

PREVENTION AND MANAGEMENT OF STRESS RELATING TO WORK

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Abstract The main purpose of the paper is to examine stress in the workplace, with a focus on researching stress related to age and sex. 22% of employed people in the European Union face stress. The consequences of stress are manifested in forms of sick leave, the avoidance of certain work tasks, inefficiency and reduced productivity, dissatisfaction with work and with themselves. If a person does not face up to their problems, it can lead to deep frustration, exhaustion and even burnout syndrome, which is easily expressed on a physical level in the form of psychosomatic diseases. There are strategies for overcoming stress at the individual and organisational level, however sometimes, despite these strategies and techniques, stress appears in all its forms and causes health problems, therefore it is necessary to seek medical and other professional help (psychologist, psychotherapist). The authors of this paper found that the level of stress among employees in organisations is high, women are more likely to experience stress in an ‘emotional way’, while men are more likely to suffer physical illnesses because of stress, and secondary school/university students are the most stressed.

Keywords:

stress at work,
stressors,
symptoms of
stress,
consequences of
stress,
stress management

1 Introduction

People like to glorify successful people who are stressed. We admire them because they are able to withstand great pressure, loads and stressful situations. When someone says, “I work a lot” or “I’m under a lot of pressure” or convincingly “I can handle anything”, we hear this as amazing and enviable and even take it as the right and only way to our objectives (Jerovšek, 2020).

Research shows that 80% of all accidents at work are caused by the human factor, that people under greater stress are more prone to mistakes, and that tired and tense people do not always make the best decisions. In Slovenia, up to 70% of all visits to doctors are due to stress-related illnesses (Jerovšek, 2020).

Stress affects the health of employees and psychosocial risks negatively affect the well-being of the company. Increasing psychological burdens in the business world are increasingly leading to mental illness among employees, which thus have a negative impact on the company. Promoting health at work is a fundamental approach to reducing stress at work and strengthening health and well-being at work (Šarotar Žižek, Treven, Jimenez, Eibel & Dunkl, 2013).

The authors of this paper want to bring this issue closer to the young and older population, as the issue of stress represents increasing costs and negative consequences for individuals as well as for organisations.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the problem of stress in general and how it manifests in employees, and to present individual and organisational techniques for the prevention and management of stress in the workplace. There is a particular focus on the question of whether stress is related to age and gender.

The authors set themselves the following goals: describe stress, study stressors inside and outside of the work environment, research work stress, identify differences in age and gender in the perception of stress, identify tips for coping and overcoming stress, test hypotheses, and make recommendations for improvement.

In designing this paper, the following qualitative research methods were used in the following order: descriptive method, comparative method, compilation method and the observation method.

2 Literature review

2.1 Stress in general

The word 'stress' is used in physics to denote the interaction between a force and resistance to that force. Hans Selye was the first to include this term in the medical lexicon to describe the 'nonspecific response of the body to any demand'. Selye is known as the 'father of stress research' and his concept of stress has influenced both scientific and lay people and communities in such diverse fields as medicine, psychology, etc. (Tan & Yip, 2018).

Stress is a physiological, psychological and behavioural response of an individual who tries to adapt and get used to internal and external stimuli (stressors). A stressor, on the other hand, is an event, person or object that an individual experiences as a stress element and which causes stress. A stressor temporarily upsets an individual's balance and stress is a completely normal response to this event (Dernovšek, Gorenc & Jeriček, 2006).

There are many recognised types of stress such as positive, negative, natural, artificial, physiological, normal, chronic, exogenous, endogenous, short-term, long-term, collective, corporate, high-risk, etc.

Hans Selye and Walter Cannon were the first to deal with stress. In the early 20th century, Cannon wrote about the 'fight or flight' response. With his experiments on animals, he was the first to prove the role of the sympathetic nervous system and adrenal system in determining the physiological nature of the response to stressors. Fighting or fleeing is a person's response when they find themselves in a difficult situation that they perceive as very threatening. Selye described a model more than 50 years ago that he called 'general adaptation syndrome' (GAS) and divided it into three phases (Lipp & Lipp, 2019).

2.2 Stressors

Stress is a physiological, psychological and behavioural response of an individual who tries to adapt and get used to internal and external stimuli (stressors). A stressor is an event, person or object that an individual experiences as a stress element and causes stress (Belšak, 2022).

Stressors can be divided into factors that cause work-related stress and others, such as: stressors related to physical health (health conditions), home and environment, financial stressors, work (study) stressors related to relationships, children, related to extended family, related to friends, etc. related to physical health (health conditions); home and environmental financial stressors; work (study) stressors; related to partner relationship, children; related to extended family; related to friends; etc. (Belšak, 2022).

Workplace stress occurs when the demands of the work environment exceed the ability of employees to meet (or manage) them. Stress is not a disease, however, it can worsen mental or physical health if it is severe and lasts for a long time. A certain level of pressure can improve productivity and create satisfaction while achieving goals. However, when demands and pressures become too great, they cause stress, which is bad for workers and their organisations (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2020).

Factors that often cause work-related stress (National Safety Council of Australia, Victorian Workcover Authority, 2012) are long hours, high workload, changes within the organisation, tight deadlines, changes in duties, job insecurity, lack of autonomy, boring work, insufficient work skills, excessive supervision of superiors, inadequate working environment, lack of adequate resources, equipment, harassment, discrimination and poor relationships with employees or bosses.

Psychosocial risks and work-related stress are one of the most difficult challenges in the field of occupational health and safety. They have a strong impact on the health of individuals, organisations and national economies. About half of European workers believe that stress in their workplace is common, and it also contributes to about half of all lost working days (Agency for Safety and Health at Work,

2020)Based on the above, the authors of this paper formulated the following hypothesis:

- H1: The level of stress among employees in organisations is high.

2.3 Symptoms of stress

Stress reaction symptoms develop within minutes of a stressful event and last from a few hours to a few days. The initial state manifests as bewilderment. Attention is reduced, the individual may feel a little confused, as if they are not fully conscious and cannot fully grasp what is happening around them. It is a general irritation of the nervous system that prepares the body for ‘fight or flight’. This is followed by withdrawal from the stressful situation or severe agitation, which can paralyse the individual for a short time (Dernovšek, Gorenc & Jeriček, 2006). The symptoms of stress can be observed at the individual level, as well as at the organisational or company level.

The symptoms of chronic stress are divided into: physical symptoms (diarrhea, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, loss of external desire, regular colds, nausea), behavioural symptoms (eating problems, sleep problems (too much or too little), distancing from other people, drug, alcohol and cigarette use, tics and other habits due to nerves (nail biting, shaking ...), shifting responsibilities, and emotional symptoms (poor temperament, inability to relax, feeling lonely, depression, sadness) (Aggarwal & Prajapati).

2.4 The consequences of stress

Individuals need symmetry between work and home life. When work commitments ‘clash’ with an individual’s personal life, stress levels increase and productivity decreases. Work-life conflict can lead to negative consequences that benefit neither employees nor employers (Foy, Dwyer, Nafarrete, Hammoud & Rockett, 2019). Below the authors have defined the consequences at the level of the individual, organisation and society.

Stress can have both positive and negative effects on individuals. In terms of positive effects, stress can be very positive and can also greatly increase motivation for the work we do. If we are nervous, we want to do as well as we can, hence we try harder. Stress can often also give us a sense of happiness or contentment and can make us feel more confident and fulfilled (McEwen, 2009).

Stress can be a major problem in organisations, as when workers are nervous, they may be more cautious and less alert, which can lead to inadequate work performance. If workers are under significant pressure, many illnesses can occur, leading to a reduction in the workforce and a shortage of workers (Kopp, Stauder, Purebl, Janszky & Skrabski, 2009).

2.4.1 Differences in the experience of stress between men and women

Women are more likely to experience stress in an ‘emotional way’, while men are more likely to suffer physical illnesses because of stress. Different models of stress identify gender as an important personal or demographic characteristic that influences an individual’s experience of stress (Meško, Videmšek, Štihec, Meško Štok & Damir, 2010). Based on the above, the authors formulated the following hypothesis:

- H2: Women experience higher levels of stress than men.

2.4.2 Differences in the experience of stress based on age

Pre-school children are the least stressed as they are not yet aware of the situations around them. They are followed by pensioners who no longer need to worry about work, school or childcare. Secondary school/university students are the most stressed, as they have to deal with school and out-of-school issues on a daily basis, or full-time employees with families, who have many worries at once and are under constant stress (Aldwin, 1991). Based on the above, the authors formulated the following hypothesis:

- H3: Younger people experience higher levels of stress than older people.

2.5 Managing and overcoming stress

Stress is usually considered a negative phenomenon. Companies today are constantly implementing stress management techniques to reduce the impact of stress and constantly need to ensure that employees are stress-free (Bansal, 2018). There are different techniques and strategies at an individual and organisational level.

At an individual level, there are various techniques that can be used to manage stress. These include discussing various stressful events and problems, education and various coping methods, learning new skills and identifying stress symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweaty palms and stomach pain. Some strategies are more appropriate for use in certain circumstances than others. There are also relaxation techniques, such as meditation yoga and taking part in sports, which result in better productivity and quality of work. It is important to make sure you get enough rest and sleep and eat a healthy diet. A healthy mind is a healthy body.

At the level of the organisation, the type of stress management measure depends on the stressor in the work environment. If the cause of stress is the nature of the job itself, a redesign of work should be considered, in particular to improve the content and the characteristics of the work (Treven, 2005).

Management strategies determine success or failure in the workplace. Several different organisational approaches or strategies can be used to overcome stress (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2020):

- Talk to your employer and union representative or any other employee representative if you think there are problems. If you are unable to speak directly with your employer, your union representative may do so on your behalf.
- Working atmosphere; try to convey constructive ideas on how the situation could be improved, creating a favourable organisational climate.
- Set priorities for your work, and if there is too much work, suggest for yourself what you might want to skip, decide on, or pass on to someone else without imposing too much extra work on others. It is about flexible work planning and design.

- Talk to your supervisor or union representative or any other employee representative if you feel you cannot handle things and make suggestions on how to improve the situation.
- If you want more diversity, look for new work assignments that you could do. If in doubt about preventive measures in your workplace, request relevant information. Follow the relevant company policy, if available.

3 Discussion

The authors of this paper had enough literature and resources available, however, the limitation that emerged was the time constraint of writing a seminar paper. The hypotheses they set were tested by analysing professional research online, articles, publications and professional books.

The authors limited the research to some aspects of stress that are considered important and worth mentioning. The hypotheses were not tested through our own research but rather through existing professional literature, thus only the theoretical part was tested rather than the empirical.

In this paper, the authors sought answers to previously set hypotheses. The results showed that the first hypothesis – The level of stress among employees in organisations is high – is confirmed, namely the workplace is the environments because individuals spend a large proportion of their daily lives there. Therefore, organisations need to work to alleviate the stress of their employees by organising simple activities to define culture, customs and companies, which, consequently, will influence employees. Employees need to feel comfortable and accepted in their workplace, which will lead to positive benefits. However, the environment in which an employee works is important, because it affects their financial stability or personal success, therefore, companies must take this into account in order for employees to be successful in their work. People devote a lot of energy and thoughts to what is important to them, which is a recipe for reviving stress.

The second hypothesis – Women experience higher levels of stress than men – was confirmed, since there are already visible differences between the sexes throughout the history of women. This is largely derived from scientific research based on a survey showing real-world statistics. Of course, it is important to note that there are

differences between the sexes between the reasons for stress itself and stressors. It is hoped that in future the level of stress felt by women will reduce.

The last hypothesis tested was – Young people experience higher levels of stress than older people – which was also confirmed. Due to various developmental changes in the requirement in the field of life, adolescents are exposed to the highest probability of experiencing stress, while on the other hand, adolescence is crucial in creating effective and constructive ways of coping with stressful situations.

4 Conclusion

This article describes stress in the workplace and there is no doubt that stress is present in every environment and period of our lives, regardless of age, status or general characteristics of the individual. Stress is a concept that everyone interprets differently and it poses a question that is still faced by a huge number of people, whether individuals or groups in education systems, for scientific reasons, or simply to facilitate personal understanding.

Most people associate the concept of stress with something negative, although in reality it is not always the case. Sometimes stress is the factor that motivates us to create positive changes in life and go outside our comfort zone, which in turn brings positive results and better well-being.

By being aware of the advantages and disadvantages of stress and, of course, its effects, it is easier to adapt to different situations that come our way in life. Negative consequences can be health-related, such as depression and anxiety, heart problems, headaches and migraines, obesity, and bowel problems. Pregnancy and menstrual problems can also occur in women. Of course, the problems are not necessarily medical, but also behavioural disorders, avoidance of stressful events, regressive behaviour (e.g. fiddling with hair, rocking, sucking fingers), increased addiction, irritability, poor self-esteem, learning difficulties (decreased concentration, forgetfulness, irrationality, poor judgment, and difficulty thinking (impaired imagination).

By understanding stress and at the same time understanding how much energy we will gain and save by avoiding negative stress when we find ourselves in stressful situations, we defend ourselves against potential negative consequences. However, in order to avoid stressful situations when we are already experiencing stressful situations, it is important to adopt preventative measures to prepare for stress. This can be in the form of various hobbies such as sports, reading, watching TV, socialising with friends and, of course, knowing our own limits to avoid burnout.

In today's environment, it is difficult to avoid stress, as we are exposed to it at every turn. It is suggested that each individual should seek help immediately when they feel the pressure of stress and immediately look for the causes of it. It means a lot to express our feelings and to be able to talk to our employer about the issue. Our health should be our priority, however, for the most part this is not the case in the 21st century. Every company should integrate systemic management and stress prevention at all levels into the system and constantly fight for the well-being and protection of workers.

The practical advice the authors would offer managers, employees and policy makers is that relationships at work are key, as they are always a potential source of stress. Tolerance towards co-workers, mutual respect and, in the long run, assertive communication are ways of achieving a better organisational climate and greater efficiency of the organisation, as well as one's own satisfaction and a less stressful life in already demanding jobs.

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