

## 18.5: Coping with Work related Stress

4. What are the remedies for job-related stress, and how can managers motivate employees to participate actively in health promotion efforts for the benefit of all concerned?

We come now to the most important question from a managerial standpoint: What can be done to reduce job-related stress? Many suggestions for coping with stress are implicit in the previous discussions. However, it is possible to summarize several important actions employees and managers can take in order to provide a more desirable work environment and improve employee adjustment to work.

### Individual Strategies

There are many things people can do to help eliminate the level of experienced stress or, at the very least, to help cope with continuing high stress. Consider the following:

**Developing Self-Awareness.** Individuals can increase awareness of how they behave on the job. They can learn to know their own limits and recognize signs of potential trouble. Employees should know when to withdraw from a situation (known to some as a “mental health day” instead of absenteeism) and when to seek help from others on the job in an attempt to relieve the situation.

**Developing Outside Interests.** In addition, individuals can develop outside interests to take their minds off work. This solution is particularly important for Type A people, whose physical health depends on toning down their drive for success. Employees can ensure that they get regular physical exercise to relieve pent-up stress. Many companies sponsor athletic activities, and some have built athletic facilities on company premises to encourage employee activity.

**Leaving the Organization.** Sometimes an employee may be unable to improve her situation and, as a result, may find it necessary (i.e., healthful) simply to leave the organization and find alternative employment. Although this is clearly a difficult decision to make, there are times when turnover is the only answer.

**Finding a Personal or Unique Solution.** Another means individuals can use to cope with stress is through a variety of personal or unique solutions. For instance, here is how one manager described his reaction to a stressful situation: “If someone finally bugs me, I politely hang up the phone and then pound the hell out of my typewriter, saying all the things on paper I wanted to say to that person on the phone. It works every time. Then, I rip up the paper and throw it into the trash can.” If an employee cannot leave a stressful situation, this may be a good temporary way out of it.

**Physical Exercise.** Because part of the cause of the fatigue resulting from stress is the body’s physical reaction, exercise can be an effective means of enabling the body to more effectively deal with the physical components of stress. Regular exercise can be an important and effective individual strategy.

**Cognitive Perspective.** Finally, because stress is in part a function of how events are perceived and interpreted, controlling one’s cognitive perspective of events can also be an effective strategy. Although one would not want to go so far as framing a truck speeding toward you as an opportunity rather than a threat, positively framing situations as well as distinguishing factors that are within as well as outside your control and influence can be effective means of reducing stress.

### Organizational Strategies

Because managers usually have more control over the working environment than do subordinates, it seems only natural that they have more opportunity to contribute to a reduction of work-related stress. Among their activities, managers may include the following eight strategies.

**Personnel Selection and Placement.** First, managers can pay more attention in the selection and placement process to the fit between job applicants, the job, and the work environment. Current selection and placement procedures are devoted almost exclusively to preventing qualitative role overload by ensuring that people have the required education, ability, experience, and training for the job. Managers could extend these selection criteria to include a consideration of the extent to which job applicants have a tolerance for ambiguity and can handle role conflict. In other words, managers could be alert in the job interview and subsequent placement process to potential stress-related problems and the ability of the applicant to deal successfully with them.

**Skills Training.** Second, stress can be reduced in some cases through better job-related skills training procedures, where employees are taught how to do their jobs more effectively with less stress and strain. For instance, an employee might be taught how to reduce overload by taking shortcuts or by using new or expanded skills. These techniques would only be successful, however, if management did not follow this increased effectiveness by raising work quotas. Along with this could go greater effort by

managers to specify and clarify job duties to reduce ambiguity and conflict. Employees could also be trained in human relations skills in order to improve their interpersonal abilities so that they might encounter less interpersonal and intergroup conflict.

**Job Redesign.** Third, managers can change certain aspects of jobs or the ways people perform these jobs. Much has been written about the benefits of job redesign. Enriching a job may lead to improved task significance, autonomy, responsibility, and feedback. For many people, these jobs will present a welcome challenge, which will improve the job-person fit and reduce experienced stress. It should be noted, however, that all people do not necessarily want an enriched job. Enriching the job of a person with a very low need for achievement or external locus of control may only increase anxiety and fear of failure. Care must be taken in job enrichment to match these efforts to employee needs and desires.

In addition to job enrichment, a related technique aimed at reducing stress is *job rotation*. Job rotation is basically a way of spreading stress among employees and providing a respite—albeit temporary—from particularly stressful jobs. Job rotation is particularly popular in Japan as a means of allocating the more tedious or boring tasks among a large set of employees so prolonged stress is reduced. Japan is also finally working toward a reduced workweek as a means of reducing job-related stress.

**Company-Sponsored Counseling Programs.** Several companies have begun experimenting with counseling programs, the fourth strategy suggested here. For instance, Stanford University's executive program includes a module on coping with stress, and the Menninger Foundation conducts a one-week anti-stress seminar in Topeka. In one experiment among police officers, the value of a stress management program was examined. In the program, which consisted of six two-hour sessions, officers were told about the nature and causes of stress, were shown useful relaxation exercises, and were put through several simulated stressful situations—such as role playing the handling of an arrest. Throughout, emphasis was placed on reinforcing the officers' confidence that they could, in fact, successfully cope with on-the-job stress. The results of the program showed that those officers who went through the program performed better, exhibited greater self-control, and experienced less stress than officers in comparable positions who did not go through the program. Similar findings have emerged in a variety of business organizations. Once again, much work-related stress can be reduced simply by encouraging managers to be more supportive and to provide the necessary tools for people to cope with stress.

**Increased Participation and Personal Control.** Fifth, managers can allow employees greater participation and personal control in decisions affecting their work. As noted above, participation increases job involvement and simultaneously reduces stress by relieving ambiguity and conflict. However, although the benefits of increased participation are many, it should be noted that being more participative is no easy task for some supervisors. One study, for example, found significant differences in the extent to which different supervisors would allow their subordinates to participate in decision-making. Females were found to allow more participation than males. Supervisors with high achievement needs, high levels of confidence in the abilities of their subordinates, and low feelings of being threatened by others allowed more subordinate participation. The issue of participation does not appear to be whether subordinates desire it; instead, it appears to be whether superiors will allow it.



Figure 18.5.1. Stress Ball Stress balls have been used for centuries, particularly in Chinese culture, to help relieve anxiety and improve hand coordination. These days, people still turn to stress balls for reliable anxiety relief. (Attribution: Katy Warner/ Flickr/ Attribution 2.0 Generic (CC BY 2.0))

**Work Group Cohesiveness.** Sixth, managers can attempt to build work group cohesiveness. Team-building efforts are common in industry today. These efforts focus on developing groups that will be both more productive and mutually supportive. A critical ingredient in the extent to which stress is experienced is the amount of social support employees receive. Team building represents one way to achieve this support.

**Improved Communication.** Managers can open communication channels so employees are more informed about what is happening in the organization. With greater knowledge, role ambiguity and conflict are reduced. Managers must be aware,

however, that communication is a two-way street; they should allow and be receptive to communication from subordinates. To the extent that subordinates feel their problems and complaints are being heard, they experience less stress and are less inclined to engage in counterproductive behavior.

**Health Promotion Programs.** Finally, many companies have recently embarked on a more systematic and comprehensive approach to stress reduction and wellness in the workplace. These programs are usually referred to as **health promotion programs**, and they represent a combination of diagnostic, educational, and behavior modification activities that are aimed at attaining and preserving good health. A typical program includes risk assessment, educational and instructional classes, and counseling and referrals. Health promotion programs tackle a wide array of health-related concerns, including physical fitness, weight control, dietary and nutritional counseling, smoking cessation, blood pressure monitoring, alcohol and substance abuse problems, and general lifestyle modification.

Companies involved in such programs usually feel that the costs invested to run them are more than returned through higher levels of productivity and reduced absenteeism and stress-related illness. Moreover, many companies have found that providing such services serves as an attractive incentive when recruiting employees in a tight job market.

Stress is a function of the objective environment but also of individuals' subjective interpretation of events and their consequences. Both body and mind are involved the process. It is important for both firms and individuals to take preventive measures before the cumulative effects of stress manifest themselves in ways that cost both the individual and the company.

**Eustress** is a term that signifies beneficial stress, either psychological, physical. The term was coined by using the Greek prefix "eu", meaning "good", and stress, literally meaning "good stress". Eustress was originally explored in a stress model by Richard Lazarus. It is the positive cognitive response to stress that is healthy, or gives one a feeling of fulfilment or other positive feelings.

#### concept check

What are some things that managers can do to reduce stress in the organization?

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