

## WORK RELATED STRESS

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### ABSTRACT

**S**tress is part of human life and every living organism undergoes series of stress as a result of daily life activity. Stress at work is one of the major psychosocial risks at work. Work related stress is a problem and is of great concerned to employees, employers, psychologists and counselors. The paper examines issues of work related stress, work related stressors and certain occupations that are comparatively high risk to stress due to quantitative and qualitative demands. The paper also throws more light on outcomes of work related stress, Counselling implication and management of work related stress.

**Keywords:** Stress, risk, psychological, physiological, occupation, demands and grey hair.

## Introduction

This paper examines the issue of work-related stress among employees and the risk factors peculiar that are to work-related stress. Generally, stress is a difficult topic to address, because there are various definitions, since various people and different authorities have different definitions, therefore, there is no single acceptable definition by authorities in the field of mental health or other fields. Stress has range of definitions available.

Every living organism undergoes series of stress as a result of daily life activity. It means that every day activity is stress- induced to every individual. The intensity of stress varies from individual to individual. Different individuals can react differently to the same situations and same individual can react differently to situations at different times of their life.

## Concept of Stress

Stress is defined as the physiological and psychological reactions to certain events in the environment. Some people defined stress as events or situations that caused them to feel tension, pressure or negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger. Stress is an unpleasant state of emotional and physiological arousal that people experience in situations that they perceive as dangerous or threatening to their well- being(Tenibiaje2011) According to Selye (1976), stress is defined as the condition that can give rise to psychologically felt stress or discomfort and psychological state itself. He goes further to say that stress is the sum of all non- specific effects of factors that can act upon the body. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as tasking or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being.

Stress comes from negative events such as failure in examination, death of spouse, or compulsory retirement. Similarly, stress can emanate from positive events such as stress of achievement, joy, happiness, or wedding ceremony or having won a lottery and bonanza. All these can always provoke crisis of stress. Stress has been defined and used in different ways depending on the aims of theorists or researchers (Weiten 2000).

Stress at work is seen as one of the major psychosocial risks of work. Work-related stress is one of the problems confronting employees. It is of great concern to employees, employers and psychologists, because of its high growing rate in ill- health, as a result of long working hours of some employees. In reference to work-related stress, European commission (2000) defines stress as the emotional, cognitive, behavioural and psychological reaction to aversive and anxious aspects of work, work environments and work organizations. It is a state characterized by high levels of arousal, distress and often by feeling of not coping. At European level, the 2004 EU social partners describes stress as a state, which is accompanied by physical, psychological or social complaints or dysfunction and which results from individuals feeling and unable to bridge a gap with the requirements or expectations placed on them. Though, stress is a normal adaptive reaction to threat, it signals danger and prepares us to take defensive action. Individuals should be motivated to deal or avoid things that pose realistic threats to them. Although, stress may hinder performance on difficult tasks, moderate stress seems to improve motivation and performance on less complex tasks. Stress can lead to serious problems, if not properly or appropriately managed. Stressors cannot be defined objectively, but one can only identify potential stressors, the kinds of event or experience that most people are likely to find exceed their capacity to handle the demands that are involved (Gross2010). Stress becomes a risk only to safety and health if it is protracted. Some experts in mental health opined that short-term stress for meeting a deadline of certain demands is not usually a problem, but it is a way to energize individuals to the best of their abilities.

## Stressors

The circumstances that cause stress are referred to as stressors, they vary in duration of occurrence and severity. Stressors are conditions that may potentially precipitate stress or demand of life which eventually leads to stressful situations. Stressors are forces within the environment that usually threaten an organism's existence. Stressors may be physical or mental, physical stressors may be objects or animals that threaten an individual, such as the sighting of a snake, strange object in the dark, fearful images or fearful statues and others fearful objects. Mental stressors are those things like death of a spouse, death of loved ones, unhappy marriage, divorce, financial insecurity, poor social contacts, failure in one's endeavours, or failure in promotion examination or other conditions that may threaten or bring anxiety.

Stressors can be classified into three general categories:

- (i) Catastrophic events
- (ii) Major life changes and
- (iii) Daily hassles

### (i) Catastrophic events

A catastrophe is something that happens suddenly, which is a disaster or life threatening calamity that pushes the individuals to the outer limits of their coping capability. Catastrophes may be natural disasters such as fires, hurricanes, earthquakes, floods and tornadoes. Catastrophes may be man-made disasters like wars, violent, destruction, arson, automobile accidents. Catastrophic events often cause emotional disturbances, nightmares and mental stress.

### (ii) Major life changes

The most stressful events for adults involve major life changes such as death of a spouse or family member, divorce, imprisonment, losing one's job and major personal disability or illness. The most stressful events for adolescents are the death of a parent, or a close family member, divorce of their parents, imprisonment of their father or mother and the major personal disability or illness. It is common to experience positive events which have stressful components. For example, getting married is usually considered a positive experience, but planning of wedding, deciding who to invite, and dealing with family members may cause couples to feel stressed.

### (iii) Daily hassles

Our environments are full of stressful events. Much of the stress in our lives results from having to deal with daily hassles pertaining to our jobs, personal relationships and everyday living circumstances. Many people experience the same hassles every day such as waiting in a long line, noisy neighbourhood or community, to work in heavy traffic, queuing for water or fuel or even kerosene, misplacing articles and losing important items. Though, these things may be felt like a minor irritant, but cumulative, overtime, can cause significant stress (Encarta 2009).

There are many ways of classifying work-related stressors. More commonly demands may be related to:

- i. Time pressure (quantitative demands)
- ii. Amount of work (quantitative demands)
- iii. Difficulty of the work (cognitive demands)
- iv. Empathy required (emotional demands)
- v. Inability to show one's emotions at work (emotional demands) (European Foundation 2010)

The quantitative demands placed on the employees and the availability of resources is the possible causes of reactions on the employees. In general, people experience stress when the demands placed on them exceed the resources available to meet those demands. Whenever stress reactions persist over a period of time, they may likely develop into a state that may be permanent which results into health problems. Normally, individuals are well adapted to cope with short-term exposure to pressure but every individual has greater difficulty in coping with prolonged exposure to intensive pressure.

### **Work-related stress.**

Work-related stress has attracted the attention of psychologists and mental practitioners as a result of high rate of suffering from stress. According to the Four European Working Survey (6.35Mb.PDF) carried out in 2005, 22% of European workers reported lower backache, muscular pain and fatigue owing to stress. Work-related stress has been associated with a number of other ill-health outcomes, such as cardiovascular diseases (Kivimaki and his associates 2002), also musculoskeletal disorders particularly back problems (Hoogendoorn and his associates 2000) and neck-shoulder-arm-wrist-hand problems (Arien and his associates 2001) as well as absence from work (Houtman and his associates 1999)

Certain occupations are potential stressors to the workers in their work-places, such occupations may lead to anxiety and uncertainty. It means that such occupations can increase stress levels of workers. Experts reported that stress levels vary according to occupation, with a number of occupations classified as comparatively high risk to stress (European Foundation 2010). It is clear that some occupations bring particular qualitative stress factors with them, like farmer, teacher, lecturers, doctor, bus driver, police officer, stenographer, executive officer, senior manager and judge. It is interesting to note, according to European Foundation (2010) some occupations stressors trigger the workers (for example doctors and nurses) who are likely to be in contact with sick people) It is on record that some occupations have high stress levels while some have medium stress levels. Policing is a stressful occupation and Nigerian situation has added to the potentially stressful features of criminal justice work. In addition, there is occupational stress as well as poor social relation with the public.

Germany is one of the countries that have reported increase in stress levels over the past five years. A survey carried out the WSI Works Council between September 2008 and January 2009 on working conditions and occupational health showed that 79% of all works council members interviewed stated that the psychological strain for employees at the work-place had risen between 2006 and 2008. For example, in Slovenia, 84% of teachers surveyed in 2008 said that their profession was very or exceedingly stressful. In Bulgaria, an empirical psychological survey of judges was conducted in 2008 by the union of psychologists aimed to define the level of stress faced by judges. The survey found that about half of the respondents reported stress, 24% at a low level and 22% at a medium level. In a survey carried out in Denmark, senior managers have the highest stress levels, while in Italy the survey carried out in the banking sector, showed high levels of stress for workers in this sector, both for those handling money and those not handling money ([www.eurofound.europa.eu](http://www.eurofound.europa.eu)). In a research conducted on work stress of police officers in Nigeria showed high stress levels (Tenibiaje 2005). Although, it appears that enough research has not been conducted on farmers in Nigeria, as it is hardly difficult to have insight into such research. It is however perceived that stress levels of farmers may likely be high. .

### **Risk factors for work-related stress**

There are two risk factors for work-related stress. They are quantitative and qualitative demands

The quantitative demands are:

- (a) Work load i.e. heavy work load
- (b) Working hours i.e. long working hours
- (c) Quantity of work i.e. demanding type of work
- (d) Intensity of work
- (e) Persistent work load
- (f) Long hours of meeting—executive committee meeting and
- (g) Over doing

(ii) Qualitative demands

- (a) Control at work
- (b) Supportive social relationships at work
- (c) Management of organizational change
- (d) Communication or Information within the organization

### **Outcomes of Work-Related Stress**

The outcomes of work-related stress are numerous, from minor problems to major problems that may lead to death. Kivimaki and his associations (2002) emphasized that work-related stress has been associated with a number of ill-health problems. Outcomes of work-related stress are:

- (i) Physical problems
- (ii) Mental health problems
- (iii) Reduction in quality of output
- (iv) Reduction in quality of productivity
- (v) Indolence
- (vi) Absenteeism
- (vii) Presenteeism. This is a situation where the worker is present at work, but the worker feels too ill to be able to work effectively and efficiently.

### **Stress and Grey Hair**

The colour of hair is due to melanin which is produced by melanocytes in the bulb of the hair follicle which is later incorporated into the keratinocytes that form the hair. Normally, dark hair which is peculiar to some people, especially in Africa contains true melanin that is found in the skin where as red hair and blond are due to the presence of sulfur and iron in Melanin in some cases. Naturally, hair goes grey whenever

melanocytes are of age because of old age and loss of enzymes that produce melanin. White hair occurs when the air bubbles become incorporated into the growing hair (Edelson 1996).

Recently, the number of young women and men with premature grey hair are on the increase, even now young girls are having grey hair. Though, heredity may have contributed to premature grey hair, stress and other factors have been discovered to have impact on change of colour of hair (Macrae2011). Macrae (2011) explained that during brief but intense periods of stress and continue on and on, it can start to take its toll on Deoxyribonucleic (DNA). The DNA may eventually be damaged due to long period of stress which affect the cells and has impact on the cell that produce pigment in hair. Macrae (2011) went further that too much stress turns hair grey, when demands on chemical adrenaline is being put under pressure it causes hair to change colour and wreck havoc on the body. Also Professor Robert Lefkowitz in his contribution to grey hair explained how chronic stress may lead to a variety of human conditions and disorders, which range from mere cosmetics like malignancies.

When demands on work are threatened, impulses are conveyed to the adrenal glands which secrete hormone called adrenaline that is chemically identical to non adrenaline. Adrenaline is secreted though in minute quantities but it is released into the blood streams and it is spread throughout the body. It promotes variety of response like increasing the rate and strength of the heart beat which eventually increase the blood pressure, blood sugar rise and metabolic rate.

A long hour of work is another possible cause of grey hair which is also linked to demands at work by workers. Today people work for 10 – 12 hours every day. Long hours at work lead to stress emotion which is hazardous to man's health. Eleven hours of work on an average day were 2.4 times more likely to have heart attack than were men who worked "just" seven to nine hours a day (Simon1999). In 1997, an international team addressed the question on how working too hard affects the health. The team claimed that work can kill, they emphasized on work and health with conditions ranging from heart attacks to exhaustion and mental stress

Some workers are always busy that they hardly eat their meals. Their meals are not regular, no regular eating times. They skip the meals as a result of demands on work assigned to them, no enough time for eating. A lot of higher executive officers do not have time to eat while treating files, reading minutes of meetings and attending to duties. All these are parts of the daily hassles that are causing stress that lead to grey hair in some workers.

### **Management of Work-Related Stress**

Management of stress is the process of using thoughts and actions in dealing with stressful situations so as to lower the stress levels or to minimal the stress levels. The process of managing stress is to control the stress level through strategies, either to modify, avoid the threatening situation, moderate unpleasant emotions, or rethink the situation in a positive way. As mentioned earlier, stress reactions may result when people are exposed to risk factors at work and these may be emotional, cognitive, behavioural and psychological in nature. When stress reactions persist over period of time, they may develop into more permanent, less reversible health outcomes such as chronic fatigue, burnout, musculoskeletal problems or cardiovascular diseases.

It is very important to prevent stress and prevention of stress should take priority over management of stress. Prevention and management of work-related stress is not the same with management and prevention of stress in general. Every worker should be aware of the stressor that is related to work. Workers should be aware of risk factor available in the various jobs. Promotion of well being at work should be effected through the development of varieties of initiatives designed to raise awareness of stress and combat stress. The awareness could be through seminar, courses, and leaflets.

Management of work-related stress is the sole responsibility of the employers and employees. They are supposed to tackle the issues of work-related stress through the implementation of lay down law and regulation on work-related stress. Law protecting the number of hours to be used by workers should be enforced. Employers are obliged by law to appoint a psychosocial prevention adviser (European commission 2010).

### **Counselling Implication**

The Counselling implication of work related stress is that whenever the demands at work are threatened, individuals need to be counselled to be conscious of effect of high demands on organs and systems of the body. The demand affects the heart, the heart rate increases thereby increases blood pressure, blood sugar and metabolic rate. All these have effects on the individuals' health and it may lead death.

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