intelligence of the body.

It helps nurture the auto-functioning principles, increasing vitality and well being of the body. The healing effect not only brings structural changes in the body, but also improves management of self at the mental and emotional levels.

It is increasingly used for treatment of many stress-induced disorders throughout the world. This therapy can be profoundly relaxing, exhilarating and effective. Sessions are usually as short as 40-60 minutes in total. Some of the stress related disorders managed by Craniosacral therapy are:

- Back pain
- Migraine
- Post-operative pain and strain colic
- Depression
- Drug withdrawal
- Exhaustion
- Frozen shoulder
- Hormonal imbalances
- Hyperactivity
- Immune system disorders
- Fall or injury
- Sciatica
- Stress related illnesses
- Visual disturbances

- **Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP):** Neuro linguistic programming provides us with a blueprint of reality that shows how others have positively responded to similar stressful situations that we are facing at present. This lets us understand about practical life-situations and how it can be successfully handled. We see the differences in approaches and make conscious efforts to change our attitudes to stressors. Practice of NLP gives us occasion to grow out of our limited capability to face life positively. When encountered with stress or depression, many of us have applied these principles in our life without even realizing it came from NLP.

'Neuro' refers to the neural network that feeds information to the brain. Neurons or nerve cells are the working units used by the nervous system to receive, store and send signals. 'Linguistics' is about the content (verbal and non-verbal) that moves across and through these networks. Through 'programming, stored content or signal is manipulated by brain to convert them into useful information. The brain may direct the signal, sequence it, or change it based on our prior experiences, or connect it to some other experience we have stored in our brain to convert it into thinking patterns and behaviours.

### Conclusion

Finally, we may opine that preventive stress management can have three stages: primary to eliminate stressors; secondary- to respond to stressors if inevitable; and tertiary- to use therapy if stress has occurred. Individuals can use

coping strategies like learned optimism, developing self-awareness, time management, and leisure time activities at the primary stage, physical exercises, relaxation and diet control at the secondary stage; opening up, networking or social support at the tertiary stage. As organisational stress has its roots in policies, structure, physical conditions, and processes/ functions, organisations have to eliminate work stressors or help employees modify their perceptions or help them to cope with the problem. Therefore, organisational stress coping strategies would relate to personnel selection and replacement skills training, job redesign, role negotiation, increased participation and personal control, team building and cohesive work groups, improved communication, career counselling and even comprehensive health promotion. New age therapies are also extremely helpful in stress management.

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