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**A GUIDE TO MANAGING  
WORKPLACE STRESS**

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*A Guide to Managing Workplace Stress*

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# PREFACE

The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) has commissioned recent research which has indicated that:

- about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill;
- up to 5 million people in the UK feel "very" or "extremely" stressed by their work; and
- a total of 12.8 million working days were lost to stress, depression and anxiety in 2004/5.

Work-related stress is therefore a serious problem and tackling it effectively can result in significant benefits for organisations. This can result in a happier and more productive workforce with fewer days away from work with stress related illnesses.

Managers will also want to comply with recent HSE advice on managing stress within the workplace fulfilling their duty of care to employees. This should result in less exposure of organisations to the threat of litigation and the resultant negative publicity this causes.

The intention of this book is to provide information to those who may be suffering from work related stress and to provide managers with a "toolkit" to help address such problems in the workforce.





# CHAPTER 1

## WHAT IS STRESS?

DEFINITIONS

UNDERSTANDING STRESS

STRESS AND PERFORMANCE



# CHAPTER 1

## WHAT IS STRESS?

### *Definitions*

Most people, when asked about their use of the word “*stress*” describe combinations of unpleasant situations, and unpleasant inner personal experiences. These experiences can cause confusion for many people as they can find it difficult to separate stress reactions with the actual causes of stress. Pressure at work, difficulties in family or personal relationships, involvement in a traumatic incident or a new position of responsibility are all examples of *causes* of stress. These causes will be considered further in Chapter 2.

However stress itself is the body and mind’s response to an event or occurrence, not the event itself. Stress has been defined as; “*a feeling of doubt about being able to cope, a perception that the resources available do not match the demands made*”. Stress can be accumulative over a period of time resulting in a “*burnout experience*” (physical and psychological ill-health adversely affecting work and social functioning) unless addressed as soon as possible by line and senior managers.

### *Understanding Stress*

We will now look at two types of instinctive stress responses:

1. Short Term - ‘*Fight or Flight*’ Response and;
2. Longer Term - General Adaptation Syndrome

## 1. Short Term - 'Fight or Flight' Response

Stress has always been with us. But in the days of the cave man things that caused stress and the ways of dealing with them were very different than they are today. Early humans had to deal with life or death situations that demanded immediate physical reactions. Most of the stress situations that we face today are of a different type. When confronted by a sabretoothed tiger for example, our early ancestors had two options; to either run or fight. In order to do this, a complex set of bodily reactions must be activated.

This set of reactions involves primarily the release of hormones such as Adrenaline, and Nor-Adrenalin. These hormones speed up heart rate, increase blood pressure, increase availability of energy stores, and increase metabolism. These hormones also increase muscle strength and makes the body resistant to infections and inflammations. Response to threat that prepared our ancestors for extreme physical activity is known as the "*fight or flight*" reaction. We are all descendants of a long line of people who had a very effective "*fight or flight*" reaction to danger. The problem is that fighting or fleeing is not as appropriate today as it was in the past.

We have "*fight or flight*" reactions in different situations but we seldom act them out. When confronted with an angry boss, competition, uncooperative co-workers, hostile employees, etc. we may feel like fighting or fleeing but we seldom do this. If you are like most people, you just sit and stew. Your mind and body can pay the price when this happens too often.

Stress is a state of tension that is created when the person responds to both internal and external demands and pressures. Such demands require some kind of response. Any response, no matter how small involves some activation of the "*fight or flight*" response.

This means that the internal and external demands and pressures can add up over time to increase the total burden on an individual. The greater the total burden the stronger the "*fight or flight*" reaction needs to be to manage it. "*Fight or flight*" reactions that are too extreme, too frequent, or too prolonged place a strain on your mind and body. Strain can lead to system failures of mind and/or body and can result in physical and mental symptoms.

***Biological changes during the ‘fight or flight’ response***

Basically the “*fight or flight*” response develops in biological terms by:

- Signals received from primary senses e.g. vision or hearing
- Brain releases hormones
- Breathing increases
- Heart rate and blood pressure increases
- Liver releases sugar, cholesterol and fatty acids into the bloodstream
- Digestion ceases
- Kidneys release hormones such as Adrenalin, Nor-Adrenalin and Cortisone which causes increased sweating and clotting mechanisms.

***How we experience these biological reactions***

- a. **Salivation:** The body does not want to waste energy having to produce saliva and so this production decreases and produces symptoms such as a dry mouth.
- b. **Facial colour:** The sympathetic nervous system may telegraph its state of mind in the whiteness (pallor) or redness (flushing) of the face. Pallor associated with fear or anger is caused by constriction of the facial blood vessels brought on by the release of large amounts of Adrenalin and Nor-Adrenalin. Associated with embarrassment or slight to moderate anger, a flushed face (which may begin with a faint blush at the top of the ears) is caused by the dilation of the facial blood vessels due to adrenalin. All the blood is draining from areas that we do not need immediately to stay alive; this blood is forwarded to feed our muscles (“*fight or flight*”).
- c. **Biting jaw:** The jaw clinches down to protect our mouth and teeth in event of a fight situation.
- d. **Tense muscles:** Preparing ourselves to become stronger and less likely to suffer an injury should a fight ensue.
- e. **“Butterflies in the stomach” or nausea:** Blood in the abdominal cavity is diverted from the abdominal area to feed muscles which may be used to fight or run away.

- f. **Bladder:** we don't need the water in our bladder and it becomes tense. We need to become lighter if we should need to run away hence the need to pass water.
- g. **Feeling cold:** Blood supply to the body extremities shuts down and we sweat more to regulate body temperature, elevated by our exercising muscles
- h. **Wide eyes:** Increased visual acuity to see and react to the environment. It can be observed that eyes blink; eye brows raise and some people have "flashbulb" eyes. These signs are visible not only in warfare and physical combat but also in meetings around the conference table!
- i. **Flared nostrils:** increased oxygen needed for the lungs.
- j. **Breathing-sighing:** allows breathing muscles to have a rest.
- k. **Stress hormones:** Released to sustain this physical response.

## 2. General Adaptation Syndrome

General Adaptation Syndrome was identified by Hans Selye (1907-1983)<sup>1</sup> who found that when a human being or animal is stressed a sequence of events occurs in three stages.

The **first stage** is the *alarm reaction* when the sympathetic nervous system is activated and the '*fight or flight*' response occurs (see above). After this initial stage a 'counter shock' reaction occurs and the parasympathetic nervous system is activated and the brain releases hormones into the bloodstream. If the alarm reaction stage is successful bodily balance is now restored.

The **second stage** is *resistance*, in which defence and adaptation are sustained and optimal. If the stressor continues we try to cope with it for as long as possible. Our arousal declines but remains higher than normal and although there are few outward signs of stress our ability to resist new stressors is impaired.

The **third stage** is *exhaustion* and adaptive responding ceases as our ability to cope declines and the stress response itself may become damaging.

Some people are more vulnerable to stress than others and all of us vary from time to time in our individual vulnerability. Our vulnerability to stress is determined by a set of complex

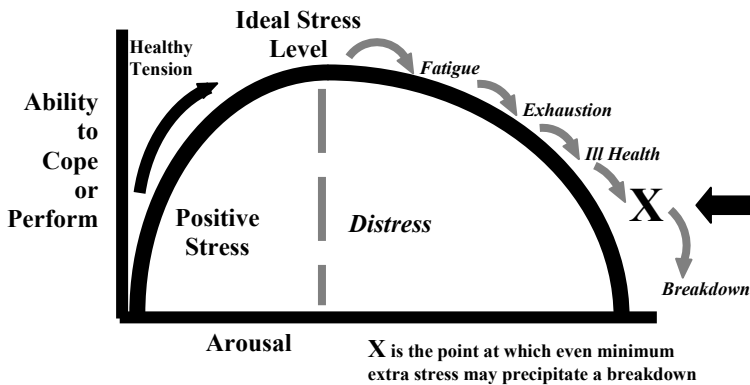
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<sup>1</sup> Hans Selye (1907-1983) as cited by Rosenhan, D. & Seligman, M. (1995) *Abnormal Psychology*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. London

interactions in our biological predisposition, health behaviours, lifestyle considerations and our financial, spiritual, and social resources for coping with stress.

## *Stress and Performance*

All the information that you have received so far may make you wonder what damage you are doing to your body and how you can keep going. However, we know that we all need stress in our lives and that it can become addictive and accumulative. Figure 1 demonstrates how this works.



*Figure 1: Stress and Performance*

**Arousal:** Too little arousal or pressure can produce lethargy (*‘the less you do the less you want to do’*). Increasing levels of arousal however improves performance in producing healthy tension and this kind of stress has been termed *‘positive stress’*.

**Ideal stress levels** produce normal tension which produces optimum ability to cope or perform. At this amount of pressure our arousal systems are on top performance and we achieve what we set out to do. An example of this is doing an exam. Three months prior to the exam we are often not putting ourselves under any great pressure, however three days before the exam it is a different story! Our concentration is greater, our memory is working at top performance and we are studying for long periods of time to achieve a result. The same is true for report and target deadlines.

**Distress:** If arousal levels are maintained for long periods without stress free periods or effective lifestyle balancing, performance starts to decrease. We are not effectively dealing with excessive arousal or the amount of hormones in our bodies and we start to feel under pressure.

**Fatigue:** Muscles become fatigued as we maintain anxiousness. This is when we start to make appointments to see health care professionals such as doctors or nurses. These appointments will often generally be for physical symptoms and signs of stress such as reoccurring headaches and neck-aches.

**Exhaustion:** We sleep a lot or sleep can become generally disturbed. We start to experience the long-term effects of stress such as tiredness, lack of energy and exhaustion.

**Ill-health:** We start to feel increasingly physically and mentally unwell and can display a number of symptoms which are described in Chapter 3.

**Breakdown:** Even one small event can cause a stress reaction at this stage that may seem an overreaction to yourself or others around you (*'the straw that breaks the camel's back'*). Your boss asks you to re-do a report and you start crying on his shoulder or throw all the furniture around in your office! This could be demonstrated at home by screaming at the children for running in front of the television when you are watching it or shouting at your partner after a perceived criticism.

The key for a manager is to help staff achieve optimum performance at an ideal stress level whilst avoiding the problems associated with under or over arousal.



## **CHAPTER 2**

# **THE CAUSES OF STRESS**

**HOLMES AND RAHE SELF-RATING SCALE**

**OCCUPATIONAL RISK FACTORS FOR STRESS**



## CHAPTER 2

# THE CAUSES OF STRESS

Stress can be caused by any number of life events which can have particular meaning to a vulnerable individual. To give you an idea of the type of events that could potentially cause stress the following scale has been included in this section. It demonstrates the life-events which people in general find stressful. It was developed by Dr Tom Holmes and Dr Richard Rahe (American Psychologists). They asked American citizens over a period of years to rate how stressful they found normal life-events and include physical, mental and emotional stressors. They rated these events between 0 and 100 and the results were then scored to develop the following scale. Each person was asked to circle the event if it has occurred in the last 18 months. The results can give you an idea of the current accumulated stress that you may be under at the present time. The score is the accumulation of all the circled responses to produce a total score.

## *Holmes and Rahe Self-Rating Scale*

Death of spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation	65
Jail term	63
Death of close family member	63
Personal injury and illness	53
Marriage	50
Fired at work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Change in family members health	44
Pregnancy	40
Sex difficulties	39
Addition to the family	39
Business readjustment	39
Change in financial state	38
Change in number or arguments with spouse	35
Taking out a large mortgage or loan	31
Foreclosure on mortgage or loan	30
Change in work responsibilities	29
Son or Daughter leaving home	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Spouse begins or stops work	26
Starting or finishing school	26
Change in living conditions	25
Revision of personal habits	24
Trouble with boss	23
Change in work hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in school	20
Change in recreational habits	19
Change in Church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
Taking out a small mortgage or loan	17
Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in number of family gatherings	15
Change in eating habits	15
Holiday	13
Christmas season	12

**TOTAL SCORE =**

## Results

The total scores were found to predict the following:

- **120 - 149:** increases likelihood of illness by 10% in the next 2 years.
- **150 - 299:** increases the likelihood of illness by 50% in the next 2 years.
- **300 and above:** increases the likelihood of illness by 80% in the next 2 years.

The term illness as used in this questionnaire is very generic. It could mean anything from the physical complaints that you may feel requires a doctors' or nurses appointment, to having prolonged emotional reactions that you feel are unusual for you.

The factors that maintain a prolonged stress reaction or cause an illness to develop are: the intensity of the stressor, the duration of the stressor and the number of stressors present at any one time. Also taken into account are the person's coping mechanisms, lifestyle balance, way of thinking and their perception of the situation.

## *Occupational Risk Factors for Stress*

### Environmental Conditions

The general conditions in which an individual works can be a contributory cause of workplace stress, especially if the conditions prevent work targets from being achieved, or detract employees from undertaking their work effectively. Environments which are poorly maintained can produce a negative attitude amongst employees e.g. *'if management don't care, then why should we?'*. Similarly workplaces that are dull, untidy, badly designed or scruffy are likely to make employees respond negatively to issues that arise at work. The workplace layout and ergonomics can also have a major impact upon an employee's efficiency, safety and general wellbeing. Employee participation in the design and layout of the workplace can improve morale in giving employees some control over their environment and can reduce this potential stressor.

Staff facilities should be provided for rest, privacy, sanitary convenience, washing facilities and somewhere from where food and drink can be prepared or obtained.

An employer should consider environmental issues such as lighting, heating, ventilation, humidity and space. Often these

issues are factors that exacerbate other stressful conditions. The employer needs to be aware of their duty of care in providing 'reasonable' conditions for their employees in order to meet statutory requirements. The active participation of employees is an effective way of reducing physical and emotional stress from the work environment.

## The Job

While pressure can generate enthusiasm and energy, prolonged pressure without any respite can create nervous tension and finally 'burnout'. A balance needs to be achieved between providing a challenge to staff and not overloading them (see figure 1, page 15).

Though it is reasonable for an organisation to set employees targets, standards and deadlines, problems can arise when those set by the employer exceeds the individual's ability to meet them. When these are unachievable the employee may develop a sense of helplessness. Similarly this may still happen when a target is reached but the employer increases the next target. Employees can easily feel defeated, undermined or useless especially when there is no mechanism for feedback between the employee and employer.

Managers need to consider several reasons as to why deadlines or targets may be unachievable by employees. These include the adequate training and experience of employees and the provision of the right resources and allocated time to achieve them. Continual pressure from unrealistic deadlines or targets can lead to poor morale and result in high sickness rates or employee retention.

Stress from conflicting demands on time may be a sign of '*role conflict*' or '*role ambiguity*' i.e. difficulty in deciding which task is more important. It may be that the time available is insufficient to deal with the extent of work being required. If the employee is expected to undertake several jobs simultaneously then the employee can suffer from increasing levels of stress. Role ambiguity and lack of control over a task are major potential stressors at work. The worst case scenario is the situation where an employee has responsibility for a task but little authority to implement necessary systems to effectively deal with the task. Clear indications of the level of responsibility and authority of individual employees will help to avoid this particular problem.

The interface between differing departments in the same organisation can also be a potential source of stress as each will have its own priorities and ways of working. Reciprocal dialogue is needed between employer and employee to ensure that each understands the other's priorities and work parameters. Workloads should regularly be reviewed and whether existing deadlines are realistic. Tasks could be prioritised with the employee rather than be allowed to build up and the employee given autonomy over managing important aspects of their workload. Effective management should ensure the most suitable employee is allocated for a particular task e.g. some employees prefer a high throughput but low accuracy whilst some prefer a low throughput but high accuracy.

Management of working hours is an important issue in managing stress. Issues such as length of shift, shift pattern and rest times are all covered in the Working Time Regulations (see Chapter 7). The balance of shift pattern and social time spent with family must be addressed for each individual employee.

Travelling time can be enjoyed by the employee as an autonomous part of their work out of the office. Problems however can arise when travelling time exceeds the amount of time that can be spent in the workplace, or impinges upon the time available for the remainder of work that needs to be completed. Travelling can also be exhausting both physically and mentally and can reduce a person's performance.

Stress can occur when there is a mismatch between the tools necessary to complete a task and the task itself. Certain equipment may fail to meet its design criteria or have a poor reliability record. Employers may undertake a task analysis where equipment suitability and reliability is reviewed. Technology such as IT may pose some of its own problems where the impersonal nature of computer communication and e-mails may increase stress by lack of social contact with colleagues.

Employees tend to work more effectively if they know what they are supposed to do, how it is supposed to be undertaken, why it needs to be undertaken in a particular way and how their role fits into the corporate objective. Conversely when job roles conflict or are ambiguous the end result can be confusion and frustration. If sustained then these feelings may develop into

anger and resentment. The problem can be exacerbated when the employee has little ability to change the cause of the problem.

Clerical support is important in providing employees with adequate administrative resources. This area of work may become problematic if employees are regularly taking work home and not using holiday entitlements. There may be delays and reduction in the standard of written correspondence and tasks may be only partially completed. Messages may not be answered and paperwork may begin to accumulate. Employees therefore need to have time set aside for the completion of paperwork and for the technology and software to support this process. This also applies to workers not based in an office environment. Employers should seek to minimise the need for excessive paperwork to help reduce this particular source of stress.

Cover during staff absence can become a stress issue if employees are required to cover for colleagues other than on a short term basis e.g. sickness and holiday. Managers should avoid relying on an employee's goodwill as the sole method of dealing with the workload when a colleague is absent. Employers sometimes utilise the abilities of multi-skilled or 'floating' workers who could be moved into other areas of the organisation when there is a shortage.

## **Summary of Occupational Risk Factors**

### ***Environment***

- excessive noise
- poor lighting
- poor ventilation
- overcrowding
- excessive vibration
- incorrect temperature
- toxic fumes and chemicals
- badly designed furniture
- open plan offices
- poor maintenance
- poor canteen facilities
- poor childcare facilities



### ***The Job***

- targets, deadlines & standards
- 'role conflict' or 'role ambiguity'
- working hours and shift patterns
- travelling time
- technology and work equipment
- clerical/admin support
- cover during staff absence
- inadequate training, equipment or resources
- unachievable workload
- lack of control over workload
- lack of variety leading to boredom

### ***Contractual***

- low pay
- shift work
- flexitime (when abused by employers)
- unsocial hours
- excessive hours of overtime
- job insecurity including temporary/short term contracts and redundancy

### ***Job Design***

- boring work
- too much/little work leading to under or over arousal
- pace and flow of work
- too much/little supervision
- job isolation
- lack of direction and decision-making
- lack of job control
- lack of adequate rest breaks
- under-utilisation of skills
- working with computers or other machinery