

Volumen 5 - Número Especial- Octubre/Diciembre 2018

REVISTA INCLUSIONES

INSTITUTO VENEZOLANO
DE INVESTIGACIONES LINGÜÍSTICAS Y SOCIALES

ISSN 0719-4706

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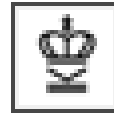
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**OCCUPATIONAL STRESS
SOURCES AND WAYS TO COPE WITH ITS CONSEQUENCES**

**ESTRÉS OCUPACIONAL
FUENTES Y MANERAS DE ENFRENTARSE CON SUS CONSECUENCIAS**

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Fecha de Recepción: 29 de agosto de 2018 – **Fecha de Aceptación:** 15 de septiembre de 2018

Abstract

One of the most significant contemporary problems is that of occupational stress. It is studied as a multiform phenomenon finding manifestation in employee's mental and physical responses that occur upon sufficiently prolonged intensive influence of emotionally negative and extreme factors directly related to the performance of one's job. Occupational stress is a possible response of the body when employees face requirements that could not be met by the level of their knowledge and skills. It may be due not only to structural-organisational peculiarities but also to the employees' nature of work, personal relations and their interaction. **The main objective** of this article is to provide an overview of the types of occupational stress, to demonstrate the main stressors, their weight regarding various groups of employees and their consequences; to propose methods, mechanisms and strategies for coping with the occupational stress. **The main research methods** used herein are inquiry, interview, content-analysis, comparison methods and intuitive and systematic approach.

Keywords

Occupational stress – Stressor – Stress management – Stress-resistance – Strategies Compensation mechanisms

Resumen

Uno de los problemas contemporáneos más importantes es el estrés laboral. Se estudia como un fenómeno multiforme que encuentra manifestación en las respuestas mentales y físicas de los empleados, los que ocurren tras una influencia intensiva suficientemente prolongada de factores emocionalmente negativos y extremos directamente relacionados con el desempeño del trabajo. El estrés ocupacional, es una posible respuesta del cuerpo cuando los empleados enfrentan requisitos que no podrían cumplirse por el nivel de sus conocimientos y habilidades. Puede deberse no solo a las peculiaridades estructurales y organizativas, sino también a la naturaleza del trabajo, las relaciones personales y la interacción de los empleados. El objetivo principal de este artículo es proporcionar una visión general de los tipos de estrés ocupacional, para demostrar los factores estresantes principales, su peso con respecto a varios grupos de empleados y sus consecuencias; proponer métodos, mecanismos y estrategias para enfrentar el estrés laboral. Los principales métodos de investigación utilizados en este documento son la investigación, la entrevista, el análisis de contenido, los métodos de comparación y el enfoque intuitivo y sistemático.

Palabras Claves

Estrés laboral – Stressor – Manejo del estrés – Resistencia al estrés – Estrategias Mecanismos de compensación

Introduction

Occupational stress is a multi-form phenomenon with many dimensions, finding manifestation in mental and physical responses to stress situations in occupational activities, and to complicated situations at work. In other words, occupational stress is a strained state of an employee occurring at sufficiently long-lasting, more or less intensive influence of emotionally negative and extreme factors directly related to the performance of one's job. Nervous system overburdening at the performance of one's duties at work is manifested mainly through emotional outbursts provoking or causing extreme situations. In the course of time the threshold of extreme drops and an employee being constantly overburdened very easily loses control over his/her emotions and his/her professionalism. It is to be noted here that the development of stress responses is possible even in progressive well-managed organisations which is due not only to structural-organisational specificities, but also to the nature of work, employees' personal relations and their interaction, and even purely legal¹ aspects influencing the employees' work.

Work-related stress is a possible response of the body when employees face requirements not corresponding to the level of their knowledge and skills. In a recent research² in 15 countries of the European Union 56% of workers determine that the most common stressors are the high work speed, 60% - the fixed (and/or too short) terms for performance, 40% - monotony of work, more than one third have not been able to exercise any influence on the terms and conditions for the performance of assignments. Work-related stress factors contribute to the occurrence of health issues. This way 15% of workers complain of headaches, 23% - of aching neck and shoulders, 23% - of fatigue, 28% - of stress, and 33% - of aching back. Almost one out of ten shares that intimidating tactics are applied at work.

Types of occupational stress

There are many varieties of occupational stress³: health workers' stress, managerial stress (of the managers), educational stress, sport stress, teaching stress, informational stress in operating activities, traumatic stress, etc. Occupational stress may be caused also by a poor organisation of the work process, low level of autonomy and opportunity to take independent decisions at work, setting short terms for the performance of assignments that could not be kept by the employees, lacking opportunities for flexibility at work⁴. We shall study here the classical types of occupational stress like *informational*, *emotional* and *communicative* stress.

Upon informational overloading when an individual is not coping with the assignments, for multiple times (or even once at a high level of preoccupation), and is not

¹ P. Parvanov, P. Legal opportunities for making Bulgarian tourism a socially-orientated industry – Social economy in a situation of restricted resources – theory and practice - 2017, p. 84 - 116.

² Source: <https://psy.su/feed/1925/>

³ P. Fetiskin, Psycho-technology of stress-mastering behaviour. M. Kostroma. 2007.

⁴ M. Dimitrova, Problems of Health and Safety Management in the Bulgarian Public Administration, International Journal of Contemporary Economics and Administrative Sciences, Volume 1, Issue 3 (2011) 184, www.ijceas.com/index.php/ijceas/article/download/28/pdf

able to take important decisions under time limitations, most often *informational stress* occurs. In addition, the tension (respectively the level of stress) may increase if decision-making or assignment performance involves a high level of responsibility or lack of required information, frequent or sudden changes in assignments and requirements, and in general, the information parameters of work.

Emotional stress may be experienced when the individual's inner attitude, personal values related to his/her profession, job, and position are destroyed. Emotional stress occurs upon a real or supposed (but assumed as real) threat, a sense of humiliation, guilt, anger and indignation, lack of understanding, distrust and injustice. It may occur in cases of disagreements, suspension or termination of business and/or personal relations with colleagues and in conflicts with the management body.

Communicative stress, related to the actual problems of business communications and relations finds manifestation in elevated irritability, inability (inefficiency) to protect against communicative aggression, inability to formulate a refusal when necessary, lack of knowledge of methods for protection against manipulation, lack of compliance in communication rates.

It is to be remembered that *stress consists of two components: a stress-factor or stressor* – this is what influences the individual, and a *stress-response* – a non-specific response of the body to the influencing stimulus.

The stressor's influence causes two interrelated processes in the human body: activation of standard non-specific reactions developing upon the influence of each stimulus that is unusual for the body, and mobilisation of the physiological systems providing adaptation to that factor.

The intensity of the stress-response depends on the specificities and the significance of the stressor regarding the individual, and the individual's functional state before the impact of the stressor. In fact, this explains why the same stressors have a different strength of influence on different people even if they perform the same job.

Stressors, their weight regarding various groups of employees and consequences thereof

All these reasons make us pay a serious attention not only to stress as a phenomenon, but namely to *occupational stress* and the ways to cope with its consequences. From this point of view we shall here provide an overview of the main sources of *psychological stress* in work environment⁵. A research was conducted in which owners⁶, managers and their employees in the field of small tourism business (small family hotels and guest houses) replied to the question to what extent they assumed and realised as sources of stress the different aspects of work and environment and of what weight (strong, medium or weak factor). The answers save for minor variances were identical; therefore we summarised them in the table presented below:

⁵ M. Usheva, Managerial psychology: skills, diagnostics, impacts (Blagoevgrad: "N. Rilski" Univ. Publ., 2017), 82-83.

⁶ In some cases the same person is both the owner and the manager due to the specificity of the business.

N	Stressor	Owner	Weight of stressor	
			Manager	Employee
1.	Nature and/or conditions of work	Medium	Medium	Medium
2.	Salary or extra benefits;	Strong	Strong	Strong
3.	Team and/or task force	Strong	Strong	Strong
4.	Manager's personality or style	Strong	Strong	Medium
5.	Type of organisational structure and the place of the individual within the organisational hierarchy	Strong	Strong	Weak
6.	Deficit of time	Strong	Strong	Weak
7.	Career level	Strong	Strong	Medium/ weak
8.	State of uncertainty and not knowing the circumstances, in which an individual is situated	Strong	Strong	Strong
9.	Expecting unpleasant events	Medium	Strong	Strong
10.	Every abrupt change requiring general re-adjustment of behaviour	Medium	Medium	Strong
11.	All sorts of interpersonal conflicts and abrupt changes in relationships	Medium	Medium	Strong
12.	Situations in which an individual encounters failures or disappointments in one's attempt to achieve badly desired goals	Strong	Strong	Strong
13.	Excessive physical fatigue and mental exhaustion	Strong	Strong	Strong
14.	All kinds of states of <i>deprivation</i> : from complete isolation or loneliness, which can bring to despair and intensive stress, to unsatisfied keen curiosity, boredom, uniform and monotonous work, at which stress is gradually accumulated	Medium	Medium	Medium

Table 1
Stressors and their weight in the field of small tourism business
(small family hotels and guest houses)⁷

The first stressor “nature and/or conditions of work” is deemed medium by all three groups; the main explanation is that a man at the start of a job knows in advance what to expect and is adjusting to the conditions.

The second stressor “salary and extra benefits” is as expected determined by all three groups as strong, especially when a need for decrease of salaries occurs, for example.

The third stressor “team and/or task force” is assessed as strong and of an exceptional significance by the managers, and as medium by the employees. Exceptions are formed by the cases in which the emotional background is so bad that the due to the impossible communication with the team the employee has to look for a new job. It is interesting that this actually happens even in small hotels and guest houses owned by only one family.

⁷ Source: own research

The fourth stressor “manager’s personality and style” may be very strong for the two managerial levels, and medium – for the employees. Some employees, however, specify that this is so because in a small company it is easier to make contact, and for large hotel complexes (based on the experience of their employees) the manager’s personality and style can be a weak stressor as employees have no touch to the superior managers.

The fifth stressor “type of organisational structure and the individual’s place within the organisational hierarchy” is of a strong influence on the managers, while employees identify it as weak.

The sixth stressor “deficit of time” is strong for the managers, but weak for the employees. In clarifying the answers it turned out that employees mean that they always have a way to compensate the deficit of time and according to them the managers are the ones that should take care of it. If they are in a permanent deficit of time in the performance of some job duty, this stressor may become strong, and even very strong, and to unlock other individual-personal stressors, too.

The seventh stressor “the career level” is as expected strong for the managers. Managers before launching their own business or transferring to their current job share that it is this stressor that in many cases was the factor for personal and professional development and willingness to achieve greater success. As it could be expected, this stressor is rated as weak or medium by employees, as in their words (of the bigger part of them) they feel at the right place and if they decide to pursue a career this shall bring them out of their comfort zone (i.e. probably to transfer into another, bigger organisation).

The eighth stressor “state of uncertainty and not knowing the circumstances in which an individual is situated” is rated as strong by all three groups. The difference is in the managers’ approach and in their awareness that it is within their power to make provisions for the decrease of the strength of this stressor with regard to their employees.

The ninth stressor “expecting unpleasant events” is rated as medium by the owners, explaining that they are constantly in such a situation and it could be said that they have adjusted to it to a great extent. The managers and employees, however, determine it as a strong stressor, specifying that it becomes stronger when some structural changes or laying-offs are expected (regardless if they work within a family business or for a bigger organisation).

The tenth stressor „every abrupt change requiring general re-adjustment of behaviour“ is of a medium weight for managers with the explanation that they in principle are ready for changes due to the nature of the occupation they have chosen, but it is a very strong stressing factor for employees (with the explanation that sometimes the personal and psychological specificities do not allow the performance of such an adjustment in particular for introvert persons).

The eleventh stressor „all sorts of interpersonal conflicts and abrupt changes in relationships“ is again of a medium weight for the managers, with the explanation that they are prepared to deal with such issues. For the employees, however, this stressor is strong as some employees share that for similar problems they were forced to change their job.

The twelfth stressor „situations in which an individual encounters failures or disappointments in one’s attempt to achieve badly desired goals“ is rated as strong by all

three groups and all they share that it is a stressor of a strong influence no matter if it affects personal or professional goals.

The thirteenth stressor „excessive physical fatigue and mental exhaustion“ is again rated unanimously by all three groups in research as a stressor of strong influence. People share that it is this stressor that may bring to apathy and depression, as well as to aggressive deeds.

The fourteenth stressor „all kinds of states of deprivation“ is rated as medium by all three groups, but with the explanation that this stressor covers many variants and the individual's response to each of them could not be predicted – for some states and persons the stressor could be strong, for others – not so strong.

All these, as already noted, naturally affect also people taking managerial positions, but there are stressors that are typical only for managers. A manager should be able to recognise them in his/her activities and know how to oppose adequate compensating mechanisms. The managerial factors of stress include:

- Informational load (overloading);
- Informational uncertainty;
- Managerial responsibility;
- Time deficit;
- Interpersonal conflicts;
- Intrapersonal (role-based) conflicts;
- Poly-focused managerial activity;
- Factors of outer environment.

Regardless of the group to which it belongs stress may be caused also by *physical sources*: pain, cold, high temperatures, accidents, calamities, etc.; *social*: conflicts, crises, poverty, unemployment, inflation, wars.

They in their aggregate have inevitable projections on the individual (employee) and the company taking the character of a threat⁸. All they can bring to a multitude of *adverse consequences*, the most common of which are⁹:

1. Fixation on only one alternative. Stress is an obstacle to considering several alternatives; the employee shows rigidness in behaviour and thinking. Regarding the management staff this could be expressed in an impossibility to “see” different ways and solutions and may bring to wrong managerial decisions.

2. Simplification of perception (underestimation) of the opponents and their capabilities. Stress may enhance the black-and-white apprehension of world, nuances may become invisible and inadequate response may occur. Regarding managers this may bring to lost positions in negotiating, employing ineligible people, assigning tasks to

⁸ M. Stankova, Restricting the natural and social threats in tourism (Blagoevrad: University Publishing House with “Neophyte Rilski” SWU, 2016), s. 4, 29-30.

⁹ M. Usheva, Managerial psychology: skills, diagnostics... 83-84.

employees who could not cope with them or on the opposite – assigning too simple tasks to employees with bigger capabilities and claimed levels of knowledge.

3. Fatigue. If a state of fatigue continues for too long it results in elevated irritability, paranoid reactions, increased suspiciousness, hostility and enhanced protective reactions, Both for employees and managers that may result in mistakes, failure in performance, individual-personal and professional problems.

4. Restricting the time perspective and ignoring the future consequences. Attention in conditions of stress is often focused only on the most threatening situation. At this stage no interest is devoted to future until a solution of indispensable problems is found. This way managers may lose their ability in planning and forecasting, which may result in an excessive fixation on the current problems and missing long-term benefits.

5. A drop in the sense of responsibility for the result from the decision made. The individual imputes the bad results from his/her work to the opponent's actions or to some external situation, which enables him/her not to feel guilty for the wrong decisions. Employees pass the responsibility to the superior staff, and managers – to external factors.

To that regard an inappropriate management of stress and motivation within an organisation may result in demotivation, apathy and even resistance by the part of the personnel¹⁰.

A manager can most easily identify stress by the employee's behaviour and most of all by the changes in speech. Changes in speech at stress may vary. The speech may become expressive, with more frequent use of interjections and parasite expressions like "so to speak", "you know". Frequent repetitions of words, phrases and entire sentences occur, and/or changes of phrases just spoken out. Speaking gets quicker, pauses between phrases become shorter.

Stress is accompanied by changes in mimics and pantomimics. When under stress the body becomes strained, and at the same time speech is accompanied by meaningless or spontaneous movements, intensive blinking, gestures, fiddling with keys, pens, wringing one's hands, and others. Frowned brow, louder voice, changed intensity of voice. Stress brings to the occurrence of irritability, accompanied by an increase in the number of complaints of discomfort, assessment statements, insincere smiles, as well as a decrease in the number of affirmative nods. Alertness is significantly enhanced: the individual carefully fixes his/her glance on the others looking them straight in the eyes, and non-verbally keeps a tough posture at the same time.

Coping with occupational stress

Coping with occupational stress is possible through a managerial influence or through a personal self-management and self-improvement. For their implementation it is

¹⁰ D. Yaneva, Motivational factors for the enhancement of efficiency of labour, IX Scholarly conference with international participation "Management and Sustainable Development" (University of Forestry, 2007), 428.

necessary to know the factors on which coping with stress in work environment depends, and belonging to the manager's competences. Such factors, for example, are¹¹:

- Giving the employees an opportunity to plan their work and to take decisions on the run of their work and on ways to solving problems;
- Improvement of work so that the personnel may make the best use of their competence;
- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities with regard to staff (starting with the job descriptions);
- Developed and working procedures of disciplinary measures and claims (clear identification of unacceptable behaviour);
- Cultivating culture of behaviour at which employees trust each other and recognise others' contribution;
- Providing personal support from colleagues and managers;
- Supporting and encouraging the personnel;
- Clearly specified and worked-out accessible feedback opportunity.

Stress management may use the following compensating mechanisms:

- Establishing a favourable organisational climate (incl. of emotional background);
 - Organising feedback;
 - Involving the personnel in managerial decision making;
 - Using project and team forms of work;
- Science-based organisation of work;
- Enhancing the level of managerial culture (incl. of compliance with ethical, legal, aesthetic norms);
- Psychological measures (suggestion, hypnosis, coaching);
- Using various forms of self-control;
- Social support for the personnel:
 - Training on anti-stress programmes;
 - Collective sport activities, gym programmes;
- Individual measures:
 - relaxation (auto-training and meditation);
 - modification – forming a positive emotional response and new forms of behaviour.

Difference between people regarding stress is expressed by the concept of the so-called *stress threshold*. The stress threshold is a subjective characteristic describing the threshold of individual sensitiveness and apprehension of the individual regarding stressors. It is related both to individual's mental characteristics, and to his/her experience, needs (realised or unrealised), desires and self-estimation of one's own capabilities.

To that regard it is important to build up *stress-resistance*, i.e. the skill to overcome difficulties, to master (but not suppress) emotions, to show restraint and tactfulness. Stress-resistance is determined by a combination of personal qualities which enable the individual to cope successfully with significant intellectual, volitional and emotional loads, pre-determined by the peculiarities of the occupational activities, without particularly harmful consequences for the activity, other people or one's health.

¹¹ M. Usheva, Managerial psychology: skills, diagnostics... 90-91.

Apart from all these, it should be remembered that the individual's self-esteem plays a huge role. A low self-esteem brings to distrust in one's own strengths and abilities, and respectively – to further stress and dependency on others. An insufficient self-respect frequently causes drug or alcohol abuses and others. A too high self-esteem, on its part, can also bring to stress at overrating one's abilities and capacities. People having an adequate self-esteem rarely have such problems. It can be said that *it is self-confidence and confidence in one's own decisions that underlie stress management and allow the individual to successfully control one's own life.*

Strategies for coping with stress

In general, *the strategies for coping with stress* may be provisionally divided into internal and external¹². *Internal strategies* are the ways by which the individual copes with the stressors by using only the available internal resources. Among them is the capability to define and perceive the stress event as not only a negative one, but also as a challenge. In this case there occur two types of responses – *active*: a challenge that could be overcome, and *passive*: a challenge, which if not taken, shall pass by itself. The *external strategies* usually involve the use of resources for coping with stress, which are beyond the individual, like, for example, social support (from the family or circle of friends) and professional support by specialists in psychology, psychotherapists and psychiatrists.

In addition to these, we shall review some more major strategies for coping with stress and response manners. They are:

- avoiding (inaction);
- escaping;
- re-assessing the stressor;
- distancing;
- fighting;
- adjusting.

Avoiding, as well as *escaping* include giving up situations and opportunities that would place the individual in a state of stress. This may be done by changing one's job, undertaking fewer responsibilities, changing the place and environment of living, etc.

Inaction is most often characterised by ambivalent behaviour at which the individual as if intends to do something for solving the problem or situation, but, however, he/she does not undertake anything. Typical words used in such a case are „*it may*”, „*possibly*”, as well as the simultaneous use of positive and negative assessments of the same objects, phenomena, persons. Upon such a strategy there is a big probability for the individual to end in depression. The non-verbal characteristics provide indications through closed postures (crossed arms and legs, holding hands nearer the body, etc.). Often the adequate management of stress is supported also by the *re-assessment of the stressor*. It means that upon individual's impossibility to change the situation, in which he/she is, he/she can always change his/her attitude to the situation (and this way decrease the pressures by passing from an idea of excessive value to a regular perception). This, however, depends mainly on the state of the individual's nervous system and on his/her capability to go into a state of balance.

¹² M. Usheva, Managerial psychology: skills, diagnostics... 94-95.

In addition to escaping, the stressors' intensity can be reduced through *distancing*. The individual tries to avoid everything that causes stress, and in the process of stress interaction, he/she starts more and more frequently to use gestures symbolising repulsion and words showing that there is (or should be) a distance to objects and people related to the particular situation. Denial of the situation as such is accompanied by the words „no”, „never”, as well as by increasing the number of denials. In the event an individual takes a decision for *fighting* the disturbing situation aiming at its elimination, he/she can take the way of aggressive behaviour. He/she raises his/her voice intensity and movements aimed at other people. The number of hostile statements increases. While fighting the situation the individual can make his/her position harder increasing the use in his/her speech of the words like „everybody”, „always”, „exclusively”, and using a very restricted set of words and phrases, demonstrating untypically poor vocabulary or obsessive repetition of the same thought.

And at the end, *adjustment* is a dynamic process through which a living creature or a group of creatures, regardless of the variability of conditions, maintain steady vital functions needed for the existence, development, reproduction and having offspring. It is the mechanism of adaptation created as a result from a long evolution that enables the existence of the body in the conditions of an incessantly changing environment. Adaptation, in the broadest sense of the word, means adjusting to something, incl. to stress, by decreasing the sensitivity to the stressor.

The psychological adaptation is defined as a process of creating an optimum compliance of the individual to environment at the performance of human characteristic activities. This process gives the individual the opportunity to satisfy one's current needs and achieve the significant goals related thereto, securing at the same time maximum compliance of the individual's activity and his/her behaviour to the requirements of environment. Efficiency of mental adaptation depends directly on the specificities of the individual's interaction and communication with other people. In situation of conflicts within the family or at work and difficulties in developing informal communication, the disorders of adaptation are observed more often as compared to the cases of efficient social interaction. The efficient mental adaptation is one of the pre-requisites of a successful professional activity.

Conclusion

In the process of occupational, and in particular of managerial activities, there could occur stress situations due to the dynamics of events, the need for quicker decisions making, mismatching of managers' and employees interests and needs, activity rhythm and nature. The factors contributing to the occurrence of emotional stress in such situations can be the lack of information (or availability of insufficient information), its discrepancy, excessive variety or monotony, estimating work as exceeding the individual's capabilities in terms of volume or complexity, the conflicting or unclear requirements, critical circumstances or risk in decision making. Important factors improving the mental adaptation in professional groups are social convergence, ability to build up interpersonal relations, capability of open communication.

It should be emphasised that that it is the process of adaptation, “through the active behaviour of adaptation, conditions are established for improving the quality and

increasing the profit¹³. Hans Selye proposes a very interesting hypothesis that ageing is a result of all the stress encountered by the body in the course of one's life. It corresponds to the syndrome of the "phase of exhaustion" of the total adaptation syndrome, which to some extent is an accelerated version of normal ageing. Each stress, and in particularly stress caused by fruitless efforts, leaves irreversible chemical reactions behind it. Their accumulation predetermines the signs of ageing of tissues. The damage of brain and nervous cells brings to particularly heavy consequences. However, a successful activity, whatever it is, leaves smaller consequences to the direction of ageing, so, according to Selye, an individual can live long and happily if choosing the right job and doing it successfully.

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Para Citar este Artículo:

Usheva, Mariana y Filipova, Milena. Occupational stress. Sources and ways to cope with its consequences. Rev. Incl. Vol. 5. Num. 4, Octubre-Diciembre (2018), ISSN 0719-4706, pp. 84-94.

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¹³ P. Dimitrov, Situation of tourism industry (Blagoevgrad: "N. Rilski" Univ. Publ., 2007), 61.