

## Stress Management

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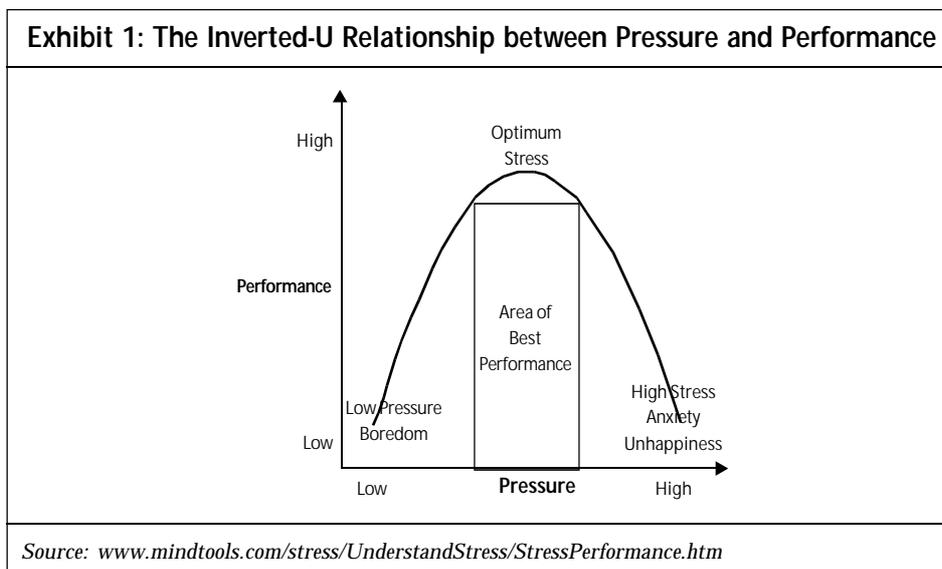
***Regular practice of yoga and meditation not only helps employees to manage stress but also helps create a peaceful and cordial environment to work and produce better results. Staff training, organizing formal meetings, rewarding people for their performance and extra-curricular activities are some of the means by which organizations can make employees feel valuable and enable them to overcome stress.***

According to the late Dr. Hans Selye, “Stress is the sum of all the non-specific effects of factors that can act upon the body.” Anything that affects the body and causes stress is called a stressor. Stressors could be internal as well as external. Internal stressors are those which cause stress due to something that happened in the past. Environment, people, food and other external factors form external stressors. Depending upon the circumstances, beliefs, perceptions and conditioning, different persons react differently to the same stress factor.

According to Dr. Murray Mittleman of Boston’s Beth Israel Medical Center, working under a high-pressure deadline is the main reason for stress development in any corporate. A stressor stimulates the body’s sympathetic nervous system

and places all the major organs under stress. This stress has to be discharged in some way or the other; else it will cause illness and premature death.

Stress deteriorates the performance of employees which results in low turnover rates of the company. There is a direct relationship between pressure and performance. It can be explained with the help of an “Inverted U” graph (see Exhibit 1).



The left hand side of the graph depicts that when there is very little pressure on employees to carry out an important task, the performance level is low. This happens in cases where an urgent or a more interesting task is at hand.

The right hand side of the graph shows that as the pressure increases, the performance level also increases. Here, the area of best performance can be observed. But, beyond this region when pressure increases, people are stressed out and the performance deteriorates.

Despite the unlimited capacity of the human mind, when the brain is overloaded, work performance is adversely affected. As people are tensed up, anxieties, difficulties and negative thinking begin to crop up in their minds and retard their concentration, focus and alertness.

Research shows that stress reduces people's ability to deal with a large amount of data. Both decision-making and creativity get marred because of the inability of people to account for all the available information at one time. This explains why highly stressed people persist in a stressful environment even though better alternatives are available for them. It also becomes clear why anxious people perform best under little or additional stress, while calm people need additional pressure to perform better. A smooth curve is shown above, but in reality it differs from person to person based on situations, circumstances, and personal attitude. The area of best performance enables one to concentrate and focus more on the task at hand.

According to Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Chicago University, the area of best performance is referred to as a state of 'flow'. He adds that in this region, people get completely involved with work, without feeling bored. Stress and tension do not crowd the mind and anxieties do not interfere with the thought process, hence skills are used to their utmost potential. The levels of creativity, efficiency and satisfaction are the highest in this region. It is in this state of 'flow' that the most powerful speeches are made, the best software developed and the most artistic or athletic work delivered.

However, most managers find it difficult to always remain in this area as they have to be readily available for their employees. Further, they have to deal with constantly changing information, decisions and activities around them. Rarely do they find a few minutes alone without distractions. Working from home, spending a few moments in silence, meditation and yoga can help managers to a great extent in this period. Allowing managers to work on tasks that demand deep concentration all by themselves will help create a flow of their own.

There are three major approaches to manage stress:

1. **Action-oriented:** This approach works on solving the problem which causes stress. It may include either changing the environment or the situation.
2. **Emotion-oriented:** In case where it is not viable to change the situation, this approach helps in changing the interpretation of the situation and the perception about it.

| Exhibit 2: List of Symptoms and Health Disorders Associated with Stress  |   |
|--|---|
| Symptoms of Stress   | Health Disorders  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headaches</li> <li>• Muscular aches</li> <li>• Grinding of teeth</li> <li>• Nervous tics</li> <li>• Increased sweating</li> <li>• Rapid heart rate</li> <li>• High blood pressure</li> <li>• Low grade infection</li> <li>• Increase in or loss of appetite</li> <li>• Irritation, anger, hostility</li> <li>• Fear, panic, anxiety</li> <li>• Poor concentration</li> <li>• Dizziness</li> <li>• Restlessness</li> <li>• Nightmares</li> <li>• Insomnia</li> <li>• Fatigue</li> <li>• Impotence</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coronary heart disease</li> <li>• Hypertension</li> <li>• Eating disorders</li> <li>• Ulcers</li> <li>• Diabetes</li> <li>• Asthma</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Migraine headaches</li> <li>• Sleep disorders</li> <li>• Chronic fatigue</li> <li>• Possibly some cancers</li> </ul> |

- 3. Acceptance-oriented:** When a problem cannot be solved either by taking the right action or by controlling the emotion, what is needed is the situation to be accepted as it is.

### Action-Oriented Approach

This approach is suitable when the situation can be changed if an effective action is taken. It involves managing and overcoming stressful situations and changing them into advantageous situations. Here, skills are introduced to enable people to perform their jobs actively, work well with their boss and co-workers, and change their surroundings to eliminate environmental stress. Besides, this approach helps in overcoming the stress of work overload, eliminating the stress of problem jobs, and dealing with problem people, managing performance stress and avoiding burnout.

### Emotion-Oriented Approach

This approach is subtle but plays an effective role in managing stress. When no action can change a situation, people need to change the way they look at that situation which causes them stress. This approach is less attractive than the

action-oriented approach, since stress can recur at a later point of time. Sometimes because of negative thinking, harshness and unjust nature, people find it difficult to maintain cordial behavior with their friends and colleagues, which cause the development of stress.

### **Acceptance-Oriented Approach**

When neither the right action nor a change of emotion works in controlling stress, this approach is applicable. People have to accept the situation as it is since it cannot be changed. For example, the death of a loved one in the family has to be accepted as it is.

### **Relaxation Techniques**

A corporate could train its employees in relaxation techniques which help them be more efficient and productive. Some of these relaxation techniques are explained below:

#### **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

This technique uses progressive contraction and relaxation of muscle groups throughout the body.

#### **Deep Breathing**

This stress management technique involves inhaling and exhaling exercises.

#### **Visual Imagery**

By mentally imagining a relaxing image and scene, the body gets relaxed. This technique helps in the treatment of certain medical conditions such as cancer, asthma, chronic pain and obesity.

#### **Autogenic Training**

Concentrating on feelings and one's desired state and allowing these thoughts to flow at their own pace can relieve stress.

#### **Thought Channelization**

In this technique, people are trained for channelizing their thoughts properly so as to develop a positive attitude and direct the mind flow towards higher contemplation.

## Meditation

By meditating and observing one's thoughts which may be either good or bad, one can be free of stress. Transcendental Meditation (TM) is catching up in India very fast. Many companies including AirTel, American Express, Hero Honda, Hewlett-Packard, BHEL, BPL, ESPN-Star Sports, Eveready, SRF, Wipro, Maruti, Siemens, Ranbaxy, Tisco, and Godrej have put their managers through this course. Many of them are even allowing employees to practice TM during office hours. For example, at Marico, all the employees practice TM together during their working day. According to KK Aggrawal, Senior Vice-President, Hero Honda, it's an excellent stress buster. He further adds, "Intellect and creativity are a company's greatest assets. When the mind is relaxed productivity peaks." It provides a win-win situation for both the employees and the employers.

## Yoga

It helps in uniting body, breath and mind. Practicing some *asanas* can make people stress-free. Obesity itself has become a common stressor these days and is the cause of several heart-related diseases. Yoga can aid in preventing heart diseases to some extent. Also, the employees are required to be aware of the types of food and the effect they have on health. Due to busy schedule, people hardly get time at home to perform some exercises or yoga to lead a healthy life.

## Stress Management Tools

Following are some practical ways to benchmark the current stress levels and monitor future stress-related conditions.

- **Absenteeism:** Maintaining a register for marking the number of absentees at a regular interval of time can reveal the cause of stress. There may be a chance that the number is increasing due to the increased stress.
- **Tardiness:** With the help of daily report and weekly summaries, an analysis of the reasons why employees come late can be done.
- **Medical claims:** By analyzing the data of their health insurance companies, organizations can find out if their employees are victims of stress.
- **Professional assistance:** Professional trainers can help employees to trace out the root cause of stress which develops into physical ailments and guide them accordingly.

- **Complaints or grievances:** Departments with the greater number of complaints have to be facilitated with some stress-control strategies.
- **Accident reports:** Research done on the accidents may reveal the effect of the stress over mind and the cause of the accident.
- **Errors in judgment or misstatements:** Some employees are prone to errors and make wrong decisions. Hence, companies should monitor their employees' decision-making and estimate the cost of a wrong decision to the company.
- **Personal relationships:** The behavior of people changes as per the situation. Hence, companies should be proactive by taking appropriate action whenever required so that stressful relationships are prevented.
- **Customer service problems:** Companies can analyze if their employees are facing stress because of customer service problems and can take measures to reduce the errors involved while taking customers' orders, shipping, invoicing, etc.
- **Quality problems:** A quality report should contain the description of stress-related activities and their trends among certain employees or departments. This can help in finding the cause of stress and eliminating it.

Corporate leaders and managers sometimes try to eliminate stress by meeting the demands of the stressed employees. However, there are chances that this enhances their problems. This is because managers do not focus on eliminating the root cause of stress. Managers need to understand the root cause of stress and its effect on productivity of employees. In today's competitive corporate world, employees work to keep up with ever-increasing performance targets. It demands of them to work for long hours and causes burnout. The signs of burnout include anger; cynicism, negativity and irritability; exploding easily at inconsequential things; headaches or migraines; weight loss or gain; insomnia and depression; shortness of breath; extreme tiredness and fatigue; heart palpitations; and inability to focus.

Spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravishankar, Founder of an NGO "The Art of Living", while addressing the corporate executives in a talk organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in Pune, said, "If you drop your barriers, you will improve

your communication skills and confidence while meditation will help enhance your self-esteem. And that will help you become better negotiators.” According to him, Sudarshan Kriya, a breathing exercise, rejuvenates each particle of the body and eliminates stress and tension.

Stress can be minimized if companies take the right steps. Stress-free employees perform better, work harder, feel happier and have a long-term commitment to the business when compared to their counterparts. Hence, it is better that companies take measures to eliminate stress, or they will end up paying a price.

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