

Contact Safety

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Mine Safety & Training Section

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Stress and the Workplace

More so now, than perhaps any other time in human history, stress is a major factor in our daily lives. According to numerous studies, the workplace is one of the major sources of stress for American adults and it has progressively escalated over the past few decades. (Workplace Stress, 2016) In fact, a survey by the American Physiological Association (APA) in 2011 showed that over 70% of those surveyed indicated the workplace as one of their major sources of stress. This trend is likely to continue as workplaces become more advanced and more demanding. This is why it is important to recognize and understand the different types of stress that affect humans; causes of stress in the workplace; and how to prevent job related stress. Stress is the body's response to certain situations and can affect your physical health, mental health and behavior. What stresses one individual may not affect another. For example, some people find public speaking extremely stressful, while others are completely at ease in this setting. The first key to stress management is understanding the three different types of stress we can encounter.

Acute Stress – This is the most common form of stress. This comes from the body's immediate reaction to a new challenge, event or demand and is commonly referred to as "fight or flight response." It can be thrilling or exciting, such as the feeling you get from riding a roller coaster or a fast run down a

ski slope. It can also be negative, such as the response from a car accident, argument or a costly mistake at work. This type of stress typically does not last long and therefore does not have enough time to do extensive damage to the body. The most common symptoms are:

- Emotional distress – this includes anger/irritability, anxiety, and depression.
- Muscular issues – tension headache, back pain, jaw pain and muscle tension
- Digestive problems – heartburn, acid reflux, diarrhea and irritable bowel syndrome.
- Elevated blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, dizziness, headache, chest pain

Episodic Stress – This is basically an acute form of stress that occurs on a frequent basis. Individuals suffering from this type of stress live in a constant state of chaos and crisis. They have too many irons in the fire and are typically unorganized and always late with meeting deadlines. The "worry wart" is another type of individual prone to suffer from episodic stress. They see disaster around every corner and typically have a negative outlook. The most common symptoms with this type of stress includes:

- Persistent tension headaches and/or migraines
- Hypertension, chest pain and heart disease

Chronic Stress – This type of stress comes when an individual never sees a way out of a miserable situation. (Miller & Smith, 2016) This is a grinding stress that individuals find themselves in day after

day that wears the body down over time. Unfortunately, individuals typically get use to this chronic stress and fail to take any action to address it, which then results in significant health issues that include:

- Mental breakdown
- Heart attack or stroke
- Suicide
- Violence

Now that we have identified the different types of stress, let's shift to factors that cause or lead to stress in the workplace.

Environmental Factors – These factors include economic uncertainty, political uncertainty and technological uncertainty. For example, when the economy is contracting (economic uncertainty), employees tend to become anxious or worry about their job security. Economic uncertainty has plagued many workplaces over the last 8 to 10 years, with many employees losing jobs or seeing a cut in hours and wages. With the continued advancements in technology (technological uncertainty), employee's skills and experience become obsolete, requiring them to learn how to use more advanced equipment, thus increasing their level of stress.

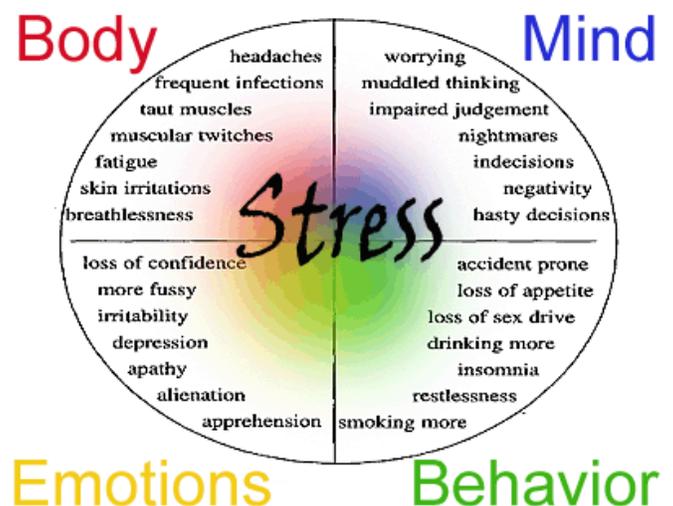
Organizational Factors – these are factors that occur in the workplace and can lead to stress. Some organizational factors include:

- Tasks/workload demands – job design, working conditions and workload requirements.
- Role demands – this include job assignments above an individual's ability or roles where expectations are not clearly understood.
- Interpersonal demands – the ability or inability to get along with fellow employees.
- Organizational structure – is the organization tightly controlled, micromanaged or inclusive.
- Organizational Leadership – management style of senior executives or administrators.

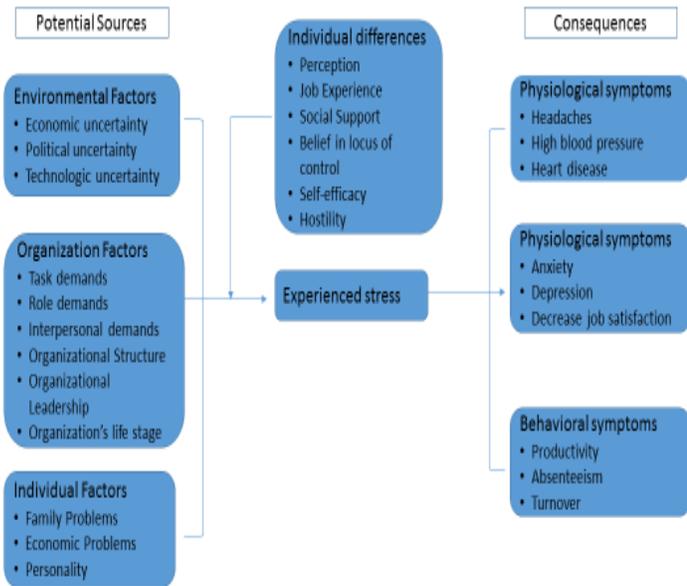
Leadership styles that create tension, fear and anxiety will increase employee stress.

Individual factors – While many employees work between 40 and 50 hours each week, the problems and experience they encounter the other 120 hours each week can spill over into the workplace. These factors include:

- Economic Problems
- Family Problems
- Personality Issues



The chart below depicts a model of stress and shows the potential sources/factors and consequences if not handled both timely and appropriately.



Source: Organizational Behavior (S. Robbins)

So you might be thinking, why should I as the operator or safety professional be concerned about stress and my employees? As noted in the chart above, stress can have a negative impact on the job. It can lead to lost productivity, increased absenteeism, and high employee turnover.

According to the American Institute of Stress, it is estimated that workplaces in America spend more than \$300 billion a year due to stress related issues. In addition, an employee that is under an extreme amount of stress is an employee that is not focused on the job at hand and therefore, more prone to unsafe acts, and likely to have more work related injuries/illnesses. What can employees and employers do to mitigate the impacts associated with stress?

Managing stress in the workplace is essentially a collaborative approach between the employee and employer. There are approaches each side can take to help manage/reduce workplace stress.

For the employee, there are many ways to help cope with and reduce stress and what is listed below is only a small sample of what you can do to reduce your level of stress.

- Maintain/initiate positive relationships
- Exercise regularly
- Maintain a healthy diet
- Get plenty of rest daily
- Learn to organize and prioritize your workload
- Eliminate bad habits (perfectionism, negative thinking, control freak)
- Seek help from medical professionals to help with coping skills

Managers and employers can help reduce workplace stress by instituting a number of organizational changes. These include:

- Improve communication – listen to your employees and address concerns they may have with things like recent changes to the company or job role.
- Personnel selection and job placement – the right person for the right job.
- Establish realistic company goals
- Create a company wellness program
- Establish a friendly social environment

Remember, stress is the body's response to certain situations. This response can have a positive or negative affect on an individual. As individuals, we are exposed to stress from time to time, and it is important for us to recognize it and manage it before it reaches unhealthy levels that impact our private as well as professional lives. As employers and safety professionals, it is important to understand and recognize stress and its impact on employees. Finally, employers should recognize that increased employee stress can lead to increased operating costs as well as increased accident rates. By recognizing this and implementing some of the organizational changes identified above, employers can do their part to reduce workplace stress.

References

Miller, L. H., & Smith, A. D. (2016, July 14). *American Psychological Association*. Retrieved from American Psychological Association Web Site: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-kinds.aspx>

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Segal, J., Smith, M., Robinson, L., & Segal, R. (2016, June). *Help Guide Organization*. Retrieved July 15, 2015

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QUIZ

1) _____ is the most common type of stress.

2) Never seeing a way out of a miserable situation is what kind of stress?

3) Name 3 organizational factors

_____, _____,
_____.

4) Name 2 ways to help cope with stress.

_____, _____

5) Increased employee stress can lead to _____ and _____

If there is any specific topics you would like to learn more about please write on line below.

Employee: _____ Date: _____

Mine/Company: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____