

**Personalized Stress Management:  
A Tool for Organizational Wellness**

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## **Abstract**

The number of wellness programs offered by organizations is growing each day and most of them include stress management objectives. Thus, enhancing the effectiveness of coping with job stress is an increasingly important strategic objective for organizations who wish to maintain their competitive advantage. Following some compilation of background work done on stress and coping, an argument is made supporting the recent paradigm shift that favors an individualized rather than general approach to stress and coping. Specifically advocated is the use of critical incident analysis when it comes to identifying stressors that plague the workforce and cognitive behavioral therapy as an effective coping measure.

## Introduction

In today's world, longer working hours and increased job pressures are common occurrences. Employees encounter a variety of complex challenges as they struggle to meet the demands of the modern workplace. In a technologically advanced, global marketplace, traditional nine-to-five schedules have fallen by the wayside. The introduction of cell phones, pagers, laptops and emails are making it harder for workers to draw boundaries physically and psychologically between their work and family life (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran 2006). This leads to increased stress, which takes its toll on employee health and well-being.

As a response to the increased job pressures and stress, organizations are increasing their focus on the preventive or wellness approach toward employee health. One way of defining health is to say it is the absence of disease. A more informative definition of health is to represent it as "a state of physical, mental and social well-being" (Gordon & Henifin, 1981). An employee's health can therefore be harmed not through just disease and accidents, but also by stress (Ryan & Watson, 2004). Managers now realize that they must be concerned with all aspects of employee health, including their psychological well-being.

Job related stress has been associated with a vast array of diseases, such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, peptic ulcers, colitis and various psychological problems including anxiety and depression. Research has shown that stress has a direct effect on the endocrine system, the cardiovascular system, the muscular system and emotions (Levi, Sauter & Shimomitsu, 1999).

While changes in the work environment are often inevitable, managers often underestimate how easily these changes can throw a person off kilter. Psychologists refer to people who are not comfortable with their work environment to be in a state of disequilibrium. This occurs when a person's skills, abilities, and goals do not fit with the work environment such as the boss, co-workers, compensation systems etc. Lack of fit between the person and the environment can have results on several levels: subjective (feeling fatigue), behavioral (accident-proneness), cognitive (a mental block), physiological (elevated blood pressure), and organizational (higher absence rate) (Bunce & West, 1996). Some of the costs to organizations include higher rates of accidents, performance inefficiencies, increased turnover and increased disability payments. (Burke 2000).

Over the last 15 years, researchers have observed that preventable illness makes up 70% or more of the total cost of health care (Fries et al, 1993). Preventable illnesses often result when individuals do not adequately address modifiable health risk factors such as nutrition, weight control, physical activity, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, tobacco use, safety and mental well-being.

Health and wellness promotion programs in organizations seek to reduce these risk factors by promoting healthy lifestyle choices and discouraging behaviors and attitudes that are detrimental to good health. If the current health trends in the U.S. population continue, we will see dramatic increases in serious health problems and early mortality due to stress related preventable conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. At the same time, the employer-based health funding mechanism is already approaching the breaking point, with some employers recognizing that their global competitiveness will be in jeopardy unless sufficient steps are taken to curb rapidly escalating health care costs (Hall, 2008).

Several 2007 surveys of mid-to-large sized employers report that 77% to 89% offer wellness programs (ERISA committee 2007; Hewitt Associates, 2007). Wellness programs seem to be an amazing countertrend in American businesses. While pundits talk about declining employer/employee loyalty, the growing employer interest in the wellness and health of their employees expresses the opposite. Even as health care costs continue to increase, businesses are spending large amounts on wellness programs for their employees and promoting it as part of their corporate culture (Fitch & Pyenson, 2008).

The American institute of Stress estimates that stress costs workers between \$200 billion and \$300 billion a year in increased workers' compensation claims, lost productivity, higher health care costs, and turnover (Ivancevich, 2007).

For the various reasons described above, an organization's success and competitiveness depends in large part on its willingness to view wellness and stress management as part of its strategic objectives.

The purpose of this paper is to establish that wellness objectives for any organization are closely tied to the effectiveness of its stress management programs. Some background on existing job-stress theories is presented along with modern day suggestions for their modification to today's changing workplace.

## **Background**

There has been extensive research on the subject of job-stress. However, when reviewing the literature, one finds a lack of consensus in many areas. Perhaps this is warranted due to the highly individualized and perception based nature of stress. Generally speaking, the literature focuses on two areas 1) stress and its causes, often known as stressors and 2) coping, which is a behavioral response to the stressor. Hence, stress and coping are terms that are often used in tandem.

## **Stress definitions and concepts**

Stress is the way we react physically and emotionally to demands. That there are no universally accepted definitions of stress reveals not only the complexity of the construct but also the limitations to research in the field. Although many definitions of stress exist, one of the more widely accepted ones considers it to be an affective state that occurs in response to perceived demands or threats in the environment with which one feels unable to cope (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Selye, 1975). Here the physical and psychological signs and symptoms often associated with prolonged exposure to stressful states are referred to as strain (Fox et al., 1993). This distinction helps to clarify why states of stress are not always associated with illness; moreover, the definition emphasizes the important role of coping in the management of stress.

Stress can also be seen as a person-environment relationship (Folkman, 1984; Lazarus, 1966). Stress is a process, a sequence of events that will lead to a particular end. According to McGrath (1970), stress is the result of an imbalance between the physical or psychological demands encountered and the response capability of the individual, more so in cases where failure to meet the demands has important implications for the individual.

Brewer (1995) suggests that two powerful conditions affect the level of stress. If the outcome is important, stress will increase and if the outcome is important and uncertain, stress will further

increase. We must recognize that stress is unavoidable and is an unpleasant fact. A certain level of stress, often known as eustress may actually improve performance and decision-making. For example, the importance and uncertainty of the results of a test may cause the student to study more and learn the material. However, when stress becomes too much, it is termed to be dysfunctional, resulting in poor performance and deteriorated decision-making. This type of stress is commonly called distress.

A state of work-related stress is characterized by various complaints, which can be clustered into distress complaints and burnout complaints (Lindblom et al, 2006). Distress complaints predominantly consist of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Lindblom et al, 2006). Burnout complaints are commonly described in three dimensions, comprising emotional exhaustion, a distant and cynical attitude toward work, and self-perceived diminished competence to fulfill the demands posed by the job (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Burnout complaints are explicitly linked to work.

An influential theory in the field of stress and health is the transactional theory of Lazarus and Folkman (1987). This theory states that an individual's reaction to the environment is mediated by (a) the subjective evaluation (i.e., appraisal) of the environment, and (b) the process of coping with a stressful appraised event. Appraisals of situations and coping behavior are influenced by personal characteristics, such as personality, social skills, and problem-solving skills. According to this theory, prolonged duration of the stressful experience leads to exaggerated affective, cognitive, physiological, and behavioral responses. Consequently, complaints (e.g., psychosomatic and psychological distress) and impaired functioning (e.g., absenteeism) develop (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

We generally tend to respond to stress in one of three ways, avoidance, resistance, or confrontation/adaptation (Xie & Johns, 1995). The effects of stress can be viewed in three different ways: physiological, psychological and behavioral. Physiological stress means that no matter how hard we try, we cannot keep stress locked inside or ignore it. Doctors estimate 75% of all medical complaints to be stress related (Brewer, 1995). Psychological stress is caused in the work force due to factors such as undefined job responsibilities, lack of recognition, boredom due to one's skills not being utilized and lack of priorities. Its effects are seen through tension, anxiety, fear, irritability, poor work performance and procrastination. Behaviorally related stress includes changes in productivity, absenteeism, and turnover. Individual reaction to behavioral stress could show up as changes in eating habits, increased smoking or alcohol consumption, hurried speech, nervousness and sleep disorders.

## **Coping with stress**

Thirty years of systematic study have generated a substantial body of evidence on factors that contribute to stress—the 'sources' of stress. Much less is known, however, about how individuals deal with or manage the stress they experience, and about effective methods of coping with work-related stress.

Despite numerous efforts to examine coping strategies, our understanding of the stress-coping process remains incomplete (Edwards, 1988). Lack of effective stress management may lead to significant decrements in well-being, dissatisfaction, feelings of disengagement from the job, and reduced job performance. Prolonged maladaptive coping may ultimately induce a chronic, highly debilitating form of stress known as burnout. There is general agreement that coping forms part of the person-environment transaction, which occurs when an individual perceives a situation as stressful. Dewe and his colleagues have described coping as cognitions and

behaviors adopted by the individual following the recognition of a stressful encounter, that are in some way designed to deal with that encounter or its consequences (Dewe, Cox & Ferguson, 1993). Lack of understanding the coping phenomenon is also due to the various techniques used to measure coping.

Coping is defined as efforts to manage demands, conflicts, and pressures that severely drain, or exceed, a person's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two broad categories of coping viz. emotion based coping and problem focused coping.

Emotion-focused coping methods involve attempting to reduce the symptoms of stress. Emotion-focused coping is also known as avoidance coping (Roth & Cohen, 1986), although it should be acknowledged that the two terms have been used to refer to a wide range of coping behaviors (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). Emotion-focused coping is considered an appropriate response to a stressor (a situation or event causing stress) that is short term or cannot be changed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, stress and strain often arise because of long-term social or environmental factors such as work demands (Karasek, 1979) for which emotion-focused coping would be less effective. As a result, regular use of emotion-focused coping has been associated with greater risk of psychological and physical problems than has problem focused coping (Scheier et al., 1986; Snow et al 2003; Soderstrom et al 2000). Problem focused coping methods involve attempting to change or eliminate stressors or their effects. In theory, someone could use both coping strategies, but some research has suggested that using emotion focused coping impedes the use of problem-focused coping (Scheier et al., 1986). It is perhaps for this reason that most stress management interventions (SMIs) focus on only one of these two approaches.

There are three types of interventions when it comes to coping techniques. (Murphy, 1988; Sidle, 2008). Primary level interventions are concerned with modifying or eliminating the source of stress (stressors) inherent in the workplace in order to adapt the environment to better fit the individual. Primary interventions involve changes such as redesigning jobs to give employees greater flexibility or more decision control. Secondary interventions focus on the individual and are concerned with increasing awareness and extending the physical and psychological resources of employees to enable them to minimize the damaging effects of stress and manage stress more effectively. They help employees better recognize and manage stress symptoms as they occur. Examples of secondary interventions include relaxation techniques, meditation, time management and cognitive behavioral therapy. Finally, tertiary interventions are designed to help employees recover from stressful events. Tertiary interventions are frequently related to coping from a one-time significant stress-causing event. Their role is recuperative rather than preventive. An example would be a company's employee assistance program offering help to an employee who had to deal with a house fire.

In the analysis section, support for the critical incident method for evaluating coping techniques is extended and the use of CBT is advocated as an effective coping intervention. Closely tied to CBT, we introduce the many advantages of higher levels of emotional intelligence (EI) in coping with job-stress.

## **Personalized Stress Management**

The ultimate goal of studying stress and its organizational effect is to come up with solutions that deal with removing the source (the stressor) and/or provide employees with effective coping techniques for those stressors that are difficult or sometimes even impossible to eliminate. Both

of these goals are complimentary and not mutually exclusive. Whether one approach is better than the other really depends on the situation. It is generally accepted that removal of the stressor, though it appeals to a higher purpose, is often not possible. The issue of stressor removal is further complicated by perception i.e. what is a stressor for one person is not necessarily a stressor for another.

Hence, the focus is generally on stress response and coping. The research on coping is taking a more holistic turn, in that it answers the question as to how organizations can better understand each employee and what stresses affect him or her. Then, coping techniques are sought and applied in a personalized manner to each individual situation. Such an approach while recommended often comes with a significant cost in terms of time and expense for the company. Hence, from the point of view of employee welfare alone, this is not something that most corporations will pursue. The main goal of organizations is maximizing shareholder value and minimizing costs. The shift will only occur when corporations recognize that there is indeed an increase in the performance and output of workers who have lower stress levels. This realization has been slow but it certainly exists as evidenced by the vast increase in wellness programs incorporated by companies in recent years.

It is important to understand two things when it comes to stress management. One, there is no single coping technique that can be applied to everyone because each person reacts differently to stress and therefore copes in a different way. Second, the techniques for coping are evolving with the change in times. Today's workplace is very different from what it was a few decades ago. Factors such as globalization, increased demands from workers in terms of skill sets and productivity have lead to a new set of stressors that did not really exist in the past. Thus, it is important to continually evolve the coping techniques and align them with the new set of problems.

In this section, we focus on the importance of improved evaluation of coping techniques using Critical Incident Analysis and then focus on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy as a personalized coping technique. We also take a brief look at the role of emotional intelligence as an aid to coping with job-stress.

### **Evaluating coping behaviors through critical incident analysis**

Effective evaluation of coping techniques is crucial to learning how to deal with stress. Most of the coping techniques used so far rely heavily on deductive inferences based on existing research and literature. In contrast, a more effective manner is gathering data on coping techniques using induction. Inductive techniques make no assumptions about how individuals might respond in specific situations and therefore have ecological validity. As a consequence, this avoids placing any restriction on the types of behaviors which individuals may report during stressful events. Another improvement can be achieved by the use of elicited over predetermined stressors. Predetermined stressors involve general factors such as role demands, human resource practices, or job conflicts whereas with elicited stressors respondents actually identify stressful experiences that they have confronted themselves. This leads to responses that are more valid as they are specific and of importance to the people questioned (O'Driscoll & Cooper 1994).

As a result, the Critical Incident Analysis (CIA) method for understanding the coping process is recommended. CIA entails asking individuals to describe stressful transactions in terms of three elements:

- (i) The antecedents or circumstances in which the stress occurred: Here individuals are asked to think of situations that have had a disruptive effect on their work or created undue pressures for them. We avoid the use of the word “stress” in framing the question as this may predispose respondents to only think of situations where they did not effectively cope, hence limiting the opportunity to explore effective coping behaviors.
- (ii) Their responses in that situation, along with the responses of other people: Here we ask individuals to describe specific behaviors that they exhibited when confronted by each disruption. It is important here to focus on the description of behaviors and not an evaluation of whether particular responses were effective in helping the individual to cope.
- (iii) The consequences of both their own and others behavior: here we focus on two sets of questions. The first descriptive question asks, “What happened as a result of what you did?” and the second on evaluation of the outcomes to gauge the effectiveness of the coping behavior through the question, “How did you feel about what happened?”

Critical incident analysis offers several advantages in the study of stress-coping strategies, the most obvious being the ecological validity of information about individuals' responses in specific situations. Secondly, CIA ensures a more accurate portrayal of the specific behaviors that individuals display in response to stressful events. The information generated from critical incident analysis of coping provides a more comprehensive framework for examining the relationship between behaviors and the environments in which they occur. Finally, this approach enables a closer examination of the outcomes of situationally specific coping behaviors. Rather than asking global questions about coping effectiveness, CIA probes the specific consequences for individuals of their responses, along with their evaluation of the outcomes of those responses.

### **Cognitive behavioral treatment as a stress management intervention**

Cognitive-behavioral treatment (CBT) was frequently used for the treatment of psychopathology and has only recently been used for treating work related stress. This makes sense because the psychiatric disorders such as mood and anxiety disorders bear similarities to those with work related stress complaints. The primary goal of CBT for work-related stress is to increase an individual's skills (i.e. to equip patients to cope more effectively with difficult work conditions and demands). These interventions typically consist of psycho-education, analysis of individual responses and cognitive restructuring (Ivancevich et al 1990; Jones & Johnston, 2000).

Cognitive-behavioral approaches are secondary interventions that help employees rethink their beliefs about challenging situations. Specifically, individuals learn to recognize how their pessimistic and often distorted thoughts of gloom and doom lead to stress. Next, they learn to replace their overly pessimistic thinking with more realistic or more optimistic thinking (Sidle, 2008).

Cognitive restructuring techniques and social and coping skills training are explicitly aimed at changing appraisals of threats by enhancing both the quality and quantity of individual coping skills.

It has been seen that CBT is perhaps the most promising approach for coping with job related stress. However, there are often cost considerations involved when an organization chooses between various intervention techniques. Techniques such as relaxation are much easier and



cost effective to implement, often involving a step as simple as giving an employee a DVD. CBT based techniques however, are more expensive as they involve hiring a professional for a group or private session.

However, while relaxation approaches may help people feel calmer, they do not change how people view stress in their lives. They are mainly focused on symptom control. On the other hand, cognitive-behavioral interventions encourage people to actively change the way they think and behave in stressful situations. This allows people to deal with stress head-on and try to actually solve problems rather than just passively coping with them— result being sustainable lower stress level.

Organizations may be tempted to use a hybrid approach to stress management i.e. they may want to combine methods such as relaxation techniques and CBT. It is interesting to note that this is not a recommended approach. Research shows that more resource-intensive techniques such as cognitive-behavioral skills training tend to be *less* effective when bundled with other approaches (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008). While the reason for this is not fully understood, it is probable that the cause lies in the different ways that these secondary intervention techniques work. The non-CBT techniques simply allow for stress reduction while they are actively pursued and in some cases for a short time thereafter. However, every time an individual encounters the same problem, he or she still feels the same stress. The only difference is that the individual now has a technique that will alleviate the symptoms of stress temporarily. This does little good in the long run as it does not offer a comprehensive solution. CBT approaches on the other hand work with the assumption that stressful situations are a constant in the workplace and that the best approach is that we actually change our response to them. The process of reaching the required level of internal cognitive change might initially even result in a feeling of increased perceived stress as the tools for pure symptom control are discarded. A combination of CBT and non-CBT techniques therefore could lead to dissonance as they work in different ways to tackle the problem of job stress.

It is seen that CBT results in a reduction of complaints in groups with lower level of stress-induced depressive complaints (de Vente et al 2008). More specifically, cognitive behavioral interventions for work-related stress have been shown successful at achieving increased well-being in the short-run (de Jong & Emmelkamp, 2000; van Dierendonck et al 1998) and long-run (de Jong & Emmelkamp, 2000).

### **Role of emotional intelligence (EI) in stress management**

Recently, there has been a growing awareness concerning the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in stress management. EI is the ability, capacity and skills to identify, assess, and manage the emotions of one's self and of others (Bradberry & Greaves, 2005). Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined EI as: “the verbal and non-verbal appraisal and expression of emotion, the regulation of emotion in the self and others, and the utilization of emotional content in problem solving.” Studies show that improved emotional intelligence correlates to more effective stress management. There are major individual differences in coping with stressful situations. The same situation may be highly stressful for one individual while, for another, it may not be stressful at all. EI can come to our rescue in potentially stressful situations by empowering us to respond effectively, so as to eliminate the perceived stress or reduce its harmful consequences to the minimum. Regarding the relationship between EI and stress, Goleman (2001) found that the emotionally competent individual would encounter significantly less perceived stress than the emotionally incompetent. We can see CBT as an effective tool to developing emotional intelligence as it focuses on trying to change the perception people have about stress.

With higher levels of EI, there is better psychological adaptation. This results in lower anxiety, enhanced confidence, and reduced susceptibility to stressful situations. It is also apparent that those who are high on EI tend to become more committed towards their work. This commitment is experienced in the form of achieving targets, having a good rapport with their colleagues in the work set-up, regular attendance, and active participation in day-to-day life activities (Panda 2008).

## **The future**

A majority of the new research suggests that we treat stress as an individual problem rather than a general one. The same applies for coping techniques. Research is showing us that there really is not any panacea when it comes to coping with work related stress. Though difficult and expensive, personalized interventions seem to give better and long-term results when compared to general approaches.

Research shows promising trends on how the effectiveness of coping techniques is evaluated. Using critical incident analysis as a base, a need exists to arrive at effective implementation of such techniques in the workplace. HR departments need to be active in identifying internal training needs and when needed hire external consultants to ensure that they are gathering the right type of data when evaluating the effectiveness of coping techniques used by their employees.

Recent advances in actual coping techniques point towards further exploration of the cognitive behavioral approach. HR departments would do best to recognize the effectiveness of such therapy and implement it. Cost considerations are always an issue but these could be minimized by using group CBT sessions. Organizations should realize that popular techniques such as relaxation are perhaps too generalized and offer limited relief and invest in higher cost interventions.

Training of managers should also focus on emotional intelligence. Through emotional intelligence, one is able to understand oneself better, which leads to a better understanding of people and situations around us. It is also a good tool as it helps with perceptive issues that are often a large contributor to job-stress. Continued research in this area is needed to see what types of stressors are more effectively combated by high emotional intelligence. Research on which techniques are more useful in increasing emotional intelligence of managers would also be of much help.

## **Summary and Closing Comments**

There is overwhelming evidence that more organizations are continuing to incorporate employee wellness and stress management objectives as part of their strategic objectives. Employers recognize the tangible and intangible benefits of an employee who perceives himself in a state of “well-being” over one that does not.

Effective stress management is the key to an effective wellness plan for any organization. When carefully analyzed, one observes that most wellness objectives consciously or sub-consciously aim at lowering stress levels and/or offer coping techniques.

The field of stress management and coping is a highly complex one due to the various subjective effects (e.g. each person is unique and views and responds to stressors differently).

The issue of stress and coping is further complicated due to its dynamic nature. As the world around us continues to change at a rapid pace, there is a continuous evolution of thought patterns and perceptions of both individuals and organizations. This introduces new stressors on a continuous basis, ones that need to be dealt with quickly and effectively.

An important change that is beginning to occur involves using critical incident analysis for understanding what causes job related stress in employees. Simply put, this means that because stress is a phenomenon that is specific to each individual, the way data is gathered to understand the problem should also be from an individual source and not from general literature. While this is not a technique that helps reduce stress or helps with coping, it is part of understanding the problem better. Understanding the problem well and having relevant data is perhaps the most important step in developing effective coping techniques.

Focusing on effective coping leads us to research that shows how CBT can be an effective tool for stress management. This technique offers more than traditional coping techniques such as relaxation, which merely suppress the symptoms induced by high stress. CBT is a personalized technique, which aids the employee to rethink his belief about a stressful situation. Again, the focus here is based on seeing the problem as being unique to the employee. This allows for specific individualized coping techniques, which lead to results that are more effective in the long term.

Emotional Intelligence, while a stand-alone topic in its own right can be viewed as something that is enhanced through CBT. Developing EI allows employees to adapt much better to stressful situations and reduces the harmful effects of stress by allowing for a better perspective on the situation. While some people naturally have higher emotional intelligence, this is another area where progress can be made through training.

To summarize, it appears that HR departments in organizations need to move away from overly general approaches to stress management and focus on individual methods. While these techniques are more expensive, their tendency for permanent effectiveness in terms of employee well-being would more than compensate the cost of their implementation. At the same time, research should continue to develop these techniques to be more efficient and cost-effective.

Ideally, there should be a symbiotic relationship between both academia and industry leading to increased collaboration on the subject of stress management. It is only the continual efforts of both groups that will lead to advances in this often neglected area of human resource management.

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