

STRESS AND TECHNIQUES OF OVERCOMING MENTAL STRESS

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Professional paper

Summary

It is often difficult to excommunicate stressful situations. Therefore, people are forced to confront them and to try to overcome them. Strategies of confronting and overcoming stress differ. Naturally, it is very good to know types of stress, both physical and mental, on which an individual can easily react. When a person realises that the situation can be controlled successfully, and that active i.e. problem focused strategies can be used, stress consequences are greatly annulled. The worst thing a person can do is to try and avoid confronting stress, which has a long-term consequence of increasing stress and developing an illness.

Almost all authors, experts who deal with this problem, have a shared opinion that, in transitional countries, a synchronisation of Law on work protection with basic guidelines of EU as well as articulating the problem of stress at work and its impacts is yet to come. Problem needs to be dealt with multi-disciplinary measures, including joined activities of doctors, work psychologists, clinical psychologists, educated staff and sport staff.

Key words: *health, physical activity, yoga, meditation*

INTRODUCTION

Word “stress” originates from medieval English (“stress”, “to stress”). Primarily, it had reference to effort, trouble or certain limitations. Stress is based on different experiences of an individual, i.e. one’s way of life, reactions caused by a wide projection of diverse events, and thus different definitions of stress (Dunham, J. 1992.).

It is common that by stress one denotes something upsetting or worrying, as for example illness, disagreement, violence, problems at work, exams, communication.... However, our body experiences a feeling of stress in a much sophisticated manner. Stress is everything expected of us, something that requires adjustment, much like every change in our lives, whether good or bad. Just a thought of or presentment of a “change” evokes the feeling of stress. Stress is also a physical effort just as running, carrying heavy things, differences in temperature as well as an excessive meal. Stress is an inevitable part of everyone’s life (<http://ww.medicina.hr>). In fact, it is a very complex process of interaction between an individual and his/her life.

Basic concepts

The most accepted definition of stress says that stress is a condition or feeling in which one is when one believes that demands in one’s life exceed personal and social means which one has at one’s disposal. Stress does not always have a

negative impact. Lower level or small amounts of stress can pass undetected, and can simultaneously encourage both creativity and productiveness. Such level of stress is often positive in work environment and, as according to research, causes better employees’ efficiency. Contrary to lower level of stress, higher level of stress often has very damaging consequences and can initiate some of more serious chronic diseases (Sutović, A. 2005.). Stress is explained as a condition in which psychophysical balance is disturbed and, due to adjustment, it demands making additional effort. Expression “stress” refers to:

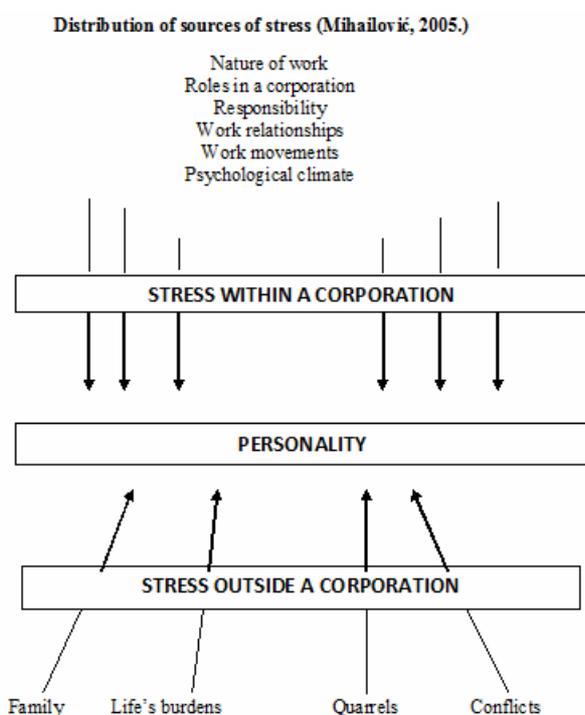
- 1.Inner body condition (sometimes referred to as “strain”)
- 2.External event (the cause of stress; “stressor”) and
- 3.Experience emerged by individual – environment transaction

STRESS AT WORK

Contemporary theories of stress are all based on interaction of an individual and hi/her environment. One of the most recognized theories of stress is by R. Lazarus and his associates. As according to Lazarus model, stress is being defined as: a complex of emotional, physical (physiological) and behavioural reactions which can be triggered by some, in our opinion, dangerous or upsetting event, or it can be defined

as a complex of mental and physical reactions towards the stressor which raises demands we cannot fulfil.

Stressor (the source of stress), is defined as: an event or a series of events for which we believe are a threat to our lives, lives of our loved ones, material goods, self-respect, and so on. Stressor is an external even, whilst stress is inner condition or experience. "Burn out syndrome" indicates a state of total emotional exhaustion due to excessive but to no purpose hard work (Čukić, B. 2004.). Burn out syndrome is similar to the chronic fatigue syndrome; with the first attitude towards work changes whereas that is not known to be a characteristic with the latter.



STRESSFUL PROFESSIONS

WHO research and announcements of Nation's Business, 1994 say that professions related to education (teaching and similar professions) belong to professions with higher level of stress [http://moravek.net/edukacija/stres-posao2, pdf](http://moravek.net/edukacija/stres-posao2.pdf)

To this group belong professions related to health (medical staff) and management (Draker, P. 2006.) It should not be forgotten that an unemployed person is under stress, too. Apart from the mentioned professions, flight controllers, mothers of small children, police officers, newspaper editors, waiters, brokers...also belong to stressful professions. In the basis of their stress is a

situation where they have to answer to demands of others within a time limit, and while doing so they are not in control over the events. It is interesting to say that those who suffer from stress the most are between 35 and 45 years of age, and the level of stress grows as long as they stay in one work place.

STRESS PHASES

In 1959, a Canadian physiologist Hans Selye began with first explanations of stress. His work started from developmental phenomenon of stress and its consequences. He noticed that in each reaction to stress, three basic phases could be detected:

- Phase of panic reaction
- Phase of resistance, and
- Phase of exhaustion.

Phase of panic reaction is the starting phase, which does not last long and in which the body is preparing itself for stressful situation by recuperating. During the phase of resistance, the body starts fighting stress and tries to adapt to it. If the pressure weakens, that means that the personality is overcoming stress. If the stress lasts, a long and tormenting adaptation takes place, which can have a lot of unwanted consequences. Phase of exhaustion sets in if the mechanisms of adaptation fail. Phenomenon of exhaustion is a sign that the body has used all defence mechanisms and is exhausted. According to Selye's understanding of development of stress, a long fight with stress can grow into so called "stress disease". It can be developed as a consequence of a long resistance to pressures (<http://glasjavnosti.co.yu>).

TYPES OF STRESS

Physiological stress relates to encumbering of organs and physical systems (fracture due to stress, etc) i.e. to the correlation between pituitary body and adrenal glands when during the stress period. Psychological stress is defined by cognitive processes and emotional conditions of the body in stressful transactions with an environment. Social stress relates to overall social situation within a specific time period which affects most people. Acute stress is a product of tension in everyday life and often appears in uncomfortable situations which need dealing with. Considering that those situations are habitually coincidental and do not last long, such stress is usually easily overcome. Chronic stress is of a long-lasting character. A victim of chronic stress

cannot see a way out of a stressful situation (such as poverty, unemployment, unsatisfactory job, etc). Traumatic stress is a consequence of a severe tragedy (accident, natural catastrophe, war, etc). Symptoms of such stress can include a vivid memory of a trauma, even after many years. Those people, who are in pain, are diagnosed with “posttraumatic stress syndrome” (PTSP).

REASONS FOR STRESS CONTROL

In the United Nations’ report from 1993, stress at work is described as “XX century disease” (Mihailovic, 2005). World Health Organisation (WHO) considers harassment at work “a worldwide epidemic” or pandemic.

Stress costs! One can function under stress a year or two, but over the long term, an employee suffers and his/her stress is a liability to the state. Excessive burden of mental system reflects to the productivity, quality of work done, process itself, number of mistakes made, number of injuries at work, and so on (<http://www.medicina.hr>.)

ELIMINATING STRESS

Stress control is a key to a successful career. It is thought that not only virtues as self-discipline, ability and systematic approach are important for success but also ability to control negative feelings as fear and tension are as important.

Many try to diminish stress consequences in an inappropriate or even damaging manner. Instead of taking stimuli and tranquilisers, contemporary men should learn methods to avoid stress and to diminish its damaging effects. Some of them we can do ourselves, such as reducing the amount of daily duties (work, family, and school, social), adopting well-balanced diet with lots of vitamins and minerals, avoiding sedatives, well-balance rhythm of sleep and awareness, regular physical activity with relaxation techniques and meditation.

Given the past cognitions and practice of working with stress imply to groups of tasks:

- Those that should be done by a company, and
- Those who are under jurisdiction of participators of a stressful event, an individual.

Therefore, with the goal of overcoming stress, measures, actions and techniques of a company are suggested in order to avoid and recover from

stress, within living and work environment. Those two approaches are not mutually exclusive but are complementary done on the same tasks.

A company can do a lot so that the risk of stress would be minimised and its consequences would be put in bearable framework.

Mental training

By the methods of mental training people can be trained on how to mentally correctly overcome a stressful situation and not how to avoid the situation considering that it is, in many professions, simply impossible due to sheer nature of work (for example police, medical staff...). One of the most important parts of stress management, i.e. dealing with stress, is so called Strategy. Many of these strategies could be easily learnt and no additional instructions are needed. It is important to mention that none of these strategies is lesser than any other and one can find it oneself, primarily the one that works the best in a given situation.

Physical activity

Physical activity stimulates discharging of a matter that works as natural anti-depressive – noradrenalin, endorphin, and enkephalin. Physical activities can greatly reduce stress and degree of reaction to stress. Fitness and aerobics, as hiking, running, swimming or riding a bike, can be very useful. Stretching is also useful with muscles tension.

Writing

More and more research shows that writing about stressful situations can help stress overcoming and improvement of illness and conditions caused by stress. 10-15 minutes of writing per day is recommended, and one can transfer one’s feelings and emotions during the stressful situation on paper.

Discussion

By expressing one’s thoughts and sharing them with members of a family or friends, one can better understand one’s feelings. Discussion about observations, thoughts and reactions towards stressors and trauma is of great importance, too. Laughter and cry present natural ways of dealing with stress and release of tension. Moreover, they present a part of healing process. Involvement in enjoyable activities, contemplative activities help release of tension, can include a hobby, activities or art. Taking care and playing with pets can also help a great deal.

Rest and relaxation

It is important to retain and ensure sleep rhythm which provides enough sleep and time to relax. Techniques of breathing, muscular relaxation, isometric exercise and creative visualisations should be used. One should relax in a personal usual way: listening to music, reading, walking, etc.

Diet

It is very important to regularly eat. Sugar and coffee craving can appear but it will only increase sensitivity, therefore it is very important to set certain limits. In situations of intense stressors or after traumatic situations, people often tend to start consuming great amounts of alcoholic drinks or they start taking addictive habits, i.e. tranquilisers which could help but any further consumption is damaging.

Reduction of commitments

Excessive number of commitments, whether it is overtime, working on several places, or any other working activity, often creates anxiety and tension. Naturally, all obligations cannot be dismissed and postponed, but one should think about one's obligations on daily basis because there has got to be something which could be dismissed or reduced (Havelka, N. 2005.)

Professional help

Stress can be difficult and discouraging. If the situation is difficult, the best thing would be to ask for some professional help, i.e. help of an analyst, therapist or specialist. By professional help reduction of symptoms of stress and reduction of stress in everyday life can be achieved.

Stress at work can also be reduced or even eliminated by different techniques or possibilities. It is recommended to, at least once a year (preferably more), organise a meeting with an employer or an executive and talk about work. It should be explained what is expected from employees, what are the future plans of a working organisation and where a person (employee) can see oneself in these plans, how can the work be improved, advantages and disadvantages, what are the abilities of advancing professionally, etc.

It is necessary to organise time in a proper way. Professional life should be separate from family life. Technology should not be allowed to influence life at home and to wipe out the boundaries between personal and professional time. Mobile phones should be used wisely. Analysts often recommend that the only way is

dealing with stress at work, change of work place or even a job (Mihailović, D. 2005).

MOST COMMON STRATEGIES OF DEALING WITH STRESS

If the environment cannot be changed, personal interpretation of events can be changed and also to try to experience things so that they do not damage us. That is the essence of positive thinking. The same thing can be experienced as a tragedy or as a "little thing". The most important thing is a person knows how to protect him/herself and how to defend his/her interests, in a polite, kind and argumentative manner.

For stress at work it is important to learn to apply cognitive-behavioural modification: a person, an employee needs to learn to recognise events at work which provoke stress, thoughts and emotions which follow these events. A stressful thought and a stressful emotion which follow a stressful event should be replaced with other thoughts and emotions which do not provoke discomfort. The best help for that are laughter, humour, socialising, singing, playing games, etc.

Exercises for eliminating mental stress

Breathing is the essential vital function, with the greatest importance for overcoming stress. Stressed people often forget to breathe. By breathing exercises one can:

- Decrease muscular and mental tension,
- Decrease blood pressure,
- Decrease blood sugar and cholesterol.

By breathing correctly, one can neutralise destructive impact of stress.

Breathing deeply

Correctly inhale and exhale four to five times could make a significant decrease on reduction of tension. A short test could be made, e.g. put one hand on the chest, the other on the stomach and follow which of the mentioned parts of a body moves more during breathing. Probably the movement is superficial, and a part which moves less is thoracic cavity. For this auto-therapy it is important to restrain deep abdominal breathing. Deep abdominal breathing brings a lot more oxygen to lungs than our usual superficial breathing, which indirectly improves blood circulation and the brain gets new amounts of "fresh" blood rich in oxygen. Sitting straight in a chair, feet should be firmly on the ground, and

back comfortably supported. Putting hands on the stomach and thoracic cavity. One should try to achieve lifting a hand which is on the stomach first. Calmly and slowly, one should inhale through the nose, letting the stomach blow up as long as the person is inhaling. When the stomach “comes out” a person should attempt filling the thoracic cavity with air. Exhaling is done through the mouth, in reverse order. First comes the air from the thoracic cavity and then from the stomach. As exhaling, one should relax the shoulders and the rest of the body. When a person becomes more skilful with performing deep abdominal breathing, he/she should try and hold the air around four seconds after inhaling it. Exhale should last longer than inhale

Self-massage

Self-massage can be performed for example in an office: sitting in an office chair, start with the movements of pounding from the top of your head with your fingertips. Poundings should be as light as possible and they should associate us with drops of rain. Same movements are repeated to the neck area and shoulders. Firm and symmetrical movements of smoothing down use your left hand for the left part of your neck, and your right hand for the right part of your neck, from the skull to the shoulders. Firm and symmetrical movements of circling a painful and sensitive back of the head is often massaged. Start squeezing right part of the neck, shoulders and your whole right arm finishing with a palm with your left hand. Using the same hand with circular pressures go down your right shoulder-blade and massage “knots” which have accumulated due to stress and fatigue.

Muscle relaxation

Techniques for muscle relaxation are often combined with techniques of deep breathing and are simple to perform, and they are very useful for relaxation and better sleep. Initially, it is better to perform these exercises with a partner who will control relaxation by lifting one's arm and releasing it. If it freely falls, the person is totally relaxed. With practice one can faster achieve a state of relaxation.

Sequence of procedures:

- Assume a comfortable prone position without crossing your arms or legs; concentrate on each part of your body individually.
- Maintain easy breathing (deeply) during the whole exercise.
- Tighten every muscle as much as possible and count till 10 and then slowly relax

- Try to feel how every muscle in your body slowly relaxes
- Focus on each part of your body starting from the top of your head and slowly moving towards your toes
- It is crucial to include: forehead, ears, lips, neck, shoulders, hands, palms, fingers, chest, stomach, thighs, calves and feet
- When done with external muscles try to relax internal ones

Cognitive- behavioural methods

These methods are the most practical and the most productive ways of reducing stress. They include identification of cause of stress, define priorities, change of reaction towards stress, as well as finding methods to deal with stress (Stojakovic, P. 2002). This method is especially useful when dealing with mental and physical stress. Identification of source of stress consists of keeping a journal of daily activities and events. Although this technique could seem stressful by itself, journal note needn't be very detailed (Trunk Širca, Nin Ronceli, Vaupot, S. 2001). A few words as a reminder of times and events are usually enough. First step is to recognising activities which consume our energy and time, cause nervousness or anger, or cause negative physical response (e.g. stomach ache, headache...). Additionally, it is necessary to replace a negative event with the positive ones, like those that cause physical relief and relaxation and feeling of accomplishment and content.

WAYS OF OVERCOMING PHYSICAL STRESS

Physical stress and tension negatively reflects on the feeling we transmit towards the outside world. Therefore it is very important to find a proper way for detecting and reducing such stress. Release of physical stress has a positive impact on our emotional life. One of the most productive ways of physical stress release is body stretching: stretch out your arms forward and backward, around your head and back. Make a few stretching exercises of your neck, shoulders, back, hips, legs where ever you are. Relax all your body parts that seem tense. For example, there are many techniques for stress release which can be done in bathrooms (spa centres). Bath and face and foot massage are the simplest techniques anyone can afford. Aromatic scents of candles, candle light induce relaxing feelings. Feet and ankle massage, “reiki” (radiating of warmth that surround a person), yoga, meditation, etc, should not be forgotten.

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