

PSYCHOLOGY HONOURS

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Name of the Topic : Stress Management

Sources of Stress : Environmental , Social , Physiological & Psychological

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Stress is often a complex and complicated issue and understanding your own stress experience can be confusing. Yet it is most important that in developing stress management and stress relief techniques, that you understand the possible sources of your stress in your life?

DEFINING THE TERM SOURCE

When we define the term source you can understand how important it really is in your overall stress management. The word actually means “the point at which something springs into being or from which it derives or is obtained...the point of origin..and...that causes, creates, or initiates”. (The American Heritage® Dictionary of English Language, 2009)

SOURCES OF STRESS AND THE RESULTS

The origination or root of one’s stress can involve a range of different sources. Understanding where your stress is coming from can help you in coping with stress, reducing your stress and even relieving stress for you. For those professionals working to help you in managing stress, knowing the sources of your stress is a very powerful starting point to stress treatment and developing stress techniques.

SIX MAIN STRESS SOURCES

Although there are a variety of sources of stress in people’s lives, many people look for stress help in dealing with predominantly six main sources of stress.

Here is a quick overview and summary of each of the six main sources of stress:

environmental stress

- social stress
- organizational stress
- physiological stress
- psychological stress
- significant events stress

SOURCE ONE – ENVIRONMENTAL STRESS

The first source of stress, strain and hassle in your life, can be that of environmental stress. This type of stress relates to those aspects of your environment and surroundings that are causing you stress.

Stressors that are found in our surroundings are called **environmental stressors**. Everyday life is full of environmental stressors that cause minor irritations. If you use an alarm clock to wake up, the loud noise from your alarm is an environmental stressor. Extreme temperatures are also environmental stressors and can lead to discomfort. Other common environmental stressors include:

- Noise
- Crowding
- Air quality
- Colors
- Tornadoes and other natural disasters
- War and other manmade disasters
- Light
- Insects

Environmental stressors are usually considered to fall into one of four distinct classes: cataclysmic events, stressful life events, daily hassles, and ambient stressors (Evans and Cohen 1987). Cataclysmic events comprise sudden catastrophes that affect many individuals at the same time. For instance, floods, major storms, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, nuclear power plant accidents, chemical plant accidents, and the discovery of toxic waste dumps belong to this category. Cataclysmic events are seldom predictable, neither with respect to their beginning, nor with respect to their course, but they are usually expected to be rather short.

Stressful life events are major incidents in the course of life that require major individual adaptive responses. Such events include major changes in work, or residential environment, e.g., beginning a new job, moving to a new residential area, major construction work in the present residential area, or a major perceptible change in the operating conditions of a nearby stressor. The event as such is usually short, but the behavioral consequences may be long, or permanent.

Daily hassles are repeatedly occurring aversive events of ordinary life, such as arguments with colleagues, crowded classrooms, and traffic congestions on the daily route to work. Although they typically are more or less predictable, the individual has little means to avoid such hassles, and the duration is rather short.

Ambient stressors is a term proposed by Campbell (1983), denoting more continuous and intractable background characteristics of the physical environment. They often go unnoticed, like the continuous hum of the air conditioning, the permanent dust in an industrial area, and the faint hiss of the central heating system. Most people believe that they can adapt to ambient stressors, and they consider the costs of coping with such stressors to be higher than simply enduring them.

For example, living next to a noisy, busy street may result in you exhibiting stress symptoms and stress effects.

SOURCE TWO – SOCIAL STRESS

A second major source of stress is called social stress. This relates to the stress involved in interacting, socializing and communicating with other human beings. It revolves around your relationship with other people. Some of these social interactions and relationships can be very stressful and tension filled experiences in your life. Others can be enjoyable and positive types of social stress and social interaction.

In his study, Vors (1980) describes the psychological implications of psychosocial stressors. He gives two main stressors and describes each of them in detail; Vors goes into depth about the psychoanalytic aspects of social stress and which situations prompt the brain to release certain chemicals to provoke an emotion and a reaction by a person.

Vors states that one of the two main causes of social stress is failure because it leads to a loss of self-esteem and social standing. He explains that failure leads to a higher social stress level,

because it is an important part of our self-identity, and is also how people characterize other human beings.

The second psychosocial stressor described in the article is the feeling of uncontrollability. Vors explains that uncontrollability creates an atmosphere of failure in the brain because the individual is unable to take action to create success, which increases cortisol levels and decreases self-esteem.

A continuity found in both stressors would be that in both stressors would be that the end result is always a decreased self-esteem, which brings a major contribution to social stress.

Effects of Social Stress

In his academic journal, Stankiewicz explains the detrimental effects of long-term social stress. He is able to describe this using a detailed experiment that was conducted by him, in which he used mice to prove his theory that social stress has extremely destructive effects on the average mammal, mentally and physically.

In order to test his theory, Stankiewicz conducted an experiment using average mice. In order to implement social stress onto the animals, Stankiewicz forced the mice to constantly be surrounded by other mice from the same litter. This built a bond of familiarity between all of the mice.

Then, after twelve weeks of invariably being surrounded by their littermates, each individual mouse was put into a separate cage for three weeks before results and effects of the mice were recorded.

The results showed the mice actively emitting the Arginine Vasopressin hormone inside the hippocampus, which is a chemical known to affect anxiety, memory, and increase blood pressure. The mice were also shown to have developed small ulcers, and brain damage.

Stankiewicz explains that this same process is how social stress causes major mental-health illnesses such as depression and anxiety; it is created by the brain releasing certain chemicals when under social stress for elongated periods of time

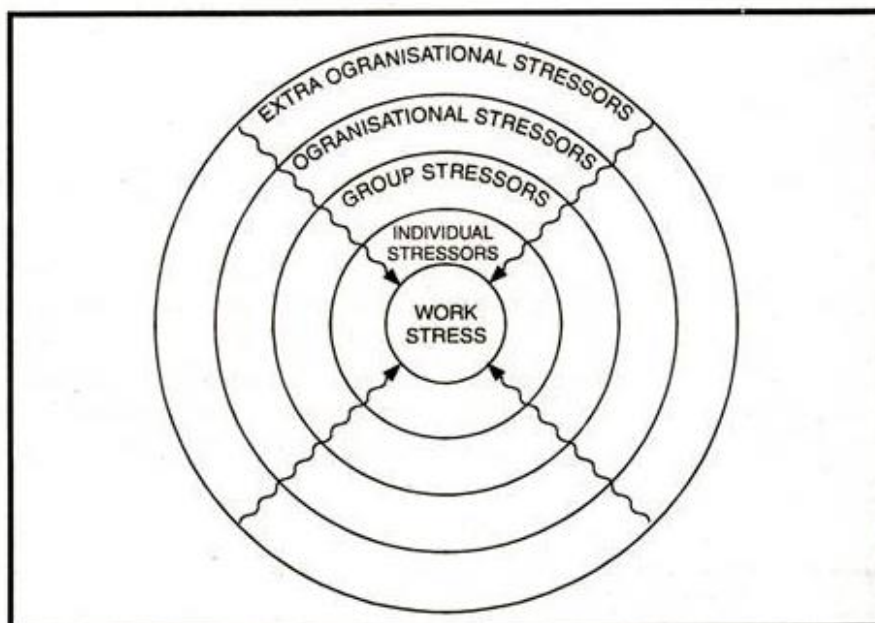
When the brain is put under certain social stressors, it chooses to release certain chemicals or hormones that it believes will help one cope with the stress he or she is being put under. Examples of chemicals or hormones that the brain emits to cope with stressful situations include Glutamate, Dopamine, and Serotonin.

In excessive amounts, these chemicals may cause serious mental illnesses. Excessive social stress that is felt at school or home is essential to the causation of many common and uncommon mental illnesses felt by students.

Even more, Stankiewicz states that physical illnesses are caused by excessive amounts of social stress, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and ulcers.

SOURCE THREE – ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS

All of us engage with, belong to and are often employed by an organization. This can result in organizational stress. Some experts in stress management and stress relief treatment discuss this stress source under the areas of environmental or social stress. For others, it warrants a category of its own, since organizations of all types play an important role in our lives. Most often this source of stress is associated with work stress and job stress. It often involves the demands and pressures placed upon you by the organization, business or group for which you work. However, it also involves any organization with which you interact including the local government organizations, clubs, associations and more.



A. Extra Organisational Stressors:

Job stress is not limited to things that happen inside the organisation, during the working hours. Extra organisational factors also contribute to job stress.

These stressors include the following factors:

1. Political Factors:

Political factors are likely to cause stress in countries which suffer from political uncertainties as in Iran, for example. The obvious reason is that the countries have stable political system where change is typically implemented in an orderly manner.

2. Economic Factors:

Changes in business cycles create economic uncertainties. When the economy contracts, people get worried about their own security. A very important example is the great depression of 1930s. During this period, suicide rates touched the sky. Minor recessions also cause stress in the work force as downward swings in the economy are often accomplished by permanent reductions in the work force, temporary layoff or reduction in pay.

3. Technological Factors:

Technological uncertainty is the third type of environmental factor that can cause stress. In today's era of technological development new innovations make an employee's skills and experience obsolete in a very short span of time. Computers, automation are other forms of technological innovations, which are threat to many people and cause them stress.

B. Organisational Stressors:

In organisations, there is no shortage of factors which can cause stress. Almost every aspect of work can be a stressor for someone. Although there are many factors in the work environment that have some influence on the extent of stress that people experience at the job, the following factors have been shown to be particularly strong in inducing stress:

1. Job Related Factors:

Job related factors or task demands are related to the job performed by an individual.

These factors include the following:

(i) If a job is too routine, dull and boring or happens to be too demanding in terms of frequent transfers or constant travelling, which limits the time he can spend with his family, the individual is likely to experience stress.

(ii) Some jobs also be hazardous or morally conflicting to the individual who interfaces with it, for example, working in a explosives manufacturing factory for the individual who is a staunch believer in and advocate of peace. For lack of other job opportunities, he may be forced to work in this environment and this may be a constant source of severe stress and anguish to the person.

(iii) Some duties and responsibilities have inbuilt stress such as those of the fire fighter or the police squad which defuses bombs.

(iv) Jobs where temperatures, noise or other working conditions are dangerous or undesirable can increase anxiety. Similarly, working in an overcrowded room or invisible location where interruptions are constant, can also lead to stress.

(v) The more interdependence between a person's tasks and the tasks of others, the more potential stress there is. Autonomy, on the other hand tends to reduced stress.

(vi) Security is another task demand that can cause stress. Someone in a relatively secure job is not likely to worry unduly about losing that position. On the other hand, if job security is threatened stress can increase dramatically.

(vii) Another task demand stressor is workload. Overload occurs when a person has more work to do than he can handle. The overload can be either quantitative (the individual has too many tasks to perform or too little time in which to perform them) or qualitative (the person believes that he lacks the ability to do the job). On the other hand, the opposite of overload is also undesirable. It can result in boredom and apathy just as overload can cause tension and anxiety. Thus, a moderate degree of work related stress is optimal because it leads to high level of energy and motivation.

2. Role Related Factors:

Role related factors relate to pressures placed on a person as a function of the particular role he or she plays in the organisation.

Individuals can experience the following role related stresses:

(i) Role Conflict:

Role conflict occurs when two or more persons have different and sometimes opposing expectations of a given individual. Thus, there are two or more sets of pressures on the individual so that it is not possible to satisfy all of them. Role conflict takes place when contradictory demands are placed upon an employee simultaneously. For example, an advertising manager may be asked to produce a creative ad campaign while on the other hand, time constraint is put upon him, both roles being in conflict with each other.

Another type of role conflict is the inter-role conflict where an individual plays more than one role simultaneously in his life and the demands of these roles conflict with each other. For example, a police officer is invited to his friend's wedding party where the guests use drugs which are against the law. Here he faces a role conflict.

(ii) Role Ambiguity:

Stresses from job ambiguity arise when an employee does not know what is expected of him or her or how to go about doing the job. For example, if an employee who joins an organisation is left to himself to figure out what he is supposed to be doing and nobody tells him what the expectations of him or his role are, the newcomer will face a high level of role ambiguity.

Even an old employee can be given a responsibility without being given much information. For example, a production manager might tell a foreman that 500 units of steel rods are to be manufactured in next five days and leaves town immediately without specifying what kind of additional help will be provided, or what the purpose, cost, weight or design details are. The foreman is left with a lot of role ambiguity and does not know how he should go about doing the job.

(iii) Role Overload:

Role overload refers to the situation when an individual is expected to do too many things within a limited time as part of the daily routine. For example, if Mrs. X is expected to perform the duties of a supervisor, receptionist, public relations officer and an accountant, she is likely to experience a lot of stress from the several roles she has to play during the day. She may be able to manage the various roles for a short period of time, but if expected to continue in this fashion on a long term basis, she is likely to fall sick or quit.

3. Inter Personal and Group Related Factors:

Interpersonal demands are pressures created by other employees. Group related stressors include factors like conflicts, poor communication, unpleasant relationship and fear of being ostracized from the group as a valued member.

Working with superior, peers or subordinates with whom one does not get along can be a constant source of stress. Some people can deal with conflicts and misunderstandings in an open way and resolve issues as they arise. Many, however, find it difficult to do this and build internal stresses for themselves.

Moreover, lack of social support from colleagues and poor interpersonal relationships can cause considerable stress, especially among employees with a high social need. Sometimes, the individuals try to avoid these stresses by remaining absent as frequently as possible and even start looking for new jobs.

4. Organisational Structural Factors:

Organisational structure defines the level of differentiation, the degree of rules and regulations and where decisions are made. Excessive rules and lack of participation in decisions that affect an employee are examples of structural variables that might be potential stressors.

5. Organisational Leadership Factors:

These factors represent the managerial style of the organization's senior managers. Some managers create a culture characterised by tension, fear and anxiety. They establish unrealistic pressures to perform in the short run impose excessively tight controls and routinely fire employees who fail to turn up.

6. Organization's Life Cycle:

Organisations go through a cycle. They are established; they grow, become mature and eventually decline. An organization's life cycle creates different problems and pressures for the employees. The first and the last stage are stressful. The establishment involves a lot of excitement and uncertainty, while the decline typically requires cutback, layoffs and a different set of uncertainties. When the organisation is in the maturity stage, stress tends to be the least because uncertainties are lowest at this point of time.

C. Group Stressors:

Another source of stress in organisations is poor interpersonal relationships or conflicts. These conflicts can be among the members of the group or between the superiors and subordinates. Groups have a lot of influence on the employees' behaviour, performance and job satisfaction. On the other hand, the group can also be a potential source of stress.

Group stressors can be categorized into the following factors:

1. Group Cohesiveness:

The famous Hawthorne studies had proved that group cohesiveness is very important to the employees, particularly at the lower levels of the organisation. Lack of cohesiveness can be very stress producing, especially for those persons who cannot thrive in isolation.

The other side of the picture is that too much cohesiveness can also lead to stress. Sayings like "Too much familiarity breeds contempt" are very valid because prolonged contact with other people can also cause stress. This stress becomes more intensified when the people we are close to or with whom we come in contact with are in distress themselves. For example, people tend to become distressed when their friends, colleagues or peers are in distress. Due to this reason people belonging to certain specific professions, which deal with the problems of other people have the highest level of stress.

According to Albercht, doctors have the highest rate of alcoholism of any of the professions and that psychiatrists have the highest rate of suicide.

2. Lack of Social Support:

Satisfaction, though, a state of mind is primarily influenced by the positive external factors. These factors include friendliness, respect from other members and self respect, support, opportunity to interact, achievement, protection against threats and a feeling of security. In this type of social support is lacking for an individual, it can be very stressful.

3. Conflicts:

People who are working in the organisations are prone to interpersonal and intergroup conflicts. Conflict has both functional and dysfunctional aspects. Whenever conflict has dysfunctional consequences, it will lead to stress in all the concerned parties.

4. Organisational Climate:

Much of the group or interpersonal relationships depend upon the organisational climate. An overall organisational climate may have a relaxed style of working or it may be tense and crisis oriented. All the employees of such organisation will be continuously tense, if the climate in general is unfriendly, hostile or totally task oriented.

D. Individual Stressors:

The typical individual works for about 8 to 10 hours a day. The problems and experiences which he has to face in the remaining 14 to 16 non-working hours can spill over to his work place. Our final category of stressors thus includes personal or individual stressors.

Following are the main factors which can cause stress to individuals:

1. Job Concerns:

One of the major job concerns is lack of job security which can lead to concern, anxiety or frustration to the individual. The prospect of losing a job especially when you have a family and social obligations is always very stressful. Career progress is another reason of anxiety. This is particularly true for middle aged people, because middle age is a period of soul searching and self doubt. If these people were not given promotions when due or they feel that the jobs which were given to them were beneath their qualifications, they may become very anxious. This anxiety will lead to stress.

2. Career Changes:

When an employee has to relocate geographically because of a transfer or promotion, it disrupts the routine of his daily life causing concern and stress.

The relocation can lead to the following problems:

- (i) The fear of working in a new location.
- (ii) Unpredictability about new work environment.
- (iii) Anxiety about creating new relationships.
- (iv) Uprooting of children from their schools and friends.
- (v) If the employee has got a working spouse then the stress is greater.

Uncertainty about getting a new job at the new location creates some degree of stress.

Thus, when a person is geographically relocated, his stress will depend upon how many changes occur in his social relationships and family life. More the changes, more will be the stress.

3. Economic Problems:

Some people are very poor money managers or they have wants and desires that always seem to exceed their earning capacity. When individuals overextend their financial resources, or in simple words, if they spend more than they earn, it will always cause stress and distract the employees from their Work.

4. Changes in Life Structure:

The life structure of a person changes as he grows older. As a person grows older, his responsibilities to himself as well as others change and increase. The higher the responsibility, the greater the stress.

5. The Pace of Life:

As the responsibilities of a person increase, his capacity to execute them should also increase. A hectic pace of life when the person is always busy in business or otherwise can create more stress than a relaxed pace of life. Certain professions like teaching are less stressful than those of company executives, bankers or businessmen.

6. Life Change and Life Traumas:

Life change and life traumas are both stress producing. Life changes may be slow (like getting older) or sudden (like the death of a spouse). Sudden changes are highly stressful. Life traumas can be highly stressful. A life trauma is any upheaval in an individual's life that alters his or her attitudes, emotions or behaviours. Life change and life trauma look alike but there is difference between the two.

To illustrate, according to the life change view, the death of a spouse adds to a person's potential for health problems in the following year. At the same time, the person will also experience an emotional turmoil, which will constitute life trauma and life trauma will spill over to the work place.

Thomas Holmes and Richard Roke developed "Social Adjustment Rating Schedule" to assess the degree of stress created by certain events in life. In order to develop the scale of impact,

they asked people to rate as to how long it would take them to adjust to certain stress producing events in life. After considering the responses of the people, they developed a ranking and weighing schedule for each of these stress producing events.

7. Personality of a Person:

The extent of stress is also determined by the personality of a person. In respect of personality the distinction between 'TYPE A' and 'TYPE B' behaviour patterns become relevant. TYPE A personalities may create stress in their work circumstances due to their achievement orientation, impatience and perfectionism. TYPE A people, thus, encounter more stress. TYPE B personality; on the other hand, is less stress prone.

8. Ability to Cope:

The ability of the person to cope with stress and the sources a person seeks to deal with stress are also very important. For example, people who have strong faith in God and his will find it easier to deal with stressful situations like the loss of a loved one. Similarly, family, relations and friends are a source of great comfort at such times of crisis. Thus, if we have to appraise the total amount of stress an individual is under, we have to sum up his or her extra organisational, organisational, group and personal stressors.

SOURCE FOUR – PHYSIOLOGICAL STRESS

The fourth source of stress is physiological stress. This relates to how your physiology, your body reacts and responds to stressful situations. It is often discussed as physical stress and in relation to the physical stress symptoms you exhibit. For example, take a moment and think of a time when you have felt fearfulness, nervousness or trepidation. Now remember some of your bodily reactions to that stressful situation. These responses by your body are aspects of your physiological response to stress.

Physiologic stress results in both catabolism and decreased synthesis of proteins. Thus, reduced circulating levels of proteins such as albumin and transferrin (or total iron binding capacity) are expected consequences of critical illness. Hypoproteinemia may complicate an illness and its treatment and has been associated with reduced wound healing, wound dehiscence, formation of pressure sores, reduced immune responsiveness, delayed gastric emptying, and reduced small intestinal motility and absorption. Hypoproteinemia is not necessarily an indication of malnutrition but a reflection of the severity of metabolic stress. As the stress

subsides, it is only with adequate nutritional support that protein synthesis can return circulating levels to normal.

SOURCE FIVE – PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

This fifth source of stress is psychological stress and involves the power of your own mind in how you think, rationalize and make meaning of your stress, hassles and worries. It is about how your brain, your psyche, your mind thinks about the stress in your life. It is often spoken of as emotional stress or mental stress and involves powerful feelings and emotions.

There's a distinction between a stressor and actual stress. A stressor can be a person, place, or situation that's causing you stress. Stress is the actual response to one or a combination of those stressors.

There are any number of situations that can cause stress. Dr. Gary Brown, a licensed psychotherapist, says some of the more common stressors include:

- relationship conflicts at home
- new or increasing work responsibilities
- increasing demands
- financial strain
- loss of a loved one
- health problems
- moving to a new location
- exposure to one or more traumatic incidents, such as a car accident or a violent crime

Knowing how to spot the signs of stress is the first step in developing ways to manage its adverse effects.

Some of the more common physical, psychological, and emotional signs of chronic stress include:

- rapid heart rate
- elevated blood pressure

- feeling overwhelmed
- fatigue
- difficulty sleeping
- poor problem-solving
- fear that the stressor won't go away
- persistent thoughts about one or more stressors
- changes in behavior, including social withdrawal, feelings of sadness, frustration, loss of emotional control, inability to rest, and self-medication

SOURCE SIX – SIGNIFICANT EVENTS STRESS

This sixth and final source of stress revolves around critical incidents and significant events in your life. It is often known as significant events stress. Now not all stress is bad and there are significant events that may occur in your life that result in positive stress. Examples of this could be your high school graduation, wedding or winning a sporting event. However, there are also significant events that involve negative stress. Often these are referred to as critical incidents in your life. These can involve a major single significant incident such as a serious accident, a physical or sexual assault, etc. Such events involve a very high degree of stress and anxiety. They are often associated with continuing trauma after the event, often referred to as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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