

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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INTRODUCTION:-

In today's changing and competitive work environment, stress level is increasing both in the workers as well as the managers. As a result of this work stress, more and more managers are showing signs of chronic fatigue and burnout. Research has concluded that stressed out managers are not good for their companies or shareholders. In most cases, stress leads to reduced efficiency in even the best of individuals, which in turn leads to reduced productivity. Stress is a problem in almost all the countries of the world, irrespective of whether the economy is strong or weak. We must know what is actually stress, what are the causes of stress, what are its consequences and then, what should be done to reduce it.

MEANING AND DEFINITION:-

Considered from an individual's point of view, stress is our body's physical, mental and chemical reactions to circumstances that frighten, confuse, endanger or irritate us. If controlled, stress is a friend that strengthens us for the next encounter. If handled poorly, it becomes an enemy which can cause diseases like high blood pressure, ulcer, asthma and overactive thyroid. As per the medical explanation of the term "stress is the body's general response to environmental situations." It can lead to:

1. Physiological discomfort.
2. Some kind of emotional unhappiness.
3. Strained relationships with other people.

In very simple words, stress refers to an individual's reaction to a disturbing factor in the environment.

- "Stress is defined as an adaptive response to an external situation that results in physical, psychological and/or behavioral deviations, for organizational participants."
- "Stress is a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he or she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important."
- **According to Beehr and Newman**, "Job stress is a condition arising from the interaction of the people and their jobs, and characterized by changes within people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning."

NATURE OF STRESS:-

Some important point relating to the nature of stress are:

1. **Stress is a neutral word.** Stress is not bad in itself. But when stress is created by undesirable outcomes, it becomes Distress. On the other hand, if it is created by desirable and successful effects it is called Eustress. Eustress is a healthy, positive and developmental stress response.
2. **Stress is associated with Constraints and Demand.** Constraints prevent an individual from doing what he or she desires. If a person wants to buy something, but he does not have the necessary cash, it is a constraint. Demands refer to the loss of something desired. If a person wants to go and watch a movie, but he is unable to do so because of pressing official work, it amounts to a demand. Both Constraints and Demands can lead to potential stress.
3. **Two conditions are necessary for potential stress to become actual stress.** There must be:
 - Uncertainty over the outcome, and
 - Outcome must be important.

Stress is usually very high when there is uncertainty over the outcome and the outcome is very significant. Both these conditions are necessary. If there is no uncertainty but the outcome is significant, there will not be any stress. On the other hand, if there is uncertainty, but the outcome is not significant, there will again be no stress.

4. **Stress is not simply anxiety.** Stress may be accompanied by anxiety, but the two are not synonymous. Anxiety is psychological and emotional whereas stress operates in the physiological sphere also along with psychological sphere.
5. **Stress should also be differentiated from nervous tension.** Nervous tension may be a result of stress. Stress is a subconscious action. Even unconscious people have exhibited stress, whereas nervous tension is a conscious action. People may "bottle up" their emotions and not reveal them through nervous tension.
6. **The term "burnout" is also closely associated with stress.** Some researchers contend that burnout is a type of stress, but others treat it differently. Burnout is closely associated with helping professions like nursing, education and social work.

LEVEL OF STRESS:-

Stress is highly individualistic in nature. Some people have high tolerance for stress and thrive well in face of several stressors in the environment. In fact, some individuals will not perform well unless they experience a level of stress which activates and energises them to put forth their best efforts. On the other hand, some people have very low level of tolerance for stress and they become paralyzed when they have to interface with routine everyday factors that appear undesirable to them.

Generally Stress is viewed

Under optimum level of stress the employees will perform to his full capacity. If the stress experienced is below this level, then the individual gets bored, the motivational level to work reaches a low point and apathy sets in. If one operates in very low stress environment and constantly experiences boredom, the person is likely to be psychologically or physically withdrawn from work. Psychological withdrawal will result in careless mistakes being frequently made, forgetfulness and absentmindedness. Physical withdrawal will manifest itself in increased rate of tardiness and absenteeism which will ultimately lead to turnover.

Errors will increase, bad decision will be made and the individual will experience insomnia, stomach problems and psychosomatic illnesses. Organisational performance and individual health are at their peak at optimum levels of experienced stress. It is explained with the help of the following figure

Though, the optimum stress level may be different for different individuals, each individual can sense and determine how much stress is functional for him or her to operate in a productive manner.

SOURCE OF STRESS:-

Stress is a reality of our everyday life. There are both eustresses and distresses that come from our work and non work lives. It was pointed out by near and hunt in 1980 and Sekaran in 1986 and by Mohy others that the work and non domains of one's life are closely interrelated. Likewise, stresses experienced at home or with friends or from other non work situations can be carried over to the work place which might heighten and multiply the stresses experienced at work. Thus, we can say that stresses generate from four sources :

1. Extra-organisational stressors
2. Organisational stressors
3. Group stressors
4. Individual stressors.

The following figure summarises the sources of stress.

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. Organizational Stressors

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 :

- 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.
- 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.
- Some **duties and responsibilities** have inbuilt stress such as those of the fire fighter or the police squad which defuses bombs.
- 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 reduce stress.
- **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.

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 :

- **Role Conflict.** Role conflict occurs when two or more persons have different and sometimes opposing expectations of a given individual. 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.
- **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.
- **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.

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 organisation'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. Organisation's Life Cycle. Organisations go through a cycle. They are established, they grow, become mature and eventually decline. An organisation'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 (Inter Personal) Stressors

Another source of stress in organizations 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 categorised 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.

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 concern 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.

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:

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

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.

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. As mentioned earlier, 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 to cope with the 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.

CONSEQUENCE OF STRESS:-

As is pointed out in the introducing comments on stress, stress is not automatically bad for individual employees or their organizational performance. It is the dysfunctional aspects of the high level of stress that should be and are a major concern for contemporary society in general and for effective human resource management in particular. Distress experienced by individuals has negative consequences for them, their families and for the organizations they serve. The consequences of stress can be studied under three general categories

(A) Consequences for the Individual

Stress shows itself in a number of ways. An individual who is experiencing stress may develop the following symptoms :

1. Physiological Symptoms. In the initial stages, the major concern of stress was directed at physiological symptoms. The reason was that this topic was researched by specialists in the health and medical sciences. According to the researchers high degrees of stress are typically accompanied by severe anxiety, frustration and depression. Some of the physiological symptoms are as follows :

- **Stress:** Irritability, insomnia, alcohol and food abuse. Physical changes including rapid breathing, and heart beat, tensed muscles. Prolonged stress can cause muscular twitches, skin problems, baldness and sexual problems such as impotence.
- **Anxiety:** Excessive worry, irritability, anger, nervousness as well as inability to concentrate or sleep. Physical changes include palpitations, chest pain and dizziness.
- **Depression:** Feeling of sadness, hopelessness, guilt and worthlessness, loss of interest in activities, change in appetite or weight, difficulty in concentrating and suicidal thoughts.

2. Psychological Symptoms. While considerable attention has been given to the relationship between stress and physiological symptoms, especially within the medical community not as much importance has been given to the impact of stress on mental health. But psychological problems resulting from stress are very important in day to day job performance. The psychological impacts of stress may be :

- Stress can cause dissatisfaction. Job related stress can cause job-related dissatisfaction. Job dissatisfaction, "is the simplest and most psychological aspect of stress."
- High levels of stress may be accompanied by anger, anxiety, depression, nervousness, irritability, tension and boredom. One study found that stress had the strongest impact on aggressive actions such as sabotage, interpersonal aggression, hostility and complaints.
- The less control people have over the pace of their work, the greater the stress and dissatisfaction.
- Some evidence suggests that jobs that provide a low level of variety, significance, autonomy, feed back and identity, create stress and reduce satisfaction and involvement in the job.

3. Behavioral Symptoms. Any behaviour which indicates that you are not acting your usual self may be a sign of adverse reaction to stress. Direct behaviour mat may accompany high levels of stress include :

- Undereating or overeating
- Sleeplessness
- Increased smoking and drinking
- Drug abuse
- Nodding off during meetings or social gatherings
- Losing your sense of humour
- Moving in a tense and jerky way
- Reacting nervously or irritably to everyday sounds
- Absenteeism and turnover
- Reduction in productivity

b) Consequences for the Family

Distress which is handled by individuals in dysfunctional ways such as resorting to drinking or withdrawal behaviours, will have an adverse effect on their family life. The effects of this will be spouse abuse, child abuse, alienation from family members and even divorce. The stressors which generally affect the family life are :

- In the dual career families where both the spouses are pursuing careers, a lot of personal commitments, varied in nature, are demanded from them (both to their jobs and families). The stresses experienced by the couples stem from role overload, since both partners have to manage their careers as well as help the family.
- Additional stresses are experienced while handling the personal, social and cultural dilemmas of balancing work and family, discharging parenting responsibilities, handling competition at the work place and within the family and being an involved member of the extended family.

c) Consequences for the Organisations

The effect of employees stress on organizations are many and varied. These include :

- Low performance and productivity.
- High rate of absenteeism and turnover.
- Loss of customers due to poor attitudes of workers.
- Increased alienation of the worker from the job.
- Destructive and aggressive behaviours resulting in strikes and sabotage.

APPROACHES OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

(A) INDIVIDUAL COPING APPROACHES:-

There are a number of ways by which a person can either avoid stressful conditions, change them or learn to cope with them. Stress can be managed by an individual, which will enable him to regain control over his life.

Some of the stress reducing strategies from individual's point of view are :

- 1. Knowledge About Stress.** In the first stage, an individual should become knowledgeable about stress. He should know about the process and effects of stress. He must find out the major sources of his stress. He must anticipate stressful periods and plan accordingly in advance. He must be honest with himself and decide what he can cope with what he cannot.
- 2. Physiological Fitness.** Exercise in any form can help people in coping with the stress. Non competitive physical exercise such as aerobics, walking, jogging, swimming, riding a bicycle, playing softball or tennis have been recommended by physicians as a way to deal with excessive stress levels.
- 3. Time Management.** Most of the people are very poor in managing their time. They don't know that what must be done and when it would be desirable to do so. The result of poor time management is feeling of work overload, skipped schedules and tension. A well organized person can often accomplish twice as much as the person who is poorly organized. Therefore, an individual must understand how to manage his time so that he can cope with tensions created by job demands. A few of the well known time management principles are :
 - Preparing a daily list of activities to be attended to.
 - Prioritizing activities by importance and urgency.
 - Scheduling activities according to the priorities set.
 - Knowing your daily schedule and handling the most demanding parts of a job when you are most alert and productive.
- 4. Assertiveness.** An individual should become assertive. He should not say 'Yes' when he wants to say 'No'. He should start saying No to people or managers who demand too much of his time. Being assertive is an important factor in reducing stress.
- 5. Social Support Network.** Every person should have people to turn to, talk to and rely upon. Good friends become highly supportive during times of stress and crisis. Social net work includes friends, family or work colleagues. Expanding your social support system can be a means for tension reduction because friends are there when needed and provide support to get the person through stressful situations.
- 6. Readjust life Goals.** Every individual must know what he really wants to do. This should relate to not only the major decisions of the life but to all activities in our life. He must know what is important for him. Because of the severe competition in life to go ahead, most individuals set very high standards and goals for themselves. These high expectations and limited resources to reach such expectations result in stress. Accordingly, every person must readjust his goals and make sure he has the ability and resources to reach such goals. Perhaps the goals should be established after the resources have been analyzed.
- 7. Relaxation Techniques.** Every individual must teach himself to reduce tension through relaxation techniques such as Yoga, mediation, hypnosis and biofeedback. 15-20 minutes a day of deep relaxation releases tension and provides a person with pronounced sense of peacefulness. Deep relaxation conditions will bring significant changes in heart rate, blood pressure and other physiological factors. Yoga is probably the most effective remedy for stress. Studies have revealed that Yoga has cured several stress related diseases.

(B) ORGANIZATION COPING APPROACHES:-

Individuals may design their own strategies to reduce stress, but it is a must for the organizations to develop programmes that will help the employees in reducing their stress. This will lead to less employee turnover, absenteeism and as a result productivity will improve.

Some of the measures which organizations can take are :

1. **Selection and Placement.** Individuals differ in their response to stress situations. We know that 'Type A' individuals are more prone to stress. On the other hand, in the organizations there are certain jobs which are more stressful as compared to other jobs. While doing the selection and placement of the employees, these factors must be kept in mind. The individuals who are more prone to stress should not be put on jobs which are stressful. The individuals who are less prone to stress may adapt better to high stress jobs and perform those jobs more effectively.
2. **Goal Setting.** Goal setting can reduce stress as well as provide motivation. It will result in less employee frustration, role ambiguity and stress.
3. **Improved Communication.** Sometimes due to lack of effective communication from the superiors, the employees do not know what they have to do and how they have to do it. This result in role ambiguity. Similarly, when two or more persons have contradicting role demands from an employee, it leads to role conflict if there is lack of proper communication. Effective communication with employees reduces the uncertainty by lessening role ambiguity and role conflict.
4. **Redesigning Jobs.** Organizations should redesign the jobs in such a way as to give employees more responsibility, more meaningful work, more autonomy and increased feed back. This will help reduce the stress caused by monotony, routine work, work overload or underload and role ambiguity.
5. **Participative Decision Making.** The main reason of role stress is that employees feel uncertain about their goals, expectations and how they will be evaluated. These uncertainties can be reduced by the management by giving the employees a right to participate in the decision making.
6. **Building Teamwork.** The management should try to create such work environment in which there is no provision for interpersonal conflict or inter group conflict. Such conflicts are the causes of stress, such should be prevented from building or eliminated if they develop. Accordingly such team work should be developed that groups and the members are mutually supportive and productive. Members of the group should consider themselves as members of the same family and seek social support from each other.
7. **Role related factors.** Organization can deal with the role related stressors in the following ways.
 - (i) **Role conflict.** In this process, the role is pruned in such a way that some expectations can be given up. However, this is a dysfunctional solution of the problem since the advantage of a large role is lost.
Another solution is Role linkage. If role linkages are established with other role and the problem is solved by designing new ways of achieving the conflicting expectations, the individuals can experience both the process of growth as well as satisfaction.
 - (ii) **Role Ambiguity.** To solve the problem of role ambiguity, the usual approach is to make the roles clearer by putting various things down on paper. The various expectations are thus, defined more clearly (Role prescription). Another approach is that the individual may remove the ambiguity by fitting into the role as described in various expectations (Role taking). Both role prescription and role taking are advanced strategies.

- (iii) **Role Erosion.** In role erosion, an individual feels stressed due to the fact that some important function that he would prefer to perform are being performed by other roles. Often the solution is that structure clarifications be made. However, this solution is not likely to be functional and helpful. Since the basic conflict is just avoided and not eliminated. A functional strategy is "Role Enrichment" Role enrichment can be done by analyzing the role systematically and helping the individuals see the various strengths in their role and the various challenges the role contain which might not have been apparent to them while performing them. Thus the solution to role erosion is to make the role more challenging and satisfying to the individual.

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