

A case study on the need & benefit of Stress Busters among Corporate Employees

Mrs. Magdalene Daniel,

M. Com., M. Phil., Research Scholar, Department of Commerce, Annamalai University,
Annamalai Nagar – 608002

Dr. Shyamala

M.Com., Ph. D., Professor , Department of Commerce, Annamalai University, Annamalai
Nagar – 608002

Abstract

Stress is omnipresent in modern society, yet it is relatively a new concept to many. Organisations today are critically analysing how employee stress is adversely affecting both the employees' well-being and their overall productivity. This article discusses the various aspects of workplace stress and studies the new stress busting techniques that different organisations are now employing. The relevant information is collected by personal interviews of different Human Resource Teams and employees by the Author. To authenticate the effects of the measures taken by the corporates, medical inputs were taken from a cardiologist.

Key Words: *Stressors, Stress Hormone, Heart Disease, Stress Busters*

Introduction

Stress has no boundaries; it visits both rich and poor, literate and illiterate, employed and unemployed. However, the intensity and reaction to it may differ between individuals, but all experience stress in one form or the other.

The recent connotation of term 'stress' is just over 100 years, when Hans Selye began using the term after completing his medical training at the University of Montreal in the 1920s.^[1] Research has found that stress has been plaguing humanity for at least 1500 years. Cortisol is a chemical released by the body and can be found in blood, hair and urine. Medical researchers have identified Cortisol to be a key indicator of stress in humans.^[2]

The basic definition of stress is a force that produces strain on a physical body. In the psychological context, stress is any external or internal event that requires an adjustment or response in the human body. The body reacts to stress with physical, mental and/or emotional responses. Responses to stress could be positive in that it could help avoid danger or meet a deadline^[3] but could also have negative effects on the human body.

Medical research shows that Cortisol (also known as stress hormone) is released by the adrenal glands in response to stress. It is a defence mechanism of the body wherein the brain triggers its release to help the body handle stressful situations. However, high cortisol levels for long periods of time can hurt the body more than it helps.^[4] Higher the levels of cortisol, higher would be the level of sugars in the blood stream, consequently higher would be the availability of substances that help repair the tissues.^[5]

The factors that trigger or induce stress are called stressors. The stressors can be categorized into various buckets like organisational stressors, social stressors, personal stressors and other stressors based on work, society, family or psychological origins.

Stress often leads to anxiety and in a work setting leads to loss of productivity. Research shows that stress among employees invariably results in more sick leaves or time off from work. This adversely affects both productivity and morale in the workplace. Hence, minimizing workplace stress is vital to maintaining a motivated and productive workforce to achieve higher goals.

Review of literature

Definition of stress

According to Robins (2004), stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important. So, this definition justifies that stress is not necessarily always bad.

Reasons for stress

Green Haus and Beutell, (1985) Organisational based factors have been known to induce job stress for employees at work place. This states that one of the reasons for stress is due to organisational stressors.

Types of stress

There are two types of stress: eustress and distress. Eustress (good stress) is the type of stress that results in overall benefit to the person and distress (bad stress) is the type of stress that impacts a person negatively. Events like promotion, deadlines that could lead to betterment of life could be categorised as eustress. And events like financial troubles, relationship issues, loss of a loved one could be called distress.

There is no universal categorization of stress as eustress or distress; the same stress could be eustress for one and distress for another. In a workplace, frequent causes of distress are excessive job demands, job insecurity, conflicts with team mates and supervisors, lack of training necessary to do the job, conflicts with teammates and supervisors and the like.^[6]

Ill effects of stress

Stress not only affects employees' productivity at work but also affects their physical and mental health. It also affects their social life and interpersonal relationships. Stress is deemed a silent killer.

Effect of stress on productivity

Following are some of the negative effects of stress in the workplace:

Absenteeism

The Chartered Institute of Payroll Professionals discovered that stress is one of the three most common causes of long-term absence in the workplace.

Staff turnover

Employers see higher than average number of resignations.

Not keeping time

Stress often leads to sleeplessness, which then translates to tardiness at work.

Relationships

Interpersonal relationships sour under stress, which leads to low productivity.

Quality of Work

While mild stress at workplace is good for overall productivity, medium or high levels of stress usually lead to poor work quality.^[7]

Health Issues

Prolonged stress invariably leads to health issues like elevated blood pressure, increased risk of coronary heart diseases, anxiety disorders, skin ailments, acidity, diabetes and immune deficiency musculoskeletal disorders.

Addictions

Stressed employees tend to lead unhealthy lifestyles like smoking, drinking, drug abuse or poor dietary habits.

Accidents

Stress at workplace can result in absent-mindedness which results in higher accident and injury rates; and both have an increase in administrative costs.^[8]

Higher Costs

Compensations, severance pay, medical expenses, insurance expenditure and the like due to stress can spike up the administrative cost and compensation packages.

Following statistics on ill effects of stress was compiled by the American Institute of Stress: US businesses lose up to \$300 billion each year as a direct result of workplace stress.

Work related stress has been reported to cause 120,000 deaths and results in \$190 billion in health care costs each year.

Roughly 1 million workers miss their shift every day for stress related reasons.

Efforts taken by different corporates to tackle stress: Stress Busters

Modern day organisations do recognize the impact of stress on employees and in turn their overall profitability. While striving for higher profitability, organisations offer a suite of experiences to help employees manage their stress-levels. These are called Stress Busters.

Some of the stress busters, particularly tuned to Gen-Xers, are 'Build pitch perfect' programmes, 'Embrace downtime', 'Letting Go', 'Breathe slowly and deeply', 'Go outdoors for a brief break', 'Do a quick posture check', 'Pop the bubble', '15 Minute stretch break', 'Bright aesthetics', 'Clear communication', 'Unplugged afternoon', sincere compliments, 'Zumba lessons', 'Flash mob', 'Puppy play day', and the list goes on.

Case study on Stress Busters

Mr. Arun Rao, a well-known Industrial Human Resource expert, narrates how an organisation tries to support its employees when stress is magnified:

Most companies have a multi-basket employee engagement program where there is a formal team running a calendar of activities for employees at their workplace. The events could be competitions, cultural activities, teaming and the like.

Companies also provide for budgets to enable team-bonding and these could include out-bound events as well.

Companies are investing a lot on providing facilities such as gym, fitness programs such as yoga & Zumba, access to speakers in the area of physical and emotional fitness.

People see a lot of meaning in giving back - this has come up as a key driver among the younger employee population; so CSR and reach-out to the "deprived" is a key program run by companies.

Companies have also formalized flexi-working and work from home arrangements (where possible) to ensure that employees are able to strike work life balance.

Health screenings along with a formal wellness calendar are becoming key ingredients of employee engagement calendars in companies.

EAP (employee assistance program) which opens up access to professional counselling for employees is becoming a normal feature in terms of employee wellness programs. Some of the progressive companies are retaining professional counsellors and making them available to employees as an additional benefit. Companies use broadcasts to make these services more popular among employees.

Managers are being trained as part of the performance feedback regimen to learn to identify streaks of stress and guide employees to their HR or advise them to access the professional counsellors. HR business partners are seeing themselves evolve as the first point of consult, for employees who are seeking or needing help.

Companies are becoming more liberal with their leave policies, providing time for sabbatical / extended leave, to help employees faced with "Situations" in their lives. Also, in the same vein, career path programs are also becoming much more open-architected to help employees better navigate their career-life fit journeys.

Many measures are taken by the Human Resources departments to help employees handle stress. This study helps to analyse in general the measures taken and exclusively by some organisations in the corporate sector, hospitality sector and as well as informal sector.

Deloitte

Deloitte is one of the biggest audit firms in India employing around 40000 people. The HR team of Deloitte discloses that they provide regular webinars regarding mental health awareness. Customised programs for expectant mothers and new mothers & fathers to deal with the pressure are conducted. They organise family days and impact days by reaching out to underprivileged people of the society. Apart from these they organise regularly Pilates, Yoga and Self Defence classes, hand & neck massages and ergonomic assessments of sitting or working posture. The campuses are equipped with Gym and basketball and tennis courts.

Telebu Communications

Telebu communications has a dog by name FUFU which greets all the employees and the employees consider it as stress buster by spending some time whenever they feel stressed.

WelSpun

Recently, the impromptu dance by Dipali Goenka, the CEO of Welspun India, along with her teammates was well appreciated by all. Employees were seen joining in from their cubicles with leg shakes. Employees appreciate her for a healthy work environment.

Housing Development Finance Corporation

The Housing Development Finance Corporation, an Indian banking and financial services company, offers flexible working hours, Guesthouse for holidaying and free annual health check-ups as stress busters to the employees to help them manage stress.

Taj Hotels

The Taj group of hotels at Hyderabad has special relaxation zones for badminton, volleyball and indoor games. They also conduct many health awareness seminars to help manage stress.

Amazon

Amazon, the world's largest online store, allows employees to bring their pets to work on certain days. The HR team testifies to the effectiveness of this program in managing stress.

Franklin Templeton

Franklin Templeton, an Investment Company, has an Employee Assistance program wherein employees can talk to counsellors when they are stressed. This program is very effective in helping employees vent out their frustrations, get good counsel and manage stress.

Medical science behind Stress and Stress Busters

Medical science observes that life filled with stress leads to poor health. It warns against the evils of stress filled life and recommends using stress busters to manage stress levels.

Dr. Johann Christopher, Consultant Cardiologist and Director of Cardiac Imaging at Care Hospitals Hyderabad, gives an insight into stress, its ill effects and on stress busters:

The medical connotations to stress are too obvious; the final common pathway resulting from stress is death. Although it is an over simplification, some of the key risk factors for stress are hypertension, diabetes and hyperlipidaemia, as also diet, sedentary lifestyle and the like. Research shows a direct correlation between stress and heart disease, the leading killer the world over beating cancer which comes in second by a big margin. Stress affects behaviours and factors that increase heart disease risk, high blood pressure and cholesterol levels, smoking, physical inactivity and overeating. Some people may choose to drink too much alcohol or smoke cigarettes to “manage” their chronic stress; however, these habits result in increased blood pressure and damaged artery walls.

The body's response to stress may be a whole constellation of symptoms ranging from headache, back strain, or stomach ache. Stress can also cause myriad other non-related symptoms such as a low energy drive and forgetfulness. A stressful situation sets off a chain of events. Adrenaline is a hormone which is released in response to stress that temporarily causes rapid breathing and heart rate to rise leading to blood pressure rise. These reactions prepare us to deal with the stress — the fight or flight response. However, if stress is persistent, the body remains on high alert for an extended period of time which causes extensive wear and tear and injury to organs over time. Chronic stress may cause some people to drink too much alcohol or smoke, which increases blood pressure and consequently damage the artery walls. Stress recognition is the first step in its successful treatment; some common symptoms are eating to calm down, speak and eat very fast, drink alcohol or smoke, procrastination.

Managing stress is essential for good health; and researchers continue to document effectiveness of stress management methods with respect to heart disease. A few studies have examined how well treatment or therapies work in reducing the effects of stress on cardiovascular disease. Studies using psychological therapies – involving both psychological and social aspects – are promising in the prevention of second heart attacks. It is extremely important that after a heart attack, stress counselling be an integral part of the rehabilitation process. Regular exercise, positive reaction to life's events, avoidance of smoking or

consuming too much alcohol and caffeinated drinks are an important part of avoiding the stress trap. Medicines are helpful for stress only if all other avenues have been exhausted, as the benefit-risk has to be firmly in favour of the former before it is even attempted. Medication does bring a whole Pandora's Box of side effects that have to be countered by patient education and physician watchfulness, lest a new facet of medication stress emerges from the side shadows. Benzodiazepines are the most common form of sedatives that are used but the dose and frequency have to be carefully titrated.

There is no doubt relaxation or stress management techniques are the real long term solutions to stress. Holistic management of stress is the only real solution to the problem, and it has to be done in a systematic and regulated manner to ensure success in the long term.

Conclusion

From the ongoing discussion, it is clear that stress is here to stay in the modern work culture. And management of stress is of vital importance to both the well-being of the employees and the productivity of organisations. Stress busters are becoming a more common place in many organisations to help with both these objectives. Different organisations have come up with different stress busters over the recent past in this regard. Care must be taken to identify the stress busters that better suit the employees and the nature of the stress they get into, and be creative enough to come-up with tailor made ones if needed for the benefit of both the employees and the organisations.

References

1. History Of Stress. *Centre for Studies on Human Stress*. [Online] 2019. [Cited: May 10, 2020] <https://humanstress.ca/stress/what-is-stress/history-of-stress/>.
2. *Assessing individual systemic stress through cortisol analysis of archaeological hair*. **Webb, Emily, et al., et al.** 4, s.l. : Journal of Archaeological Science, 2010, Vol. 37.
3. **Berger, Fred K.** Stress and your health. *U.S. National Library of Medicine*. [Online] May 5, 2018. [Cited: May 10, 2020] <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003211.htm>.
4. **Legg, Timothy J.** The Basics of Stress. *Healthline*. [Online] June 1, 2018. [Cited: May 10, 2020] <https://www.healthline.com/health/stress>.
5. Chronic stress puts your health at risk. *Mayo Clinic*. [Online] March 19, 2019. [Cited: May 10, 2020.] <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20046037>.
6. Introduction and the Nature of Stress. *MentalHelp.net*. [Online] [Cited: May 10, 2020.] <https://www.mentalhelp.net/stress>.
7. **Thomas, Sian.** How Does Stress Affect Workplace Productivity? *Astutis*. [Online] October 24, 2018. [Cited: May 10, 2020.] <https://blog.astutis.com/how-does-stress-affect-workplace-productivity>.
8. Workplace Stress: A Silent Killer of Employee Health and Productivity. *Corporate Wellness Magazine*. [Online] [Cited: May 10, 2020.] <https://www.corporatewellnessmagazine.com/article/workplace-stress-silent-killer-employee-health-productivity>.