

# Managing Stress

## 1.0 Introduction

Stress is the demand made on an individual to adapt, cope or adjust. This is a concept borrowed from physics, where stress means a pressure or a force exerted on a body. Similarly, psychological forces also, press, push, or pull us. Stress is a normal part of everyday life; some stress is necessary to keep us alert and occupied. When managed well, it enhances performance. But when stress is poorly managed or ignored, we experience unpleasant consequences, which are reflected in our mind and body.

The amount of stress experienced by each individual depends on the environmental demands made on him and his capacity to tolerate the pressure. A person experiences stress, when the demand exceeds the tolerance level. Since each individual is unique and has varying levels of stress tolerance, the point at which positive pressures (eustress) turns to negative stress (distress) varies with each individual.

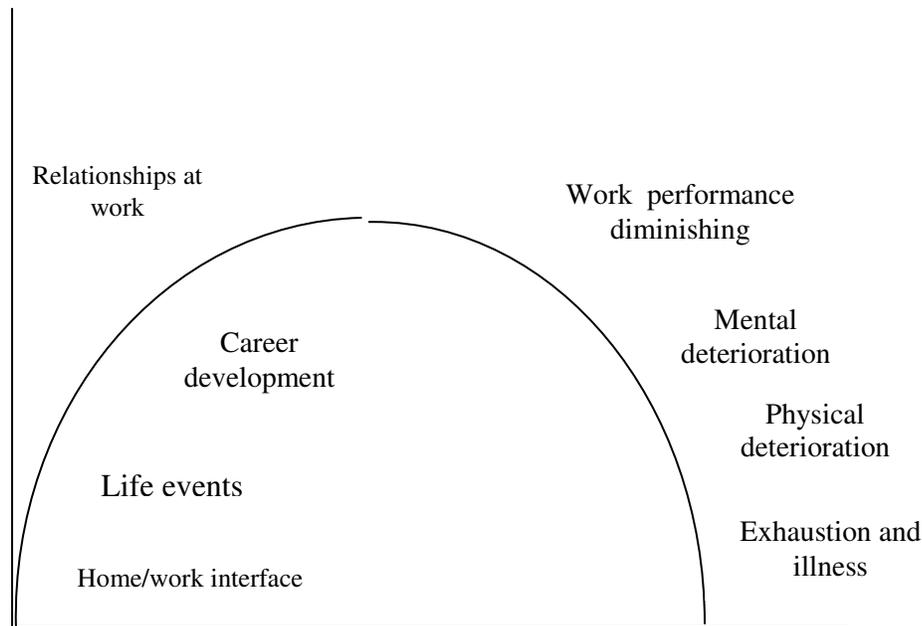
Just as too many demands create stress, too few demands also lead to stress. That is, when demands fall below your ability to cope, you suffer boredom and insecurity, which are often symptoms of stress. When demands made on you match with your ability to cope, you manage stress effectively.

## 2.0 Misconceptions about Stress

1. ***We always know when we are under stress*** - Often people become so accustomed to stress that they become unaware of it. Many of us suffer the debilitating effects of stress even though we don't feel tense. Stress can change the way you treat others or damage your body even in the absence of feelings of frustration or anxiety.
2. ***Stress is something, which affects only those who have high-pressure lives*** - Many ordinary individuals experience constant stress resulting from worry or leading unfulfilled lives.
3. ***The only way to lower stress is to change your surroundings or to take medication*** - Changing your outlook on life is the most reliable and effective way of reducing stress. Stress comes from the way we perceive the world and not from the way the world really is.
4. ***Stress is caused by events that happen to us*** - It is not events in themselves that cause our distress, but rather the views we take of events.
5. ***Emotions have a will of their own and cannot be controlled*** - We can change our feelings by first changing our behaviour or by changing our thinking. For example, developing a new understanding of a situation can make it less threatening or stressful.

### 3.0 Stress and Performance

Dr. Peter Nixon's Human Performance Curve depicts the relationship between the level of stress and ability to perform everyday roles and responsibilities.



The upward trend in the left portion of the curve shows positive arousal and healthy performance. Persons with this as dominant style are alert, energetic and confident; they enjoy a balanced lifestyle by successfully managing the pressures of life.

When demands exceed, people are pushed to the right side of the curve, which ultimately result in physical/mental deterioration and illness. So it is importance to watch out for signals that warn the forthcoming stress and start managing it.

### 4.0 Causes of Stress

Stressors, or causes of stress are many. Factors that cause stress to one person need not be a stressor for another. However, certain common stressors are listed below:

- a) **Life events** – These are the major events happening in one's life span, which can be either eustress producing or distress producing. Holmes and Rahe have developed a Life Change Index that comprises of life events and a corresponding Life Change Unit. People earning 300 life change unit in one year have very great vulnerability to stress and allied medical problems.
- b) **Pain and Discomfort** – Pain and discomfort resulting from illness or other reasons often cause stress. Discomfort as a result of overcrowding/isolation, changes in environmental condition etc. cause stress to people.

- c) **Anxiety** – Anxiety is both a cause of stress and a response to stress. Anxiety in small amounts is a motivator, but greater levels of anxiety or prolonged anxiety can lead to stress.
- d) **Frustration** – When your motive to attain a particular goal is thwarted, you experience frustration. Many people get frustrated because of the unrealistic goals that they set for themselves. Prolonged frustration can result in stress.
- e) **Conflict** – It is a situation characterized by the presence of two or more opposing goals or selecting one from two or more equally desirable goals. Conflict results in confusion and stress in individuals.
- f) **Type A Behaviour** – Cardiologists Friedman and Roseman has found out that certain personality characteristics like restlessness, impatience, high achievement orientation etc, which are typical of Type A Personality, produce stress.

## 5.0 Impact of Stress

Human beings, in general, respond physiologically to stress in a similar manner. This is irrespective of gender, age, or source of stress. Psychiatrist Hans Selye, labeled this response of the body as General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), which consists of 3 stages.

**Alarm reaction** – This is the first stage in the physiological response, which starts immediately with the impact of the stressor. This prepares the body for to either a *fight* or *flight* reaction. Various components associated with this stage are increased heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, paleness of the skin and extremities, secretion of adrenaline, slowing down of digestion etc. The body state returns to normal once the threat is removed.

**Resistance** - Even after the first stage of the stressor is not removed, we enter the second stage viz. Resistance or adaptation level. In this stage, the level of bodily arousal is higher than normal, though not as high as in the first stage. In this stage the body attempts to restore lost energy.

**Exhaustion** - The body enters the third stage of exhaustion if the stressor is not adequately resisted. Prolonged exposure to stress at this stage would lead to deterioration of health of the person.

## 6.0 Impact of Stress on body

Stress, irrespective of positive or negative, causes a physiological response in body. If managed properly, this can enhance performance if not managed properly, it can cause mild to reverse damages to the body.

On perception of threat, the sympathetic nervous system is activated, referred earlier as the fight or flight mechanism. This leads to the stimulation of the pituitary gland and the adrenal gland to produce adrenaline. This process manifests in the individual as palpitation, hyperventilation, stomach problem, spasm, cold hands etc. Stress also affects the parasympathetic nervous system leading to deterioration of physical and mental health.

Apart from all these, continued exposure to stress would lead to reduced concentration, sleeplessness, making more errors, depressed feeling etc. Hence to improve the well being of the individual, it becomes necessary to intervene at the right time.

## **7.0 Warning Signs of Stress**

- A drop in productivity
- A feeling of being overworked
- Extreme sensitivity to criticism and a noticeable touchiness
- Physical disorders, such as lack of sleep, stomach upsets, headaches and fatigue
- A decline in work quality
- An increased tendency to drink and smoke
- A tendency to miss important deadlines.

## **8.0 Tips for Managing Stress**

We can't just ignore stress and hope it will go away. Too much stress, good or bad, can affect your health. Chronic stress takes the joy out of life. Here are some tips to manage the stress in your life:

***Talk to family and friends:*** It's important to remember that you're not alone. There are people who care and are available to listen when you need to talk. They may even be able to offer some help. If they do offer their help – “just say YES”!

***Reduce chemical stress:*** Caffeine, alcohol, nicotine and sugar can all raise energy on a short-term level, but in the long run they will just make things worse. Limit their use especially at bedtime so that your sleep is not disturbed.

***Put things into perspective:*** Ask yourself if an issue is really worth the emotional and physical energy it is costing you and does it really matter in the long run? Prioritize the problems you need to deal with and tackle the most important ones first. Give yourself permission to let go of things that you cannot get done.

***Slow down when your leave work:*** Find a hobby or noncompetitive activity that you enjoy, such as sports, yoga, reading, or listening to music. Take a long bath or get a massage. Leave the work pressures behind when you go home for the day.

***Remove stress from your environment:*** Poor air quality, bad lighting and noise can really increase stress. To improve air quality, ban smoking from the areas you control, open windows for fresh air, and use plants or to provide moisture. Avoid fluorescent lighting and use full spectrum lights whenever possible. If noise is an issue, find a quiet space to work or read. If that's not possible, consider headphones with relaxing background music or earplugs.

***Manage your time to manage your stress:*** Use your time in the most effective and productive way possible. Prepare lunches and meals in advance to cut down before and after work stress. Plan projects so that you have the things you need before you start. Planning ahead gives you more control of your life and reduces stress.

***Improve your attitude:*** If you have a negative attitude you may create problems out of opportunities and cause stress by alienating or irritating other people. Minor problems can seem huge and overwhelming. Look for the "silver lining" when faced with tough situations or mistakes.

***Remember you have control over your attitude towards life and how you let events affect you.***

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