

Work-Related Stress and You

William P. Macaux, Ph.D. MBA

Work-related stress (WRS) and strain is a growing concern globally. The nature and demands of work have changed over the longer arc of time. It's less about manual labor and physical demands, and more about the psychological demands of service-oriented jobs. Add other sources of intensity – 1) constant needs to adapt to technological and market-driven changes, 2) trends to “delayer” organizations and run leaner, and 3) requirements to operate across multiple time zones – and it's no wonder stress is rising!

And WRS has its consequences – social, psychological, and economic. A study reported in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (March, 2017) estimates the cost of WRS in the United States at \$187 billion when we include both direct (medical) and indirect (production-related) costs. This estimate is believed to be conservative, and it doesn't include the “intangible” costs, i.e., “the pain and suffering, and the reduced quality of life experienced by the afflicted individual or group of individuals.”

Moving from this more general and epidemiological perspective, I would like to share some thoughts about how we as individuals can do something to mitigate the effects of stress for ourselves and for those with whom we collaborate as well as those we lead. I'll do that by first defining stress and characterizing how it works. Then I'll suggest ideas about how to individualize stress management, because one thing we know is that a one-size-fits-all strategy does not work.

Defining stress and work stress

In 1956, Hans Selye offered one of the first definitions of stress. It was biologically oriented, defining stress as the “nonspecific response of an organism to threatening stimuli.” Today, the more commonly used ways of defining stress stem from the now classic work of Lazarus & Folkman (1984), which takes a cognitive approach, defining stress as “the relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised as taxing or exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/her well-being.”

In the world of work, OSHA (1999) defines stress as “psychological and physical strain that arises when a mismatch is experienced between one's work demands and one's resources.” It was conceived earlier (1979) for research purposes in the *Job Demands-Control Model*, which postulates that we experience greater stress when “decision latitude” (autonomy) is low and work demands are high – in common parlance this has been expressed as “accountability without authority,” a recipe for frustration.

What's become clearer, based on the past couple decades of research, is that any given set of stressors or conditions that might be “appraised” as “threatening” and arouse a stress response physiologically and psychologically, may have more or less effect on individuals based upon their individual differences. Our baseline temperament (i.e., biologically-based emotional reactivity) and our less biologically based personality factors will affect how we perceive, appraise, interpret, and respond to such conditions.

Moreover, the broader cultural characteristics of the organization, and the ethnic characteristics of the regional host culture – after all, we often operate and therefore interact globally in today's world of commerce – will also affect patterns of belief, values, action, and interaction that function as norms. So, something that might be rather routine as a pattern of behavior in Company A, might seem “beyond the pale” in Company B. We adjust our expectations, perceptions, and reactions to such prevailing norms.

Implications for individual stress management

Fortunately, there are many skills and strategies that have been developed and found to be effective in stress management: 1) cognitive-behavioral training that affects how we appraise and respond to our environment; 2) mindfulness training that affects how we self-manage our own bodily and mental states to improve our emotional regulation (reactivity); and 3) communications skills training (having “difficult” conversations) that help us learn how to de-escalate conflict and regain an internal locus of control.

The good news is that as any of us begin to increase our personal capacity to manage stress, we are also in a position to better help others with their experience of stress. This may occur when we tamp down reactions to a precipitating event, or perhaps by encouraging others to pause, notice rising tension, and calm interaction, in order to make better choices. Such actions and interactions effectively function as stress-reducing interventions. The idea is “Think globally (use your awareness) and act locally (apply it to this situation).”

What I mean is that we must become aware of stress as a general phenomenon in organizational life, but we must also appreciate the dynamics of cause and course that determine its effects. There is no doubt, for example, that our experience of stress is cognitively mediated, and that it can “highjack” our emotional brain (the amygdala) and lead to bad outcomes. But it’s equally true that we as human beings have the rational capacity to interrupt this negative spiral.

Where do YOU start?

All of the strategies and skills for managing stress and contributing to a healthier psychosocial climate in your organization must be applied based upon a consideration of who you are, what your vulnerabilities and tendencies are to begin with. This means getting a handle on your temperament, personality, and interpersonal tendencies. Knowing this will allow you to pick and choose methods and practices that fit you, your situation, and the challenges that exist for you and others in the daily context of your work.

We are more likely to adopt, master, and sustain adaptive strategies that align with our personal “stress profile” than to be effective with a one-size-fits-all solution. This in no way means that we cannot leverage group training and a common set of strategies; they can be very powerful. However, they must be preceded by an individualized assessment of the factors that differentiate who we are, what we believe, and how we see and respond to the common sources of stress in organizational life.

So, we must combine an in-depth individual assessment of our personal stress profile with training in order to make the best use of proven strategies for managing stress. This implies a shaping process, which must take into account our role in the organization as well as the opportunities we have to help or hinder the cause of lessening strain and promoting organizational health and resilience.

Please carry this theme into your post-Labor Day efforts to finish the 2017 business year well!