

# STRESS MANAGEMENT IN THE WORK PLACE: KEY TO HEALTH PROMOTION AND WELLNESS

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## **Abstract**

*Life is full of demands, frustrations, expectations and deadlines. These and many more have made stress a lifestyle crisis. Stress has been known to be eustress or distress, depending on one's ability to handle life situations as they come by. Studies around the world have found stress and stress related illness to be a major contributory factor to the six leading causes of death in the world. Stressors have a major influence on our mood, sense of well-being, behaviour and health which can be adaptive to the young and healthy individuals in some cases. However, if the stressor is unremitting, the long term effects of stressors can damage health. The relationship between stressors and disease is affected by the nature, number, and persistence of the stressors as well as the individual's biological vulnerability, psychosocial resources, and learned patterns of coping. Understanding the sources and impact of stress would facilitate the development of effective counselling modules and intervention strategies by psychologists, counsellors and health practitioners to help alleviate stress. This paper looks at the concept of stress, stressors, effects of stress on health and suggests strategies for stress management of workers.*

**Key Words:** *Stress, Stressors, Eustress, Allostasis, Homeostasis.*

## **Introduction**

Globally, studies have shown the impact of stress on health (Onigbogi& Banerjee (2019); Davies (2022); McEwen& Sapolsky, (2006). Stress can be defined as 'any challenge to homeostasis', or the body's internal sense of balance (Waghacharare, Dhumale & Gore, (2013). Stress refers to the responses that occur in the body as a result of what is called stressor or stimulus. This occurs when the internal balance or equilibrium of the body systems is disrupted. The term "stress" is derived from the Latin word 'stringere' which means 'to draw tight' (Keil, 2004). Stress can manifest itself either as eustress or as distress. Eustress, literally translated as 'good stress', is a positive form of stress that motivates an individual to continue working. It is when this stress is no longer tolerable and/or manageable that distress manifests. In other words, everyone experiences stress.

Evidence suggests that under certain circumstances, stress exposures may have the potential to enhance an organism's performance and resilience; in other words, stress can also be beneficial (Aschbacheret, et.al. 2013; Stanford Centre for Stress and Health, 2012). However, too much stress, especially when it exists for a prolonged period of time and is unrelieved, can result in physical and mental illness (Shapolsky& McEwen,2006). Stress serves a somewhat paradoxical function for humans, since it is both necessary for

survival and strongly associated with susceptibility to disease, disease severity, and prognosis. Afolabi (2017) reported that Dr Olabode Shabi, a Family Health Consultant and Chairman of the Family Physicians of Nigeria, Ekiti zone, Nigeria in a presentation on "Stress and Depression in Workplace: Strategic approach to management" stated that about seven million Nigerians are currently suffering from mental health problems associated with stress and depression. He stressed that stress in the workplace and other areas of life can lead to depression, which can also lead to persistently sad mood, irritability, loss in appetite or weight and decreased energy. Stress is gendered, with women between the ages of 25 and 44 being significantly more likely to report work-related stress than men of the same age (Davies, 2022)

Stress has also been known to cause depression, anxiety, behavioural problems and medical issues such as non-communicable diseases, including metabolic syndrome, obesity and reduced insulin sensitivity, resulting from unhealthy lifestyle habits and stress system dysregulation (Pervanidou & Chrousos, 2012). Various studies around the world opines that the morbidity and mortality due to stress-related illness is alarming and is a major contributing factor to the six leading causes of death in the world (Schneiderman, Ironson & Scott (2005); Antoni, Cruess, Cruess, Lutgendorf & Kumar, (2000). The general characteristics of a person in distress are: being over-aroused, tense or unable to relax, touchy, easily upset or irritable; easily startled or fidgety, and demonstrating intolerance of any interruption or delay.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a dynamic and complex, fast paced highly challenging society. Stress is synonymous with living in Nigeria and this is evident in our day to day life, with citizens having to struggle for basic amenities and needs. Afolabi, (2017) opined that 80% of modern living has its origin in stress. According to Pascoe, (2020); Reddy, Menon & Thattil (2018), academic factors are one of the most important stressors. In a research carried out by Waghacharare, Dhumale & Gore, (2013), out of 1,224 respondents, 299 (24.4%) experienced stress. Among them, 115 (38.5%), 102 (34.1) and 82 (27.4%) were dental, medical and engineering students respectively. They observed a statistically significant association between stress and the field of education. Stress was also observed in 187 (27.7%) females and 112 (20.4%) males; the association with gender was statistically significant. By applying binary logistic regression, medical studies, health and lifestyle factors and academic factors were the significant predictors for stress. The results of this research on academics and stress are consistent with the findings of Ezech, Ezech & Okey, (2016) who found out that stress was highly prevalent among students, with female being (75.3%) and male (61.4%). According to them, stress may result in health-risk behaviours and social problems e.g., substance abuse, which in turn may lead to other health issues. While stress response may be identical irrespective of the trigger causing it, the sources of stress reported by individuals vary (Reddy, Menon & Thattil (2018). These differences would be seen in the causes, sources, and consequences of the stressors.

Marital stress, work stress, academic stress, exam anxiety, increased expectations, financial problems, changes in living condition, and difficulties in managing personal life could elicit physiological responses from the body. These physiological changes that can be observed in the body are changes in heart rate (HR), blood pressure

(BP), respiratory rate, increased blood flow towards skeletal muscles, etc. This occurs primarily due to the adreno- medullary system, which is part of the sympathetic division of the nervous system and the adrenocortical axis (Bourne& Yaroush, 2003). The crux of this paper is to bring to fore the damage associated with stress if not well handled and also suggests ways stress can be managed in the work place.

### **Concept of stress**

Generally speaking, stress means pressure or strain. Life constantly subjects us to pressures. When you feel threatened, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol into the blood stream. These hormones rouse the body for emergency action. The heart pounds faster, muscles tighten, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, immune system and memory are sharper and senses become sharper too. Stress could be acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term). The process of how the body responds to stress, whether it is short-term or long-term, is known as allostasis. In this case, the stress response causes the body to release several stress hormones (cortisol and adrenaline) into the blood stream. These hormones intensify your concentration, ability to react, and strength. Also, the heart rate and blood pressure increase, and the immune system and memory are sharper. These physical changes increase strength and stamina, speed reaction time and enhance focus. The best- known acute stress response is the “fight or flight” reaction that happens when you feel threatened (Sapolsky & McEwen, 2006).

After the short-term stress has been dealt with, the body returns to normal. In such circumstances, the stress response deals with the short term stress and the body returns to normal. Chronic and long-term stress however, poses a problem. If one constantly faces challenges and the body constantly produces hormones, it has no time to recover. Stress hormones build up in the blood and over time, can cause serious health problems. Stress is the body's nonspecific response to demands made upon it, or to disturbing events in the environment, thus it is not just a stimulus or a response, but rather a process by which we perceive and cope with environmental threats and challenges. An optimal level of stress may enhance learning, however excessive stress has been shown to cause physical and mental problems, reduced self- esteem and may affect academic achievement, personal and professional development (Oku, Owoaje, Oku &Ikpeme, 2015).

### **Stressors**

The situations and pressures that cause stress are known as stressors. We usually think of stressors as negative, such as an exhausting work schedule or a rocky relationship. However, anything that puts high demand on you or forces you to adjust can be stressful. This includes positive events such as getting married, buying a house, going to college, or receiving a promotion. Of course not all stress is caused by external factors. Stress can be self- generated for example, when you worry excessively about something that may or may not happen, or have irrational pessimistic thoughts about life.

**Specific sources of stressors**

According to Gavas and Weiberg (2006) Physical stressors: these are: Heat, Cold, Temperature Hunger, Exercise, Lack of sleep, Disease, Sensory input such as aches and pain

*Psychosocial stressor: There are:* family expectations, relationship conflict births and deaths, marriage and divorce isolation, work, unemployment loneliness. also included are depression fear chronic worry pessimism pre-natal exposure o maternal stress trouble with significant others social defeat negative self-talk unrealistic expectations/ perfectionism rigid thinking, lack of flexibility, all- or- nothing attitude life experiences such as poverty, project deadlines, heavy drinking obsessive compulsive disorder

*Environmental stressors: These include;* Noise Pollution Floods Weather Overcrowding Food/water and Housing

**Stress in the Workplace**

Stress in the workplace is common in every business all over the world. Occupational stress has been identified as counterproductive for workers' productivity and ought therefore to be kept at barest minimum if performance is to be maximized (Usoro, 2018). Employees working in different sectors and organisations have to deal with stress. Bank workers for example, are among the group of workers under a great deal of stress finding impact performance (Ajayi, 2018). Managing that stress becomes vital in order to keep up job performance as well as relationship with co-workers and employers. For some workers, changing the work environment relieves work stress, while for others, making the environment less competitive between employees decreases some amounts of stress. However, each person is different and some people like the pressure to perform better. Salary can be an important concern for employees because having high expectations of increment and promotion in workplace can affect the way people work. This can lead to pressure and subsequently, chronic stress.

Cultural differences have also been shown to have some major effects on stress coping problems. People working in countries different from their countries of origin/ birth may have stressful times adapting with lifestyle, environment and weather and the pressure of meeting work demands. Stress in the workplace can be managed by employers providing stress management programs such as therapy, communication programmes and a more flexible work schedule.

**Signs of stress**

How do you know you are stressed out? Short-term effects are anxiousness, nervousness, distraction, worry and pressure. If stress level increases or lasts for a longer time, you might experience other physical or emotional effects: fatigue, depression, chest pain or pressure, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, shakiness, difficulty breathing, menstrual cycle irregularities, erectile dysfunction (impotence), loss of libido (sex drive), loss of appetite, overeating and

poor sleep, all which can have serious consequences on your health (Shapolsky & McEwen, 2006).

The American Psychological Association (2015) gave the following as signs of stress that may be cognitive, emotional, physical or behavioural:

- i. *Cognitive symptoms:* memory problems, inability to concentrate, poor judgement, pessimistic approach or thoughts anxious or racing thoughts and constant worrying
- ii. *Emotional symptoms:* moodiness, irritability or short temper, agitation, inability to relax, feeling overwhelmed, sense of loneliness and isolation, depression or general unhappiness
- iii. *Physical symptoms:* they include: aches and pains, diarrhea or constipation, increased frequency of urination, indigestion, changes in blood glucose, nausea, dizziness, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, loss of sex drive, frequent colds and irregular periods
- iv. *Behavioural symptoms:* They include: eating more or less, sleeping too much or too little isolating oneself from others, procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities, using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs to relax, nervous habits (e.g., nail biting, pacing)

### **Effect of stress on health**

The bodily changes that happen during moments of stress can be very helpful when they happen for a short time. But when the response is drawn out for a long period of time, producing too many stress hormones can affect your health (Sapolsky & McEwen, 2006). Health problems can include: Headaches, high blood pressure, heart problems, diabetes, skin conditions, asthma, arthritis, depression and anxiety. These mental and physical symptoms can put the human body at risk. Various studies link the effect of stress to exacerbate various medical conditions, such as asthma, fatigue, back pain, arrhythmias, difficulty breathing, headaches, hypertension, irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, suppression of the immune system, and fluctuations in glucose levels in diabetic patients (Centre for Disease and Control, 2010; The American Institute of Stress, 2010). The American Diabetes Association (2010) states that stress can affect patients with diabetes in two ways, firstly, stress hormones may change blood glucose levels directly and secondly, when under stress, individuals may drink more alcohol or exercise less, and may forget or not have time to monitor glucose levels or adhere to diet plans. Stress is a body's method of reacting to challenge. According to the stressful event, the body's way to respond to stress is by sympathetic nervous system activation which results in the fight-to-flight response. The body cannot keep this state for long periods of time, so the parasympathetic system returns the body's physiological conditions to normal (homeostasis).

Studies have shown that psychological stress may directly contribute to the disproportionately high rates of coronary heart disease, morbidity and mortality and its etiologic risk factors. Specifically, acute and chronic stress have been shown to raise serum lipids and are associated with clinical coronary events (Schlotz, Yim, Zoccola, Jansen & Schulz, 2011). In humans, stress typically describes a negative condition or a positive condition that can have an impact on a person's mental and physical well-being. There is likely a connection between stress and illness. Theories of the stress- illness link suggest

that both acute and chronic stress can cause illness, and several studies found such link (Schneiderman, Ironson & Siegel, 2005; Ogden, 2007).

Stress can make an individual to be susceptible to physical illnesses like the common cold and stressful events such as job changes may result in insomnia, impaired sleeping and health complaints. Schneiderman, Ironson & Scott (2005) states that the type of stressor (acute or chronic) and individual characteristics such as age and physical well-being before the onset of the stressor can combine to determine the effect of stress on an individual. An individual's personality characteristics (such as neuroticism) (Jeronimus, Riese, Sanderman & Ormel, 2014), genetics and childhood experiences with major stressors and traumas (Jeronimus, Ormel, Aleman, Penninx & Riese, 2013) may also dictate their response to stressors. The body's autonomic nervous system often does a poor job of distinguishing between daily stressors and life-threatening events. If an individual is stressed over an argument with a friend, a traffic jam on the way to work, or a mountain of bills for example, the body can still react as if its facing a life- or- death situation. When there's a repetition of the fight or flight response in daily life, blood pressure can be raised, immune system suppressed, there is increase in the risk of heart attack and stroke, speed up of the aging process and one is left vulnerable to a host of mental and emotional problems. In a study with individuals caring for a spouse with dementia, representing the stress group, saw a significant decrease in immune response when given an influenza- virus vaccine compared to a non- stressed control group (Kemeny, 2007). Studies with HIV have shown stress to speed up viral progression. Men with HIV were 2-3 times more likely to develop AIDS when under average stress (Kemeny, 2007). Although chronic stress takes a more significant toll on the body than acute stress does, both typically impose a health burden on the worker.

### **Stress management**

Working hard should not be confused with overworking at the expense of relationships and physical health. Any job can have stressful elements even if one loves what he/she does. In the short term, an individual may experience pressure to meet a deadline or to fulfil a challenging obligation. But when work stress becomes chronic, it can be overwhelming and harmful to both physical and emotional health. This must be avoided. These steps according to the American Psychological Association (2018) can be taken to manage work-related stress:

- i. Track your stressors: Keep a journal for a week or two to identify which situations create the most stress and how to respond to them. Record your thoughts, feelings and information about the environment, including the people and circumstances involved, the physical setting and how you reacted. Taking notes can help you find patterns among your stressors and your reactions to them.
- ii. Develop healthy responses :Instead of attempting to fight stress with food or alcohol, do your best to make healthy choices when you are tension free. Exercise and other forms of recreational activities are great stress busters.

- iii. Get enough sleep: Getting enough good quality sleep is important for effective stress management. Build healthy sleep habits by limiting caffeine intake late in the day and minimizing stimulating activities such as computer and television use at night.
- iv. Establish boundaries: Establish some work-life. Although people have different preferences when it comes to how much they blend their work and home life, creating some clear boundaries between these realms can reduce the potential for work-life conflict and the stress that goes with it.
- v. Take time to recharge: To avoid the negative effects of chronic stress and burnout, we need time to replenish and return to our pre stress level of functioning. This recovery process requires “switching off” from work by having periods of time when you are neither engaging in work-related activities. Balance is key.
- vi. Learn to relax: Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing exercises can help melt away stress. Simple activities like breathing, walking or enjoying a meal can be of great help.
- vii. Talk to your supervisor: Employee health has been linked to productivity at work. It is important to come up with an effective plan for managing the identified stressors. From improvement in time management, getting necessary resources, support from colleagues to making changes in workplace will make the place more comfortable and reduce strain.
- viii. Other strategies include: stay away from conflict, forget multitasking- focus on one thing at a time, keep perfectionism in check, be organized and plan ahead and effective time management

## Conclusion

Stress experienced by the employees in their workplaces may have negative impacts on their health and job performance. Thus, stress needs to be managed effectively so as to set off these harmful consequences. The following recommendations are made:

- a. Effective employer-employee communication should be encouraged in organizations
- b. Employee's participation in decision making should be encouraged to reduce ambiguity and conflict in the organization.
- c. Employees should be granted greater independence and there should be meaningful and timely feedback
- d. Organizational goals set by agencies and institutions should be realistic
- e. A fair and just distribution of incentives and salary structure will alleviate the financial pressure on workers.
- f. Organizations should create a just and fair environment for workers.

- g. Organization should encourage staff health checks and counselling services.
- h. Organizations should have a structure in place for appreciation of the employees on accomplishing and over-exceeding their targets.

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