

REDUCING STRESS AT WORK

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Abstract: *It has been previously demonstrated that reducing stress at work means actually reducing risk of illness in life. Occupational distress is one of the most important health problems in the E.U. In Europe, it is on the second place as regards the number of days off and cost. Occupational distress affects one out of three employees in the E.U. Over the last few years, some organizations have worked out programs designed to help all the employees physically and mentally in order to prevent problems related to stressing jobs. All these plans are trying to reduce work-related stress. This article aims at presenting some strategies to prevent and reduce stress at the organizational level and individually.*

Keywords: stress related to work, strategies, reducing level of stress, occupational stress

Introduction

Occupational stress is a major problem in all European societies. In Romania, we are quite at the beginning in terms of documentation and studies, but it is considered one of the major problems nowadays. Occupational stress is in relationship with various diseases and it is obviously becoming increasingly serious. At the same time, probably even more important are the dramatic socio - economic consequences manifested in absenteeism, loss of productivity, labour turnover and even disability pension costs. In the UK, the Health and Safety Executive has estimated that half of the absenteeism that occurs is due to work-stress. In the Netherlands, in ten years the disability pension because of workers' stress has increased from 21% to 30 % .

Occupational stress affects 28 % of the employees in the E.U. – according to a study published in 2005 by the European Health Commission. The first extensive review of the consecrated literature was conducted by Newman and Behr in 1979,

with the subject “occupational stress management programmes.” The authors conclude that most of the strategies reviewed base themselves on professional opinions, although some personal and organizational strategies have been also included. In this study, very few strategies have been evaluated directly with scientific rigour. This implies that “practitioners have more than their common sense and visceral instincts to rely on when they attempt to develop badly needed preventive and curative stress management interventions” – DeFrank and Cooper wrote in 1989.

Stress is of growing significance not only in established industrial countries. Preventive medical aspects are becoming important in association with the stress phenomenon.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to discuss about the correlation between stress and health or disease and to disseminate information about methods to reduce stress at work or occupational stress.

Materials

From organic chemistry in medicine, stress is defined as a state of threatened homeostasis. The principal effectors of the stress system include corticotrophin-releasing hormone, arginine vasopressin, the glucocorticoids and the catecholamines norepinephrine and epinephrine. In the body, activation of the stress system leads to adaptive behavioural and physical changes. The principal stress hormones are glucocorticoids and catecholamines. These two hormones affect major immune functions such as antigen presentation, leukocyte proliferation and traffic, secretion of cytokines and antibodies and selection of the T helper versus T2 helper responses. As a result of the stress response, it seems that the body increases its systemic inflammatory reaction.

Stress itself is neither harmful nor healthy. It represents a fundamental biological principle that is associated with vivacity. This one facilitates adaptation, dynamic balance, survival and self-organization. Stress is also significant for biological evolution. A crucial part of the physiological concept is the self-regulatory stress response. Stress may enhance biological creativity and health but may also lead to allostatic load and disease. This balance between good and bad is dependent on the level of stress.

Stress is in close connection with professional activities, depending on the type of work, the relationship at work, the role issues, person-environment adjustment, autonomy or participation and involvement of workers. All these pertain to the interface between individual and organization, but link to organization; stress is about organizational structures, selection and placement, training, payment, job structuring or restructuring, health concerns and resources. Another cause of stress can be associated with work and retirement in the context of permanent demographic changes.

Some authors consider stress as the privilege of modern world. The truth is

different: there has always existed stress, but intelligence, knowledge, schooling and technology have led to increased responsibility, life style and self-respect.

In the civilized world, where everybody must work for a living, one's job has become most important, sometimes even more important than one's family. But, in order to succeed in having a good job, one has to cope with many difficulties and meet certain requirements.

All the requirements linked to jobs take one to stress. The increases in workloads over the past decades have led to occupational stress and the growing number of employees experiencing psychological problems. At the social level, costs are considerable in terms of absenteeism, loss of productivity and health care consumption. At the individual level, work-related stress evinces in high tension, anger, anxiety, depressed mood, mental fatigue, sleep disturbances. All these problems, known to aggregate as distress, are often classified as neurasthenia, adjustment disorders or burnout.

Researchers demonstrate that stress always causes aggressive behaviour. Depression and chronic stress accelerate aging and a moderate to high stress leads to higher mortality rate. In the last few years, a great number of studies deal with stress. A new theory says that being born and raised in a major urban area is associated with greater lifetime risk for anxiety and mood disorders, which affect professional life.

Researchers at Brown University have found out that some stressful life events cause panic symptoms to increase gradually over time, rather than to trigger an immediate panic attack.

There are several illness-forms related to stress: Depression, GAD – Generalized anxiety disorders, OCD- Obsessive – compulsive disorders, Panic disorder, PTSD- Posttraumatic stress disorder, Suicide. Others are Bipolar Disorder, Eating disorders, Headaches, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IMS), Sleep Disorders, Substance Abuse (alcohol, tobacco, drugs).

If the job fails to give one satisfaction, stress increases to a higher level. The quality of life declines under these circumstances.

The organization can try to reduce stress or to keep it under control by using some strategies, such as:

- defining the job – specific tasks, reducing the element of danger caused by the ambiguous and conflicting functions and by getting more autonomy to employees for succeeding in accomplishing their tasks;
- setting objectives and performance standards;
- developing careers by training.

For reducing stress, there are needed three levels of intervention: individual, individual-organization and organization. In this structure, there are different programmes to reduce stress.

At the individual level – to reduce stress, it is possible to have relaxation\ meditation. Relaxation methods can be divided into two categories: for people who are physiologically oriented – aiming at the achievement of deep muscle relaxation (contracting and relaxing major muscle groups) and for those people who are cognitive-oriented, methods achieving relaxation by imagery and meditation.

The Weimar Institute in California have developed a program called NEW START, which has a mnemo-technical formula:

N - Nutrition - important in health;

E – Exercise – sports, physical effort (it can "clear your mind");

W – Water – 2 litres per day or more;

S – Sunshine;

T – Temperance – moderation;

A – Air - fresh air;

R – Rest (sleep 7-8 hours, relaxation);

T – Trust, social support, socialization.

At the individual level, for reducing stress at work, it is important to know the cognitive coping strategies. This programme focuses on activities such as goal-settings, time-management, communication skills, conflict resolution

and problem articulation skills. To have hobbies is also essential in reducing stress.

Developing confidence in one's forces, setting priorities and personal limits, as well as having realistic goals are also important factors.

The individual - organizational interface level requires specific stress management strategies.

Although the role of organization is to eliminate stress, the action cannot be fully successful unless the individuals urge in this direction and take a series of personal measures, such as:

- organizing personal space;
- keeping a relaxed and friendly climate;
- having adequate communication;
- inner balance or control of reactions;
- supporting people who have similar positions or common problems;
- co - workers support groups.

A technique frequently mentioned as an effective stress reduction way is saying "No". Too often do people become stressed due to their inability to refuse doing something because of the embarrassment of telling others that they cannot fulfil their tasks.

At the organizational level, the methods to reduce stress consist of procedures of offering general and professional advice to employees.

General occupational stress reduction measures refer to activities such as reduction of work of the individual or even implementation of a programme of change, the simplification of procedures and a secondary task of different activities enabling every person to express unpleasant feelings about his or her condition. Professional advice has to be made available to employees. To have the companies work out stress reduction programmes is much cheaper than the medical costs for "repair work". The latest programmes of this kind are called "wellness programmes" designed to take care of both physical and psychological aspects of the employee. They may include seminars on giving up smoking and alcohol,

as well as on losing weight and healthy diets, and exercise programmes.

All these programs aim at creating an organizational culture and provisions to meet individual needs and to eliminate the cause of stress. Anti-stress leisure time activities are mandatory. The work\ family conflict is the major source of stress; therefore, it is essential to allocate sufficient time to family.

With rare exceptions, Romanian stress management programs have not enjoyed great success, especially due to the existence of a specific mentality. There is a

general management theory saying that “people are lazy from Nature”, therefore it is necessary to have them forced to work and they must be controlled all the time and punished when they do wrong. Some multinational companies have occupational stress management quite well accomplished. It is true that there are some multinational companies where it is normal to work overtime, to be constantly busy, constantly in action, in a hurry, always running out of time. The strategies to reduce stress in Romania are still an open question and we are looking for solutions.

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