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## **Stress Management at Workplace in Challenging Situations**

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### **Abstract**

Most employees worldwide have currently faced challenging situations in the workplace because of rapidly changing technology in their work environment and the outbreak of Coronavirus-19 since early 2020. These cause work-related stress to build up in unfamiliar work conditions, heavy workload, and employment insecurity. They need to adjust and learn to use new communication methods and tools, particularly virtual meetings as challenges for them to acquire digital skills to do their work at home as well as contact customers. These new work-related conditions have apparently increased employees' stress and anxiety. Stress problems cause poor mental health and fatigue as a sign of physical weakness. This is one of the most critical problems affecting employees' well-being and productivity in the workplace. The aims of this academic paper are (1) to define the meaning, concept and theory of stress, and (2) identify causes of stress in order to handle them efficiently. The author systematically reviewed relevant research and academic papers. It is expected that the results of the analysis and synthesis will shed light on the stress issues and stress management techniques for considerations of employees, organizational leaders, and human resource units to put stress at work at a manageable level. A little stress may be good for life and work productivity, but if it looms too large, it will certainly harm the organization and its productivity.

*Keywords: Stress, stress management, workplace, challenging situation, productivity*

### **1. Introduction**

Due to disruptive technology and the outbreak of Coronavirus-19, these challenging situations have forced employees to work remotely, with a lack of balance between work and personal lives. A lot of employees have experienced stress more than ever before and increased the burnout level at work. The Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health Thailand found that Thai people have stress levels increasing from 2.7% to 4.2% due to the COVID-19 outbreak (Voice online, 2021). Other researches showed that employees in organizations have high stress rates. They face many factors leading to stress, such as unrealistic expectations, a lack of work-life balance, tight deadline, uncertainty in career path, over workload, and decreased income and other benefits (Wongwassana, 2021). Stress also triggers mental and health problems, such as depression, heart disease, arrhythmias, and even sudden death (Chi & Kloner, 2003). In this regard, stress problems in the workplace have

impacts on employees' well-being, productivity, and the profitability of organizations (Manoj, 2013).

## **2. What Is Stress?**

Stress is a nonspecific response of the body to a threat or danger which is a cause or result of something desirable or undesirable (Selye, 1936). It is a result of the relationship between the person and the external environment. The person assesses perceived external or internal demands and the perceived personal and social resources to deal with them. If the result is imbalanced, stress occurs; the person will feel threatened or harmed by unhappiness (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Beehr & Newman (1983), stress is a condition arising from the interaction between people and their jobs. It causes changes within people that force them to deviate from their normal functioning; so physical and mind are not in balance. It can be said that stress occurs when people feel their perceiving as being uncomfortable or cannot make decision at that moment, so manifesting physical or emotional imbalance. In the case of organizational change that demands innovations and personnel adjustments for the new patterns of work as in teamwork, a higher degree of collaboration, empowerment for decision making and needs to handle conflicts, employees involved will experience intense pressure to get their work done as expected by the organization (Sriboonnark, 2020 ; Ratchavieng, Srinet & Syers, 2021).

## **3. Level of Pressure**

Employees often experience stress at different points in their lives. A low level of stress can help to motivate people to do something but too much stress will overwhelm and leave them with anxiety or anger, and hold them back to act properly. It has impact on day-to-day life. There is difference between positive stress (also known as “eustress”) and negative stress. When employees get a promotion or receive desirable things, hormones like endorphins, adrenaline, serotonin, and oxytocin are released to give pleasurable feelings. But when they get too much pressure or face bad situations, the stress hormone, cortisol will be released and linked to health effects, such as depression, troubled sleep, and overeating (Cording, 2020).

There is relation between the level of pressure and performance as shown in Figure 1 below. This figure shows the pressure performance curve with a bell-shaped trajectory. The curve serves as a *useful management tool* that can help employers and employees to understand and manage the pressure in their workplace in time.

**Figure1:** Level of Pressure and Performance

Source: Martin (2018)

The optimal level of stress can positively motivate employees to focus on their task and solve problems efficiently. If employees' stress occurs too often or exceeds the optimal level, it will cause physical and mental health problems, such as headache, strain, and burnout. Employees need to take care of their stress management and try to keep their pressure in the zones of comfort and stretch for the highest performance; they need to avoid pressure in the zone of strain and burnout for their physical and mental well-being.

#### 4. Types of Stress

Employees' stress in the workplace arises from their reaction to demands of their abilities and knowledge that may not match the assigned jobs, or when attempting to get over pressure that exceeds their capability to deal it effectively. The American Psychological Association (APA) classified stress into three types--acute stress, episodic acute stress, and chronic stress (Ehrenfeld, 2018; Tran et al., 2020).

**Acute stress:** Acute stress is the most frequently occurred stress type; for example, when you cannot finish your work assignment in time. It happens in the short-term period and it may not have a full negative meaning, even though your heart might race and your blood pressure might rise. Acute stress helps to train and stimulate the development of brain in dealing with stressful situations in the future. It happens when a person reacts to upcoming situation or sudden challenges.

**Episodic acute stress:** Episodic acute stress occurs when people face regular stress or meet a crisis in their lives. For example, your boss poorly manages current tasks and often assigns an emergency job with a tight deadline. You may reduce stress by spending time for body exercise or planning about your finance in case you want to change job or resign from

work. If this stress cannot be reduced or solved in time, it will have possible impacts on your relationship with colleagues and family members, and consequently on your work productivity.

**Chronic stress:** Chronic stress is the most dangerous type of stress. It occurs when people face serious life and long-term problems. It can severely cause both physical and mental health problems.

All types of stress can lead to a variety of symptoms, but chronic stress can take a serious toll on the body over time. Understanding the three types of stress can help a person to have self-awareness and empathy for others who are under stress.

## **5. Signs and Symptoms of Workplace Stress**

Stress is not always easy to perceive but there are some signs to show that employees might be experiencing too much pressure at work. Sometimes stress can come from an obvious source, or from even a small daily nuisance from the workplace. There are some common signs of stress, such as changes in mood, sweaty palms, difficult sleeping, digestive problems, feeling anxious, headaches, low energy, muscle tension, and heart rates (Scott, 2020). It can severely damage employees' physical and mental health.

## **6. Causes of Stress at Work**

Causes of stress in the workplace can be categorized into two major types depending on the source of the cause (Panigrahi, 2016).

### **6.1 Internal causes**

Internal causes involve a personal's mindset, attitude, and way of thinking. They come from within an individual and bring out stress. It also depends on an individual's perception when experiencing a difficult situation. In the same situation, each person has different perception. Some may feel that a person or a situation threatening to the extent of exerting pressure, even though there may not be a real or intense threat or danger existing in the surrounding.

### **6.2 External causes**

External causes include many external factors in the organization which affect employees' performance and productivity which are:

- (1) Job insecurity. Employees may feel insecure at work. For example, they fear to lose their job, or face uncertain situations which are difficult to cope with. These can lead to chronic stress which causes a decline in work productivity.
- (2) Working hours. Long working hours lead to work stress and such physical problems as headaches and digestive issues, and mental problems, particularly tension, anxiety, anger and depression.

(3) Control at work. This refers to the extent of control employees have over their work. If employees have an insufficient level of control at work, they lose interest in their work and feel stressful to meet expectations of the superiors. An increasing level of control while empowering them to make decision can reduce stress among employees.

(4) Managerial style. The controlling style of managers affects stress among employees. Managers with a dictatorial leadership style have a strong grip on the planning and decision-making process for their employees. Managers with an autocratic style of leadership tend to make decisions alone, and cause their employees to feel stressful and powerless in making any decision on their work, and overwhelmed with work limitations.

(5) Overload and underload. Work overload means having many tasks to do in a very short time. A constant overload generates more stress and depression, and stressful employees cannot perform up to their job expectations. On the contrary, work under load could be as stressful as work overload in that underload consumes too much time for a small amount of work done. Such a condition can lead employees to doubt their capacity and feel bored and stressed over their low self-esteem. It can become a silent killer of team productivity.

(6) Behavioral changes. Sometimes, situations happen to ask employees to change their normal behavior. They may feel uncomfortable because such a forced change can lead to stress and its impact on work productivity and job efficiency.

## **7. Coping with Stress**

Stress management includes thoughts, emotions, planning, and methods to deal with problems. The first in priority is to identify sources of stress. Sometimes, it is difficult for employers and employees to know the true cause of stress so that they can reflect upon their thoughts, feeling, and behaviors for possible adjustments in reducing the level of stress. It should be noted that they may find their stress not from their job but perhaps from personal matters.

Some people use unhealthy habits to cope with stress, such as smoking, gambling, shopping, drinking alcohol, or overeating. These may help reduce stress in a short period of time, while still keeping the actual sources of stress. Moreover, they can lead to new kinds of problems and even more stress in the future. On the other hand, healthy coping habits, such as body exercise, outdoor activities, being with nature, keeping pets, consulting assistance for troubled spouses or trusted friends. These ways can keep them at the present moment and give an opportunity to solve problems at the roots of stress-related problems (Martin, 2020).

Scott (2021) suggested two main strategies to help people at work to cope with stress: solution-based coping and appraisal-based coping.

(1) Solution-based coping with stress. When using solution-based coping strategies with stress, people must identify areas of their lives which can be

changed, create a plan and take action on the plan that will bring about change. This strategy includes eliminating stressors, such as quitting a stressful job, avoiding a toxic colleague, managing a busy schedule, or finding a means to eliminate stress before encountering more of it. However, some stressful situations cannot easily make changes or eliminate the stressors; for example, it is necessary to work with a difficult boss and colleagues to get the job done.

(2) Appraisal-based coping with stress. This strategy of coping with stress involves how people feel about their stressors. They must ask themselves when experiencing the challenging situation whether it really causes stress or it is simply part of life. Trying to find humor or a positive aspect of a stressful situation could be a possible solution for some who could manage and tolerate stress.

Kelly Yang, Ph.D., Harvard and Berkeley-trained researcher and NY Times bestselling author suggests three steps in coping with stress (Cording, 2020):

(1) Assessing stress by listing everything which is its source. This should include both professional and personal spheres. It is important to evaluate and circle the biggest stressors on the list.

(2) Making a plan and asking others for support to reduce stressors. For example, try to communicate and negotiate with the leader or partner in extending the timeline of the project when faced with the crisis situation.

(3) Changing daily habits. It may help a person to manage stress even though no one can prevent all stressors from happening. Useful habits in managing stress could include mindful practice like meditation, making routine body exercise, eating health food and releasing suppressed emotions via music.

Employees should try new and suitable coping strategies to reduce their stress in the workplace. There are many stress-coping methods, particularly fitness activity and mindfulness training. Jarukasemthavee (2020), Professor of Faculty of Psychology, Chulalongkorn University proposes practical guidelines for mind care to help reduce stress in that Thai people need to observe their thoughts, feelings and physical symptoms. They can use psychological relaxation and breathing exercise for at least 5 minutes to calm the mind in the morning, noon, and evening. Moreover, people need to reduce access to information that provokes high anxiety. Scott (2019) also suggests the breathing exercise for 5 minutes when faced with the stressful situation. Such a method can work quickly and be easily used anywhere and in any situation. There is no need to take a complete break from stress-related agents. If employees choose a suitable strategy to manage stress, it can help reduce stress for adaptation to a sound working life.

As an organization, employers should beware that their employees' mental health issues deserve immediate attention. Employees are the most important resource of the organization. They should have a healthy body and mind to be able to work productively. Jim

Falteisek (BusinessToday, 2021), Vice President of 3M Asia Corporate Affairs suggests one strategy to manage stress and mental health problems for workers to grapple with stress from the Covid-19 outbreak. Employees are advised to open up and talk about their mental health struggles they have not encountered before by being honest, transparent and open to their leader and colleagues. Such actions will help remove any obstacles when encountered at work. No one should struggle with mental health problems alone. Moreover, 3 M Company has Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which supports employees throughout their career. The objective of this program is to help employees to cope with stress and anxiety in difficult situations in all aspects of work and life (BusinessToday, 2021).

## **8. Conclusion**

In such a challenging situation as the Coronavirus-19 pandemic, most employees have to face more stressors which lead to the higher level of stress. They may have personal, professional, and financial anxieties, but both employers and employees in the organization need to realize the impact of stress. When employees experience stress, they need to manage and reduce it as soon as possible. On the part of employers, they need to help remove obstacles or stressors for employees for the latter's overall well-being and productivity they can create for their organization.

## **9. The Author**

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