

OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND ITS IMPACT ON EMPLOYEES

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Abstract:

Due to its increasing prevalence, occupational stress is considered by the World Health Organization to be a disease of the twenty-first century, caused by the growing number of individuals affected in the workplace. This epidemic of occupational health manifests itself as a set of physical, psychological, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional reactions resulting from exposure to workplace pressures, ranking, according to statistics, as the second most significant occupational health problem in the European Union. Owing to its harmful impact on health, occupational stress requires heightened attention in order to be managed effectively.

Key words: *stress, occupational stress, stressors, protective factors, stress adaptation, occupational burnout syndrome, stress management.*

INTRODUCTION

Stress, as defined by Hans Selye, is a “general adaptation syndrome,” a term used to denote a set of adaptive reactions of the organism to the nonspecific action of certain “physical stressors” originating from the external environment. The general adaptation syndrome is structured around three stages: alarm, resistance, and exhaustion. Stress reactions occur when the relationship between the individual and the environment becomes imbalanced. In this regard, it should be noted that when discrepancies arise between the individual’s characteristics—aptitudes, personality traits, values, and so forth—and the environment—working conditions, demands, and pressures—this may lead either to the failure to satisfy individual needs or to the inability to meet work-related requirements. All these factors contribute to the creation of a stressful state and, implicitly, to its expression through various individual reactions. Stress caused by diverse stress-inducing agents, both within and outside the workplace, can manifest in multiple forms. For this reason, we can state that stress in general, and occupational stress in particular, can be categorized into two types: beneficial stress—eustress—which motivates and mobilizes the individual in professional activity, and negative stress—distress—which has an adverse impact on the health of the stressed individual.

Nowadays, an increasing number of managers are beginning to pay closer attention to the effects of stress on employees. They are becoming aware that stress consists of the adverse psychological and physiological reactions experienced by an individual who is no longer capable of coping with the demands to which they are subjected. Stress is triggered less by the external problems a person faces and more by the manner in which that person manages to deal with those problems.

Thus, most people encounter a wide range of pressure factors throughout their lives, and some might even be said to feel stimulated and perform at their maximum potential only when they are “under pressure,” especially at work. However, from the moment we can no longer adequately cope with tension, stress symptoms begin to appear.

Most researchers agree that stress represents a personal and subjective reaction; therefore, it depends on the individual’s perception both of the magnitude of the problem they are facing and of their own capacity to deal with it. If individuals believe that the problem can be controlled and are confident in their ability to manage it, stress symptoms are unlikely to occur, regardless of the pressures exerted

by the situation. However, if the problem is perceived as difficult to solve and the individual lacks confidence in their own abilities, stress will inevitably manifest.

In psychology, stress is defined as a state of tension or neuro-psychic strain; in medicine, it refers to the set of organic disturbances produced by various aggressive factors (cold, excessive heat, noise, intense emotions, etc.); it represents the ensemble of physiological reactions through which the human organism responds to a disturbing agent in an attempt to protect itself and maintain its basic equilibrium.

Since stress is considered a disease of the twenty-first century and the workplace as a stressor can lead to chronic employee exhaustion (burnout), in the present article we have analyzed, based on the specialized literature, the following aspects: 1. the concept of stress; 2. the key factors in the emergence of stress; 3. personal resources for adapting to stress; 4. theoretical and experimental approaches to stress — the physiological model and response theory, the pathogenic model and the consequences of stress, the causal model and the theory of stress-inducing stimuli as stress factors, and the interactional model of stress — the transactional theory; 5. types and forms of stress — workplace stress, occupational burnout syndrome, psychological factors and interventions for preventing and reducing stress, the development of stress-management skills and behaviors, establishing and maintaining adequate social support, fostering self-esteem, and time management; 6. stress indicators within an organization; 7. stress prevention measures implemented by the organization.

THE CONCEPT OF STRESS

From an etymological perspective, the term stress derives from the Latin *strictus*, the past participle of the verb *stringere* = “to draw tight, to press.” Stress is associated with meanings such as constraint, suffering, pressure, burden, force, and tension. Stress is used in two senses: a psychiatric one, referring to the emotional aspect of the adaptation effort, and a physiological one, describing the organism’s reaction. (Speranța Popescu Brumă, 2005, p. 43) The term stress designates both the stressor agent and the body’s reaction to it. Any factor capable of disrupting homeostatic balance — whether physical in nature (intense cold or heat), chemical (poison), infectious, or psychological — is referred to as a “stressor.”

Over time, psychologists have used the term stress in two distinct situations: the stressful situation (harmful or aggressive conditions that assault or threaten the organism, pressures, constraints, and privations to which the individual is subjected) and the stress state of the organism (its suffering, deterioration, and the physiological or psychological responses of the individual to the action of stressor agents). (R. Floru, 1974, p. 18)

Although stress has a neurophysiological component, from a psychological standpoint a cognitive definition appears more appropriate. From this perspective, stress does not reside in the stressful situation itself nor in the response to stressors, but in the interaction between the human person and the stressful situation. Stress emerges as a subjectively perceived discrepancy between demands and one’s self-evaluation of personal capabilities. The integrative cognitive conception of stress does not exclude the investigation of stress factors (stressful situations) and of the neurophysiological responses to stress. (M. Miclea, 1991, p. 269)

It is not known when the notion of stress was first used in psychological terminology, but it is certain that it spread rapidly due to the theories formulated by Selye in 1950. The Canadian biochemist Selye was the one who revolutionized medicine—a field which, for a long time, maintained that diseases originate solely from concrete factors such as microbes, viruses, and various traumas. He demonstrated that at the origin of diseases lies stress, which he understood as any environmental aggression or any state of tension generated by it, against which the organism defends itself through

adaptive reactions involving a functional axis of vital importance to the organism, namely the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis. (P. Anucuța, 2000, p. 98)

Stress is a complex psychosocial phenomenon that arises from the individual's confrontation with demands, tasks, or situations perceived as difficult or as carrying significant stakes for the person concerned. Because it is part of the individual's everyday life, stress represents a psycho-physiological reaction of the organism generated by stressor agents that act through the sensory organs upon the brain, triggering—via their cortico-limbic connections with the hypothalamus—an entire chain of neuro-vegetative and endocrine reactions with systemic repercussions. (I. Bradu Iamandescu, 2002, p. 5)

The immediate symptoms of stress may manifest in the form of indigestion, dizziness, headaches, back pain, loss of appetite, insomnia, and increased irritability. Over time, symptoms may include cardiovascular diseases, gastric ulcers, nervous depression, and other serious illnesses. Whether triggered by professional problems or by family/social issues, stress symptoms ultimately lead to reduced work performance, loss of motivation, and increased absenteeism.

In an extensive study on stress conducted during the 1960s (Holmes and Rahe), it was noted that most life events associated with the potential onset of stress—for example, the death of a spouse, divorce, the death of a close relative, accidents or illness affecting the person concerned, job loss, retirement, changes in financial circumstances, and so forth—occur within the sphere of domestic or social life rather than at the workplace. Nevertheless, given that individuals bring their personal problems with them to work, it matters relatively little, in a certain sense, whether the triggering factor of the stress state is work-related or not, since the effect on the individual remains the same and professional performance is, in all likelihood, negatively influenced. A significant workplace stressor lies in the way individuals perceive the possible outcomes of their professional activities, particularly with regard to relative success or failure. Very often, these outcomes are viewed as uncertain. When the individual does not consider the outcome to be important, stress is highly unlikely. However, when outcomes are perceived as both uncertain and important—for example, securing a major sales contract, preparing a crucial report, or simply being able “to please the direct superior”—the likelihood of stress increases substantially.

Key factors in the emergence of workplace stress

In a work environment, several key factors can influence the level of stress to which an individual may be exposed, namely: the external environment (economic conditions, technological innovations, etc.), the organization's structure and culture (type of hierarchical structure, managerial styles, etc.), job characteristics (task difficulty, level of authority held, etc.), workplace relationships (quality of relationships with colleagues, superiors, subordinates, etc.), personal factors (personality, motivation, intellect, competencies, etc.), and domestic/social circumstances (illness, the death of someone close, debts, etc.). These factors represent potential sources of stress and depend, in general, on how individuals perceive their problems, their degree of self-confidence, and the relative degree of uncertainty and perceived importance associated with the outcomes of their work.

Stress factors or stressors represent events—external or internal situations, or environmental conditions—of sufficient intensity or frequency to require adaptive reactions from the individual. People continuously evaluate both the external and internal environment (primary appraisal) and do not respond passively to these evaluations. An external or internal event may be perceived as irrelevant or neutral, positive, negative, or threatening. It is important to note that some stress factors can be changed, others can only be reduced, while certain stress factors are unmodifiable and must therefore be accepted and tolerated as such, such as the death of a loved one.

Among the potential stress factors, we may mention: job loss; physical or psychological illness; physical, emotional, or sexual abuse; financial hardship; school or university-related pressure; family-related issues—parental divorce, communication problems, domestic violence, etc.; natural disasters;

noise; crowding or overcrowding; and others. Cât privește stresul ocupațional, acesta se referă la situațiile de stres generate de situația de muncă, și anume la meseriile care impun o responsabilitate mai mare sau cu un risc mai înalt, activitățile care suprasolicită sau subsolicită potențialitățile individului produc stres. Munca poate fi un factor antisres dacă este desfășurată în condiții optime sau poate fi un factor cauzal al stresului dacă aceste condiții nu sunt respectate și poate periclita integritatea psihofizică a persoanei.

The stress factors mentioned above can generate both immediate effects and post-effects that appear after exposure to stress. Among the post-effects of stressors, we may mention: the unpredictability or uncontrollability of a stimulus; increased reaction time to aggression and elevated blood pressure; decreased tolerance to frustration; reduced accuracy in reading, and so forth.

Personal resources for stress adaptation

Personal resources for coping with stressors are defined as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral capacity to reduce, control, or tolerate internal or external demands that exceed the organism's automatic response capacity. Adaptation to stress involves both the existence of real resources (intellectual, emotional, physical, social, etc.) and, most often, stems from the individual's self-evaluation of these resources when facing events appraised as negative or threatening (secondary appraisal). At times, a discrepancy exists between actual response resources and the individual's evaluation of those resources, a discrepancy that frequently generates the stress state.

Protective factors against stress include self-esteem, assertiveness, optimism, and the sense of self-efficacy. Coping resources and mechanisms include: seeking social support—from friends, colleagues, or specialists; problem-solving; information seeking; relaxation techniques; religious practices; and positive reappraisal, among others.

During the period of anticipating confrontation with the stressor, throughout the actual confrontation, as well as after repeated encounters with situations in which the individual perceives a discrepancy between resources and demands, stress reactions emerge. These reactions may take several forms: physiological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. (A. Băban, 1998, pp. 170–171)

- a) Physical or physiological reactions: palpitations, heart pain; decreased or increased appetite; frequent indigestion; muscle cramps or spasms; headaches or migraines; excessive sweating, dizziness, general malaise; chronic fatigue; skin irritations or allergies; elevated cholesterol; frequent viral infections; blood glucose disturbances, and so on.
- b) Cognitive reactions: attention deficits; thought blockages; reduced ability to concentrate; difficulties in recall; decreased ideational flexibility; reduced tolerance to criticism; diminished creativity; difficulties in decision-making; distorted thoughts about oneself, the world, and the future; inhibitions and mental blockages; pessimistic cognitions; suicidal thoughts, and so forth.
- c) Emotional reactions: increased irritability; decreased interest in areas that previously represented passions or hobbies; loss of interest in friends; emotional instability; anxiety; depression; the feeling of being neglected; emotional repression; difficulty having fun or relaxing; the feeling of being ridiculed by others; the feeling of being a failure in one's profession or family; the sense that no one can be trusted; inability to complete a task on time; fear of being alone; fear of becoming ill; demoralization; lack of confidence in the future, and so on.
- d) Behavioral reactions: excessive smoking; poor performance at school, university, or the workplace; excessive consumption of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, or tranquilizers; sleep disturbances and difficulty falling asleep; inefficient time management; excessive preoccupation with certain activities; social withdrawal from friends; aggressive behaviors; suicide attempts, and so forth.

Theoretical and experimental approaches to stress

In the specialized literature, stress is defined as the organism's response to demands originating from the internal or external environment, as an internal or external stimulus or stressor, or as an interaction or transaction between the person and the environment.

a. The physiological model and response theory

This model emphasizes the analysis of stress responses, particularly from a psychophysiological perspective. The physiological model, also known as the classical biological model of stress—Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome—became established due to the pioneering investigations of Hans Hugo Bruno Selye. Modern adaptations of the physiological (biological) model of stress place emphasis on: the specificity of stress reactions determined by situational factors and individual differences; the role of psychosocial stressors and personality factors in the organism's physiological response; the complexity of modulating the type of stress reaction by incorporating situational variables; the reinforcement of the specific component of the organism's response; and the demonstration of the ability to learn and maintain appropriate stress-coping strategies over time. (I. Bradu Iamandescu, 1997, p. 96; S. Popescu Brumă, 2005, p. 39)

b. Modelul patogen și consecințele stresului

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Recent research on the consequences of chronic stress has validated the concept of burnout (the exhaustion syndrome), which results from long-term involvement in demanding socio-professional activities involving interactions with people. It is characterized by: mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion; depersonalization; and reduced professional performance. (S. Popescu Brumă, 2005, pp. 48–49)

c. The causal model and the theory of stressor stimuli as stress factors

The identification of stress with its sources and with the stress factors/agents—referred to as stressors—and the conceptualization of stress as an environmental condition belong to the causal model of stress and the stimulus theory. The causal model (also called the cybernetic or engineering model) conceptualizes stress as a function of stress-inducing stimuli (operationalized as independent variables) in a unilateral and unidirectional relationship with stress reactions (viewed as outputs or operationalized as dependent variables).

The causal model of stress contributes to the understanding and deepening of the role of social structures in generating potential stressors. Thus, in our contemporary society we encounter a multitude of stress factors such as: violence, poverty, isolation, economic–political crises, informational overload, and so forth.

d. Modelul the interactional model of stress. the transactional theory

According to this model, stress is understood as a specific interactional relationship between the person and the environment, in which the critical element is the individual's appraisal of environmental demands that exceed their own adaptive resources and threaten their well-being. (S. Popescu Brumă, 2005, pp. 50–51)

Types and forms of stress

In the specialized literature, several forms of stress are described: environmental stress, whose main factors include noise, heat/cold, vibrations, air pollution, radiation, and so forth; gravitational stress, whose principal factors are weightlessness and acceleration; urban stress, primarily generated by noise, crowding, and pollution; hyperbaric stress, associated with high atmospheric pressure; technostress, primarily caused by informational overload; and prenatal and neonatal stress, in which the main factor is hypoxia, among others.

e. Occupational stress / Workplace stress

When carried out under favorable conditions, work represents an exceptionally strong anti-stress factor, as it selectively concentrates nervous activity and directs behavior toward solving problems (intellectual and physical work tasks) located outside the individual. This explains why some people immerse themselves in work—sometimes even “taking refuge” in unlimited work—in order to reduce psychological tension and the stress state they are experiencing at a given moment, and often succeed in doing so. In such cases, work may be considered an effect of psychological stress rather than its cause. However, a task—whether imposed by others or self-imposed—may, through its volume or difficulty, or through the level of responsibility it entails, become a stressor. Likewise, the conditions under which work is performed may favor the emergence of stress. (R. Floru, 1974, p. 57)

Sources of workplace stress refer to: the work environment, the specific tasks associated with a given position, work overload or underload, physical danger, the degree of fit between the employee and their surrounding environment, and the family–work relationship.

In management, the deliberate use of stress is often justified by the belief that employees perform better when subjected to intense pressure or, in some cases, when they experience fear. However, such a managerial approach can only be effective for a limited period. From a long-term perspective, failure becomes inevitable, not to mention the detrimental consequences for employees’ health. The staunch proponents of stress-based management should reflect on the principle that “When people feel good, they work well.”

f. Occupational burnout syndrome

Burnout syndrome is translated as occupational exhaustion, and it is understood as a multifactorial and multidimensional syndrome that is difficult to define. Occupational burnout syndrome lies at the very center of human existence: between the inner world and the outer world, between the “self” and the “other,” between the normal and the pathological, between birth and death. (S. Popescu Brumă, 2005, pp. 90–97)

g. Factors and psychological interventions in the prevention and management of stresses

Among psychological factors, a key role in preventing stress is held by a high perception of professional efficacy. This term refers to an individual’s belief that they are capable of performing a specific task. Such perceptions influence the person’s behavior, generating greater perseverance in the face of obstacles and frustrations and, implicitly, increasing the likelihood of success. In addition to psychological factors involved in stress prevention, extensive work experience can serve as a source of coping strategies aimed at reducing stress levels, while a well-developed social support network can provide more substantial assistance to individuals experiencing stressful situations.

h. Developing stress-management skills and behaviors

The main stress-management skills and behaviors include: developing assertiveness, fostering positive communication with others, learning methods for problem-solving and decision-making, and acquiring various relaxation techniques.

i. Establishing and maintaining adequate social support

The main ways to establish and maintain adequate social support include: actively seeking direct help and being receptive to it, as well as developing and sustaining friendships.

j. Developing self-esteem

This represents a stress-management method that can be achieved through: establishing personal priorities and boundaries; engaging in activities that enhance self-esteem; and setting realistic goals.

k. Time management

The main methods of time management include: reviewing one's goals; selecting the priority activities for a given day or week; creating a list of tasks that must be completed and another list of tasks the individual wishes to accomplish, along with the time allocated to them; analyzing the consequences of postponing tasks that need to be completed; arranging activities in the order in which they should be carried out; completing one activity at a time until it is finished; avoiding rapid switching from one activity to another; and offering oneself a reward upon completing a task. (A. Băban, 2001, pp. 174–175).

Stress indicators within an organization

When employees of a public or private organization/institution suffer from stress, the effects of this situation usually manifest in at least one of the following forms: high levels of illness and absenteeism; decreased productivity and failure to meet imposed objectives; increased rates of accidents and errors; a higher number of internal conflicts among employees; and an excessive rate of staff turnover.

The measures that an organization's leadership may take to reduce stress among the workforce can be divided into two major categories: stress-prevention measures and stress-reduction measures. The former aim to eliminate the potential for stressful situations, while the latter attempt to keep stress within reasonable limits once it has emerged. Both categories of measures are implemented primarily at the organizational level rather than the individual level.

Organizational stress prevention

The possible sources of stress for individuals include job characteristics, work relationships, the organization's structure, and its culture. Given that, when maintained at an appropriate level, job demands can have a positive effect on employee performance, what can organizations do to ensure that—while voluntarily maintaining a beneficial degree of difficulty—the pressures placed on individuals do not lead to stress? Achieving such a balance is difficult for any healthy and dynamic organization.

However, there are several measures that can be taken to provide employees with the necessary incentives without causing a chronic accumulation of stress, namely:

- a) defining job positions in a manner that allows the incumbent to exercise their competencies and judgment to the fullest extent possible, incorporating tasks that are sufficiently varied and challenging to maintain their interest and engagement;
- b) the job in such a way that the job holder has a certain degree of responsibility, is given sufficient authority, and is allowed to participate in decisions that affect their work, as well as establishing objectives that do not conflict with the work objectives of others;
- c) encouraging senior staff to adopt participative leadership styles, giving appropriate attention both to individual needs and to those related to collective activity and the group as a whole;
- d) encouraging team spirit so that team members support one another and each individual's role is appropriately valued;
- e) encouraging communication between departments and ensuring constructive feedback for each individual;
- f) delegating decision-making authority in such a way that, at every level of the organization, individuals can participate in decisions that affect their work and their opportunities for advancement;

- g) developing an organizational culture in which the attitude toward employees is positive, the focus on product/service quality is reflected in respect for employees' knowledge and contributions, and mistakes are viewed more as opportunities to learn from experience than as reasons for criticism.

Among the stress-reduction measures within an organization, we may mention: reducing the number of changes imposed on each individual or team; limiting procedural and other forms of complexity in task execution; ensuring that employees have the opportunity to express their feelings and concerns to someone—manager, supervisor, colleagues, etc.; providing social and sports facilities; and offering material facilities such as an adequate cafeteria and sanitary amenities, and so forth.

CONCLUSIONS

Burnout syndrome represents a consequence of chronic exposure to stress factors and was named as such in 1974 by Freudenberger to describe a state of physical and mental exhaustion in the individual, which led to the development of an unfavorable image and position in the workplace, as well as a lack of professional engagement. This state essentially describes the syndrome of chronic occupational stress.

Nowadays, it has become increasingly common for organizations to provide qualified counseling services for their employees. Workplace counseling refers to a situation “in which one person uses a set of methods or skills to help another person think in an organized manner and take responsibility for their own decisions, whether these concern professional or private life.” (G.A. Cole, 2000, p. 320) The person offering this support may be a professional counselor or a manager with specialized training in counseling techniques. It should be noted that it is preferable for the person providing counseling to be formally qualified and experienced in the field.

G. Ergan (1990) defines counselors as “qualified helpers,” whose effectiveness is measured by “the extent to which their clients, through client–helper interaction, succeed in reaching a position where they can better manage their own problems and/or more effectively exploit the unused resources and opportunities available to them in life.” (G.A. Cole, 2000, p. 321). Therefore, each individual possesses within themselves the potential to overcome their own problems, while counseling provides the opportunity to discover inner reserves, identify external opportunities, and use both to successfully overcome stress-generating situations.

Essentially, counseling represents a process through which a qualified person—a psychotherapist—helps their client identify the problem, acknowledge what the ideal or preferred solution would be, and consider the ways in which the desired outcomes could be achieved.

It should be noted that managers who make use of counseling services for their employees do so primarily in their own interest and only secondly for the employees' well-being. When employees are unhappy, uneasy, or highly stressed, they are unable to perform effectively at work, may take more sick leave, and may even change their job, thereby increasing staff turnover. Therefore, it is in the direct interest of the organization to prevent such an uneconomical use of its human resources, and providing qualified counseling services can represent one of the ways to support employee performance, achieve commercial objectives, and demonstrate the company's commitment to its employees as individual persons.

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