Executive Briefing

The Leader's Guide to Managing Workplace Stress

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> Globally, more than 3 out of 5 doctor visits are for stress related problems.
>
> Foundation for Integrated Research in Mental Health

Scope of Stress in Today's Workplace

This briefing is designed to help executives understand, recognize, and effectively deal with stress in the workplace. As a senior executive, it will help you:

1. Raise your awareness of the causes and effects of excessive stressors
2. Encourage and support the use of good practices and preventative measures by supervisors and employees
3. Provide tools and techniques for assessing and managing stress within a workgroup
4. Help learners recognize signs of stress in themselves and others, and take appropriate measures

Important Definitions

- **'Stress'** is commonly used to describe the external exposures, pressures, and demands that we face; the coping mechanisms that we use to deal with them; and the consequences of our coping mechanisms. Furthermore, **job stress** can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. To avoid confusion, the term 'stress' will be used as the overall descriptor, while 'stressor' and 'distress' refer to the causes (exposures, input), responses, and outcomes (effects, outputs), respectively.

- **'Stressor'** refers to pressures, challenges or demands that produce adaption responses. Stressors are known to have the potential to cause distress and health problems.

- **'Distress'** refers to negative emotional, behavioral or physical reactions.

1. The Origins of Stress

While research on job stress has greatly expanded in recent years, confusion remains about the cause, effects, and prevention of work-related stressors.

Stressors are ubiquitous for all of us. Exposure to stressors can be both work-related and non-work-related. It is important to realize that stressors can have cumulative effects, and that simultaneous exposure to multiple stressors without sufficient recovery time can lead to an individual's increased vulnerability.

Stressors are interactive and interdependent, an important fact that must be recognized. While this document deals with work-related stressors, keep in mind that distress resulting from non-work-related causes is quite common and impacts the individual's workplace. Conversely, **distress** resulting from work-related causes will impact an individual's life outside of the work environment.

Did you know?

Stress is linked to the six leading causes of death – heart disease, cancer, lung ailments, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide.

American Psychological Association, 2005

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2. Stress is a Concern to All of Us

Did you know?

62% *of Americans say work has a significant impact on stress levels*

52% *of workers are more stressed because of work than home.*

61% *of workers list heavy workloads as a significant impact on stress levels.*

54% *of workers are concerned about health problems caused by stress.*

Stress is the root cause of anxiety and depression – affecting over 36 million people in American's workforce.*

Work-related distress has been shown to affect millions of workers across all types of employment sectors. Work-related mental illnesses are becoming one of the major causes of occupational illness and lost work-years. Work-related stressors have the potential to alter a person's health, job motivation or commitment to work.

This may lead to:

1. an increase in the likelihood or severity of a number of illnesses including:
    *   Physical illnesses and injuries (heart disease, musculoskeletal disorders, gastrointestinal disturbances, and various minor illnesses)
    *   Psychological effects and mental illnesses (sleep problems, anxiety, and depression)
2. increased absenteeism
3. an increase in the frequency of accidents
4. reduced morale
5. increased staff turnover
6. reduced productivity at work or at home

* American Psychological Association (APA)

3. Accountability and Responsibilities

Did you know?

Within any occupation there may be a multitude of stressors, and each employee will respond in a different way to each stressor.

Typical examples of work-related stressors include:

1. lack of control
2. time/deadline pressure
3. poor relationships
4. excessive travel
5. lack of consultation/communication
6. work overload
7. understaffing
8. organizational change
9. threat of redundancy

Occupational stressors are more difficult to assess than other health & safety hazards.

Businesses that are concerned about promoting the health and safety of their employees must assess and manage any business-related risks that may affect that health and safety. Occupational stressors and distress seem to be more difficult to assess than other health and safety hazards. **It is essential, therefore, that we apply the same rigor in assessing and managing workplace distress hazards that we do for all health and safety risks.**

All parties within an organization should be aware of the need to address potential health-related problems in the workplace:

- **The company** is normally considered to be accountable for taking reasonably practicable actions to reduce risks, thus ensuring that work activity does not adversely impact the health of staff.
- **Supervisors** are responsible for assisting employees in maintaining a healthful work environment. This includes looking at how work is organized, being vigilant regarding employee vulnerabilities, and seeing if there are ways to relieve pressure so that it does not become excessive. In addition, it is important to check to see if others are impacted by changes in team dynamics. Supervisors should be aware of available resources to which they can point employees who may need assistance in dealing with stress.
- **Individuals** are responsible for notifying their supervisors of any issues related to their own perceived stress, or stress that they observe in others. This requires a partnership between the individual and the supervisor based on honesty and trust. Individuals should also familiarize themselves with available resources and support.

4. How do Stressors Affect People?

Low morale, health and job complaints, and employee turnover often provide the first signs of job stress.

The way we think alters the way we are affected by stressors. What is stressful to one individual may not be stressful to another. What is stressful to an individual today may not be stressful tomorrow. Distress is related to the perception of loss of control that results from an imbalance between the pressures being exerted on the individual and that individual's resources. When pressures and demands rise to a level at which the person feels out of control, his way of thinking, feeling, and behaving will be altered.

As a result, changes in physiological functions occur which, if unresolved, can lead to health problems. However, people tend to perform better when under a moderate amount of pressure (see Figure 1). In Figure 1, A and B both represent high-performing individuals and teams. A, however, is working comfortably within the optimum zone of pressure, while B is distressed and is at risk for developing adverse reactions.

Working at peak performance (high point on graph) is acceptable for short periods, but it is beyond the optimum zone, the level at which people can comfortably work continuously. The risk of remaining at the peak for long periods is the likelihood of additional events adding to the pressure and pushing the individual into the overload zone.

Figure 1   **Demands v. Performance**

Once an individual has moved past the peak zone and into the overload zone, the movement down the slope can be sudden and unexpected. This can result in illness if there is no intervention. A low level of perceived control of the work situation (procedures, work pacing, and decisions) seems to increase the risk of health problems. Furthermore, a low level of support and feedback from supervisors and coworkers may increase the risk of poor health.
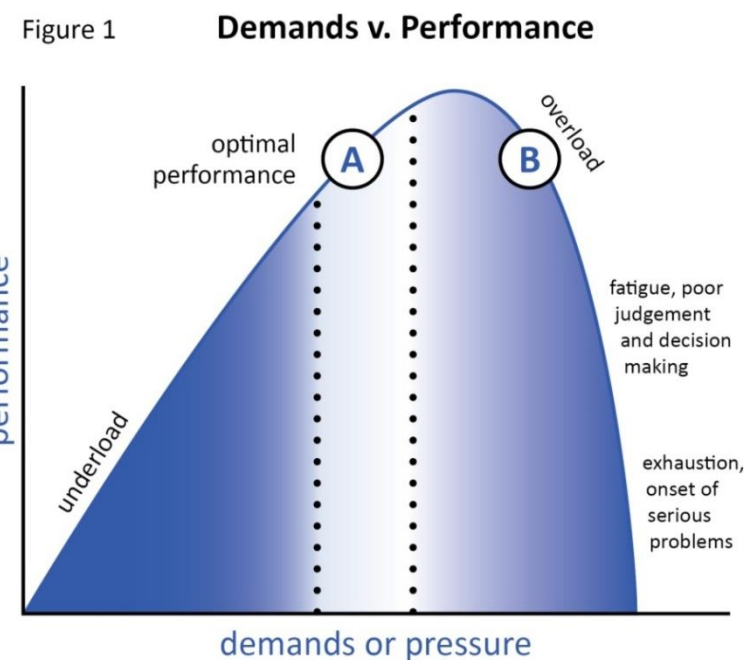
5. How to Recognize the Signs of Distress

Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than are any other life stressor – more so than even financial problems or family problems.*

A sustained change in behavior and performance can be an early sign that an employee is suffering distress. Look out for deteriorating relationships with colleagues, irritability, indecisiveness, absenteeism, or reduced performance. Perceived distress will not always result in signs that are apparent to others, and initial changes may be quite subtle (see also examples in Table 1).

Examples of various signs and symptoms of distress:

Emotional

- confusion
- loss of sense of proportion
- lack of confidence
- forgetfulness
- mental block
- lack of enthusiasm
- feeling victimized
- negativity
- depression

Intellectual

- lack of concentration & focus
- missing the point
- unable to make decisions/plans
- can't see the forest for the trees
- short on ideas
- thinking about the past all the time
- decreased work performance
- missed deadlines

Social

- more accidents
- carelessness
- overreacting
- angry outbursts
- can't keep still or settle down
- confused speech
- withdrawing from people and events
- aggressive driving

Physical

- perspiring
- looking flushed
- increased dependence on smoking, drinking or drugs
- eating too much or too little
- clumsiness
- minor ailments, headaches
- insomnia

*** National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
    DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 99-101**

6. Preventing and minimizing workplace distress

Nearly one-half of large companies in the United States provide some type of stress management training for their workforces. *

Most of the things that a supervisor can do to minimize or prevent distress are products of good management. It is important to be aware of any pressures that might negatively impact any individual, and to intervene before anybody comes to harm.

Good management practices include:

- Learning about what causes distress in the workplace, working actively to improve the working environment, and minimizing stressors within your control.
- Finding out whether distress could be a problem for individuals in your work group by implementing a systematic assessment.
- Working to eliminate or manage internal issues that are affecting staff.
- Understanding one's own physiological response to stressors and working to adopt a proactive stance.

Did you know?

The Wall Street Journal reported that one third of people surveyed considered quitting their jobs because of stress and 14 % actually did.

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7. Dealing with stressed-out and distressed employees

The most direct way to reduce stress in the workplace is to Identify the most common stressors and design a strategy to deal with the root cause.

✓ **Listen to the individual.** Talk with the employee about anything in the workplace that is contributing to the distress. Do not try to solve non-work-related issues, but be open and supportive. Recognize that non-work problems can make it difficult for people to cope with the pressures of work. It is in a supervisor's best interest to remain understanding.

✓ **Consider consulting Human Resources (HR)**—they may be able to help depending upon the situation.

✓ Depending on the issue, **you may decide to refer the individual directly to Occupational Health**. They will make a medical assessment and give professional health advice to the individual. When deciding whether to refer someone to Occupational Health, it is important to consider the following two options:

1. If the issue is minor or if you feel that the individual would receive real benefit, suggest to the individual that he consider consulting with Medical/Occupational Health staff.
2. If the issue is absence-related, if health care is required or if the person states that the cause is work-related, then make a formal referral to Medical/Occupational Health.

✓ Medical/Occupational Health staff will help to determine whether the issue is ultimately work-related.

✓ **Involve the employee** in decisions by jointly agreeing on actions.

✓ **Follow up after one month to check on whether things have improved.**

✓ **Find out whether others are also experiencing distress at work.** If one member of the team is suffering from work-related distress, he or she may represent the tip of an iceberg.

✓ **Finally, remember that health-related issues are 'privacy cases' and should remain confidential.** It is imperative that confidentiality is not breached in any communications unless such action is necessary to comply with the law or with the health and safety of the individual or others.

8. Managing your own stress

Learn good stress management skills <u>before</u> distress sets in.

Distress may impact logical thinking, so you may not recognize that you are in the middle of a stressful situation at the time. Below are some brief suggestions for preventing stress and managing your own personal stress. Make sure you learn these practices now before you really need them!

1. **Develop support structures;** talk to other individuals.

2. **Take control:**
   - take action … do something
   - say no to excessive demands
   - prioritize
   - slow down
   - leave on time; take a break
   - exercise

3. **Reduce pressure** by being objective:
   - avoid jumping to conclusions, taking things personally or making mountains out of molehills
   - ask the question: Will it really matter five years from now?
   - challenge the potentially unreasonable 'shoulds,' 'oughts,' 'musts,' 'owes' and 'deserves,' etc.

4. **Avoid** using exaggerated labels such as stupid, lazy, dumb, crazy and ugly in conversation with others.

5. **Learn techniques** to remain focused like mentally shouting, 'Stop!'

6. **Recognize the impact** of change and the stages one goes through when experiencing change.

7. **Maintain self-esteem** and remember that one is not always alone in one's thoughts and feelings.

> **Reality is the leading cause of stress for those in touch with it.**
> *Jane Wagner*

> **Stress is when you wake up screaming and you realize you haven't fallen asleep yet.**
> *Unknown*

> **There cannot be a stressful crisis next week. My schedule is already full.**
> *Henry Kissinger*

> **Stress: The confusion created when one's mind overrides the body's basic desire to choke the living daylights out of some jerk who desperately deserves it.**
> *Unknown*

Stress Assessment Checklist

Good management culture exists when:
- employees are valued, respected and supported
- health issues are treated seriously by the organization

Demands on staff are at the right level when:
- staff are able to cope with the volume and complexity of the work
- work is scheduled sensibly so that there is enough time to carry out the allocated tasks and individuals are not expected to work excessively long hours

Staff feel in control when:
- they are given a say in how they do their work
- the amount of control they have is balanced with the demands placed upon them

Good relationships exist when:
- there is good communication between supervisors and employees
- employees are not bullied or harassed
- supervisors regularly provide fair and specific feedback on the work done
- supervisors ensure that rewards (salary, promotions and allocation of tasks) are perceived as fair and in proportion with competence and effort

Good change management exists when supervisors:
- communicate to employees the reason why change is essential
- involve employees and recognize their views
- clearly understand the objective of the change
- ensure a supportive climate for employees

Employees understand their roles when:
- they know how this fits in with the organization's wider aims and objectives
- jobs are clearly defined to avoid confusion

Good training and support practice exists when:
- employees receive suitable and sufficient training to do their jobs
- employees receive support from their supervisors, even when things go wrong
- the organization encourages people to share their concerns about health and safety and work-related stress
- the individual is fair to the employer—they discuss their concerns and work towards agreed solutions

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