CHAPTER 7

Managing Workplace Stress

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides information on stress and factors affecting this concept in the work environment. Much of this stress is individualized or is caused by the organization environment. Research has clearly shown that workplace stress spills over into one’s personal, family, and community life. Work stressors are identified as those actions, situations, or events that place special demands on a person.

A model of organizational stress is presented, followed by detailed descriptions of individual, group, and organizational work stressors. The section on stress outcomes establishes that some effects of stress are positive such as self-motivation and stimulation to satisfy individual goals and objectives. However, some stress consequences are disruptive, counterproductive and even potentially dangerous. This information is followed up by an exploration of the organizational consequences of stress, such as loss of money and employee dissatisfaction.

The chapter then identifies stress moderators. A moderator is a condition behavior, or characteristic that influences the relationship between two variables. Focus is on personality, behavior patterns, and social support. Personality refers to a relatively stable set of characteristics, temperaments, and tendencies that shape the similarities and differences in people’s behavior. Behavior patterns are either Type A or Type B. The person with TABP has these characteristics:

* Chronically struggles to get as many things done as possible in the shortest time period
* Is aggressive, ambitious, competitive, and forceful
* Speaks explosively, rushes others to finish what they are saying
* Is impatient, hates to wait, considers waiting a waste of precious time
* Is preoccupied with deadlines and is work-oriented
* Is always in a struggle with people, things and events

The converse, the Type B individual, mainly is free of the TABP characteristics and generally feels no pressing conflict with either time or persons. The Type B may have considerable drive, wants to accomplish things, and works hard, but has a confident style that allows him or her to work at a steady pace and not race against the clock. Social support can be defined as the comfort, assistance, or information one receives through formal or informal contacts with individuals or groups. Social support may take the form of emotional support, appraisal support, or informational support.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of organizational stress prevention and management programs. An increasing number of organizations have developed very specific stress prevention and/or management programs, such as employee assistance programs and wellness programs. Although there is no one best strategy for managing stress and preventing burnout, there are specific, proactive steps organizations can take.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the chapter, students should be able to:

1. **Describe** the components of an organizational stress model.

2. **Distinguish** among four different categories of stressors.

3. **Explain** the effects of stress on health.

4. **Identify** the relationship between stress and social support.

5. **Describe** the objectives of individual and organizational wellness approaches for the   
reduction and prevention of stress.

Lecture Outline

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|  | This chapter focuses on the workplace and the stress created in this setting. Much of the stress experienced by people in our industrialized society originates in organizations; much of the stress that originates elsewhere affects our behavior and performance in these same organizations. Thus, work/life balance issues will be reviewed. Research has clearly shown that workplace stress spills over into one’s personal, family, and community life. |

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|  | Stress means different things to different people. From a layperson’s perspective, **stress** can be described as feeling tense, anxious, or worried. Scientifically, these feelings are all manifestations of the stress experience, a complex programmed response to perceived threat that can have both positive and negative results. The term *stress* itself has been defined in literally hundreds of ways in the literature. Virtually all of the definitions can be placed into one of two categories, however; stress can be defined as either a *stimulus* or a *response.* A stimulus definition treats stress as some characteristic or event that may result in a disruptive consequence. It is in that respect an engineering definition of stress borrowed from the physical sciences. In physics, stress refers to the external force applied to an object, for example, a bridge girder. The response is strain, which is the impact the force has on the girder.  In a response definition, stress is seen partially as a response to some stimulus called a **stressor**. A stressor is a potentially harmful or threatening external event or situation. Stress is more than simply a response to a stressor, however. In a response definition, stress is the consequence of the interaction between an environmental stimulus (a stressor) and the individual’s response. That is, stress is the result of a unique interaction between stimulus conditions in the environment and the individual’s predisposition to respond in a particular way. Using a response definition, we will define *stress* as:  An adaptive response, mediated by individual differences, that is a consequence of any action, situation, or event that places special demands on a person. |
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|  | For an action, situation, or event to result in stress, it must be perceived by the individual to be a source of threat, challenge, or harm. If there are no perceived consequences— good or bad—there is no potential for stress. Three key factors determine whether an experience is likely to result in stress. These factors are importance, uncertainty, and duration. *Importance* relates to how significant the event is to the individual. *Uncertainty* refers to a lack of clarity about what will happen. Finally, *duration* is a significant factor. Generally speaking, the longer special demands are placed on us, the more stressful the situation. |
|  | Role conflict is perhaps the most widely examined individual stressor. **Role conflict** is present whenever compliance by an individual with one set of expectations about the job is in conflict with compliance with another set of expectations. Virtually everyone has experienced work overload at one time or another, and the incident rate is increasing.Overload may be of two types: qualitative and quantitative. **Qualitative overload** occurs when people feel they lack the ability needed to complete their jobs or that performance standards have been set too high. **Quantitative overload**, on the other hand, results from having too many things to do or insufficient time to complete a job. |
|  | The underload–overload continuum is presented in Figure 7.2. The optimal stress level provides the best balance of challenge, responsibility, and reward. The potential negative effects of overload can be increased when overload is coupled with low ability to control the work demand. |
|  | Suzanne Kobasa, proposes that individuals who experience high rates of change without consequently suffering health problems might differ in terms of personality from those who do. She refers to the personality characteristic as *hardiness*.People with the hardiness personality trait seem to possess three important characteristics. First, they believe that they can control the events they encounter. Second, they are extremely committed to the activities in their lives. Third, they treat change in their lives as a challenge. |

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|  | The list of potential group and organizational stressors is a long one. They include group norms, leadership, and the status hierarchy. Each of these can be a stressor for some group members. One problem in discussing group and organizational stressors is identifying which are the most important ones. |
|  | The model in Figure 7.1 is designed to help illustrate the link among organizational stressors, stress, and outcomes. Recall from the definition that stress is a response to an action, situation, or event that places special demands on an individual. These occurrences are represented in Figure 7.1 as *stressors.* We have divided these stressors into four main categories: individual, group, organizational and extraorganizational. The first three stressor categories are work related. |
|  | Nonwork stressors are those caused by factors outside the organization. Although the emphasis in the chapter is on work, nonwork stressors should not be ignored. Raising children, caring for elders, volunteering in the community, taking college courses, and balancing family and work life are stressful situations for numerous people. The stress produced outside work is likely to affect a person’s work performance and work behavior in general. The distinction between work and nonwork is blurred, overlaps, and is significant in any discussion or analysis of stress. |

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|  | Not all individuals will experience the same outcomes. Research suggests, for example, that one of many factors influencing stress outcomes is type of employment. In one study, conducted at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, a sample of 2,010 employees was chosen for 23 occupations to examine the relationship between stress and consequences. The occupations were combined into four specific groups: skilled and unskilled blue-collar workers and professional and nonprofessional white-collar workers.  Blue-collar workers reported the highest subjective effects, including job dissatisfaction; white-collar workers, the lowest. The unskilled workers reported the most boredom and apathy with their job conditions. They specifically identified a number of major stressors that created their psychological state: underutilization of skills and abilities, poor fit of the job with respect to desired amounts of responsibility, lack of participation, and ambiguity about the future. Skilled blue-collar workers share some of these stressors and consequences with their unskilled counterparts, but not all; they reported above-average utilization of their skills and abilities but had less responsibility and more ambiguity. White-collar professionals reported the fewest negative consequences. In all groups, however, there were indications that job performance was affected.  In examining stress outcomes, the distinction in our model between organizational and individual outcomes is somewhat arbitrary. For example, a decline in job performance due to stress is clearly an individual outcome. It is the individual’s performance that is being affected. Just as clearly, however, the organization experiences important consequences from employees’ stress-related performance decrements. |
|  | Stress can produce a variety of *psychological consequences,* including anxiety, frustration, apathy, lowered self-esteem, aggression, and depression.  Some outcomes of stress may be cognitive. Cognitive outcomes include poor concentration, inability to make sound decisions or any decisions at all, mental blocks, and decreased attention spans. Other effects may be behavioral. Such manifestations as being prone to accidents, impulsive behavior, alcohol and drug abuse, and explosive temper are examples. Finally, *physiological outcomes* could include increased heart rate, elevated blood pressure, sweating, hot and cold flashes, increased blood glucose levels, and elevated stomach acid production. |

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|  | Burnout is a psychological process, brought about by unrelieved work stress, that results in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of decreased accomplishment. |
|  | Table 7.1 displays some of the indicators of these three burnout outcomes. Burnout tends to be a particular problem among people whose jobs require extensive contact with and/or responsibility for other people. |
|  | As illustrated in Figure 7.1, a number of the behavioral, cognitive, and physiological outcomes that are linked also have organizational consequences. While the organizational consequences of stress are many and varied, they share one common feature: stress costs organizations money. Although precise figures are lacking, based on a variety of estimates and projections from government, industry, and health groups, we place the costs of stress at approximately $150 billion annually. |

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|  | Many conditions, behaviors, and characteristics may act as stress moderators, including such variables as age, gender, and the hardiness factor discussed earlier in the chapter. In this section, we will briefly examine three representative types of moderators: (1) personality, (2) Type A behavior, and (3) social support.  The term *personality* refers to a relatively stable set of characteristics, temperaments, and tendencies that shape the similarities and differences in people’s behavior. The number of aspects of personality that could serve as stress moderators is quite large. We will confine our attention to those aspects of personality p identified in the Big Five model, locus of control, and self-efficacy.  The Big Five model of personality is made up of five dimensions: extroversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Of these, *emotional stability* is most clearly related to stress. |
|  | Beliefs people have about where control over their lives resides relates to *locus of control*. “Internals” perceive themselves to be in control of the events that shape their lives to a greater extent than “externals,” who feel that control is external to them. The traditional assumption is that if people feel they have control in a situation, they will be less likely to assess the situation as threatening or stressful.  While this assumption may be valid in a general sense, the relationship between locus of control and stress is not always that straightforward. A more inclusive depiction suggests that internals are more likely to experience stress when they are unable to exercise the control they believe they should, while externals will be threatened (and, consequently, stressed) in situations where they can exercise some degree of control over what is happening. Viewed from this perspective, the locus of control–stress relationship is a function of personal beliefs and environmental realities. When a person’s beliefs about where control resides are congruent with the actual locus of control in a given situation, there is less likelihood stress will result. When beliefs and reality are not the same, the likelihood of experiencing stress increases.  *Self-efficacy* is another personality attribute that is an important moderator variable. Individuals with high levels of self-efficacy feel confident in their abilities and in their job performance. They are more likely to perceive potential stressors as challenges and opportunities, rather than threats and problems. Those with low levels of self-efficacy, on the other hand, are less confident in their abilities and more likely to assume they will fail. Because they believe they will fail, they will likely exert less effort, thereby ensuring that their assessment of their abilities is correct! Even when a situation is perceived as threatening, those with high self-efficacy are more likely to deal with the threat quickly, effectively, and with fewer negative outcomes. |

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|  | In the 1950s, two medical cardiologists and researchers, Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, discovered what they called the Type A behavior pattern (TABP). |
|  | Both the quantity and quality of social relationships individuals have with others appear to have a potentially important effect on the amount of stress they experience and on the likelihood that stress will have adverse effects on their mental and physical health. Social support can be defined as the comfort, assistance, or information one receives through formal or informal contacts with individuals or groups. A number of studies have linked social support with aspects of health, illness, and stress. |
|  | Figure 7.3 presents how organizational stress management programs can be targeted. Programs are targeted to (1) identify and modify work stressors, (2) engage employees in understanding and modifying stress and its effect, and (3) provide employees with support to cope with the negative effect of stress. |
|  | In a rapidly changing work environment, this type of targeting is difficult to accomplish. However, a trained, educated, and knowledgeable workforce can make modifications with the help of management in how work is performed. Some of the targeted, corrective programs include the following:   * Training programs for managing and coping with stress. * Redesigning work to minimize stressors. * Changes in management style to one of more support and coaching to help workers achieve their goals. * Creating more flexible work hours and paying more attention to work/life balance with regard to child and elder care. * Better communication and team-building practices.   Better feedback on worker performance and management expectations. |

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|  | A **person–environment (P–E) fit** approach generally focuses on two dimensions of fit.  One is the extent to which work provides formal and informal rewards to meet or match (fit) the person’s needs. Misfit on this dimension results in stress. For example, a job may provide too little job security, insufficient compensation and reward for the effort expended, or inadequate recognition to meet the individual’s needs or preferences. The second type of fit deals with the extent to which the employee’s skills, abilities, and experience match the demands and requirements of the employer. To the extent that the individual’s talents are insufficient for or underutilized by job requirements, stress results. By improving the quality of, or maximizing, the fit between the employee and the organizational environment, potential stressors are eliminated and stress is prevented. This P–E fit approach is somewhat similar to—and very consistent with—the concept of the psychological contract. Violations of the psychological contract represent breakdowns in P–E fit. |
|  | Once in the organization, a critical variable in maximizing fit and preventing stress is effective socialization. **Socialization** is the process by which the individual learns and internalizes the values, expected behaviors, and social knowledge that are important for becoming an effective organizational member. |
|  | Originally conceived as alcohol abuse programs, most current employee assistance programs (EAPs) are designed to deal with a wide range of stress-related problems, both work and nonwork related, including behavioral and emotional difficulties, substance abuse, family and marital discord, and other personal problems. |

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|  | **Wellness programs**, sometimes called health promotion programs, focus on the employee’s overall physical and mental health. Simply stated, any activity an organization engages in that is designed to identify and assist in preventing or correcting specific health problems, health hazards, or negative health habits can be thought of as wellness related. This includes not only disease identification but lifestyle modification as well. Among the most prevalent examples of such programs are those emphasizing hypertension identification and control, smoking cessation, physical fitness and exercise, nutrition and diet control, and job and personal stress management. |
|  | There is no perfect or “one best” approach to managing stress and burnout. However, there is a general step-by-step approach that appears to be worth consideration.  Briefly it is recommended that:  1. The health and well-being of employees be a part of the organization’s mission and strategic plans.  2. A written policy statement about health, the promotion of health, and the importance of well-being be produced.  3. A wellness plan be developed that has executive commitment, union commitment, and employee commitment. Improving the wellness of employees should be a goal.  4. The “improving wellness” goal be used as a vehicle for executives, union representatives, and employees to create specific and actionable plans.  5. Organizational resources (e.g., funds, space, time) be committed to accomplish the wellness plan.  Continued on next slide. |
|  | Continued from previous slide.  6. A best-practice case file be created to circulate around the organization. Report successes and celebrate them publicly.  7. Managers be encouraged and rewarded for their involvement in wellness programs, successes, and working to bring about better work/life balance.  These are general steps that will call attention to and encourage wellness. The effort should start at the managerial level. |

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|  | Organization members do not have to—nor should they—rely on formal organizational programs to assist in stress prevention and management. There are many individual approaches to dealing with stressors and stress.  The basic rationale for some individual approaches to stress management, known collectively as *cognitive techniques,* is that a person’s response to stressors is mediated by cognitive processes or thoughts.  The purpose of relaxation training is to reduce a person’s arousal level and bring about a calmer state, both psychologically and physiologically.  Many of the meditative forms that have achieved some degree of popularity in this country are derivatives of Eastern philosophies. Included in this category are Zen meditation and Nam Sumran, or Sikh meditation. Perhaps the most widely practiced in the United States is transcendental meditation, or TM.  Individuals can be taught to control a variety of internal body processes by using a technique called *biofeedback*. In biofeedback, small changes occurring in the body or brain are detected, amplified, and displayed to the person. |
|  | Review objectives. |

Below find some applied questions/answers to reinforce your learning when you study the content and before doing your assignments.

1. Why should managers not counsel or provide advice to any employee suspected of being depressed?

Managers are not trained to counsel individual employees. The rationale is there can be severe cases of stress, which lead to burnout and can lead to a chronic problem of a physical or mental nature.

An astute manager never ignores a turnover or absenteeism problem, workplace drug abuse, a decline in performance, hostile and belligerent employees, reduced quality of production, or any other sign that the organization’s performance goals are not being met. The effective manager, in fact, views these occurrences as symptoms and looks beyond them to identify and correct the underlying causes. Yet most managers likely will search for traditional causes such as poor training, defective equipment, or inadequate instructions regarding what needs to be done. In all likelihood, stress will not be on the list of possible problems. Thus, the very first step in any

attempt to deal with stress so that it remains within tolerable limits is recognition that it exists. Once that is accomplished, a variety of approaches and programs for preventing and managing organizational stress are available.

1. What kinds of things can a manager do to better maximize employee-environment fit?

A person-environment fit approach generally focuses on two dimensions of fit. One is the extent to which work provides formal and informal rewards that meet or match (fit) the person’s needs. Misfit on this dimension results in stress. For example, a job may provide too little job security, insufficient compensation and reward for the effort expended, or inadequate recognition to meet the individual’s needs or preferences. The second type of fit deals with the extent to which the employee’s skills, abilities, and experience match the demands and requirements of the employer. By improving the quality of, or maximizing, the fit between the employee and the organizational environment, potential stressors are eliminated and improving the quality of, or maximizing, the fit between the employee and the organizational environment prevents stress. There are numerous strategies for maximizing P-E fit. Ideally, the process begins before an individual even joins the organization. Employee recruitment programs which provide realistic job previews help potential employees determine whether the reality of the job matches their needs and expectations. Selection programs that are effective in ensuring that potential employees possess the requisite skills, knowledge, experience, and abilities for the job are key elements in maximizing fit.

1. What is the relationship between stress and personality? What aspects of personality might tend to increase stress? Decrease it?

The relationship of stress is directly correlated to the personality of the individual. An individual’s ability to deal with stress will depend upon the personality or the behavior of the individual. Some factors affect the nature of the stress response. These are called stress moderators. Three important moderators are personality (e.g., locus of control and self-esteem), Type A behavior, and social support. Personality refers to a relatively stable set of characteristics, temperaments, and tendencies that shape the similarities and differences in people’s behavior. The Big Five Model of personality is made up of five dimensions: extroversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Of these, emotional stability is most clearly related to stress.