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Enhancing workers' performance under stress: Implication for stress inoculation therapy

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Abstract

This review presents evidence for the effectiveness of Stress Inoculation Therapy (SIT) in reducing work-related stress in workplace. Stress is what we feel when we have to respond to a demand on our energy. Stress is a natural part of life, and occurs whenever there are significant changes in our lives, whether positive or negative. An increasing number of employers are becoming aware of the adverse effects that stress can have on an employee's performance and are offering different programs to help employees manage their lives. Stress management will reduce effects of stress on employees and thereby lead to increase in productivity and eventually high turnover for the organization. SIT has proved to increase workplace performance, as well as improve employee loyalty and retention in the long run. It is concluded that employers and employees should explore the knowledge of SIT to reduce and/or prevent stress in work environment.

Keywords: Stress, Workers' Performance, Stress Inoculation Therapy

1. Introduction

Stress has been defined as a physiologic reaction to uncomfortable or unaccustomed physical or psychological stimuli. The biological variations that can result from stress of the sympathetic nervous system include a heightened state of alertness, anxiety, rapid heart rate and sweating. The main causes of stress include an intense work environment, emotional burdens, a lack of organizational support and dysfunctional relationships with co-workers (Michine & Williams, 2003). Many students have indicated that work related stress is associated with physical and mental health problems including hypertension, ischemic heart disease, peptic ulcer, asthma and depression Smith, Segal & Segal, 2012). It has been estimated that 30% of all work-related disorders are linked to stress (Mino, Babazono, Tsuad & Yasuda, 2006).

Occupational stress and work-related mental health problems have a number of major socio-economic consequences such as absenteeism, labour turnover, loss of productivity and disability pension cost (Czabala, Charzynska & Mrozial, 2011). Personal costs include lower self-esteem, somatic conditions (e.g., heart disease) and negative impact on family life. Therefore, workplace is considered to be one of the most important settings for mental health promotion.

Workplace stress is to be expected because stress itself is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, Hicks and Caroline (2007) point out that stress is a human response to various aspects in his/her environment that comes naturally. They further imply that stress can sometimes act as a motivator. However, high stress levels have the capacity to interfere with an individual's productivity. Besides, it can have a great impact on their physical and emotional health (Hicks & Caroline, 2007). Excessive stress is also costly. This is owing to the fact that stress leads to low productivity, encourages absenteeism, and leads to high turnover, disability pay-outs and an increased worker compensation scheme. Moreover, stress can make a worker become resentful toward his/her employer apart from distracting employee engagement (Cooper & Payne, 2008). Therefore, it is important for employees to identify any signs of stress among their colleagues and themselves early enough to prevent impacts on the organization's performance levels (Hicks & Caroline, 2007). This will help individuals recognize the underlying problem and seek measures to cope with it. Ultimately, it will reduce the impact of stress on organizational performance and productivity.

Stress management is any attempt to reduce the negative effects of stress. Management techniques can be divided into those which are broadly biological in nature and those which are broadly psychological in nature. Psychological methods of stress management try to control the body's response to stress by altering the way we think about the stressor. One of these methods is Stress Inoculation Training (STI). This paper seeks to identify the sources and types of stress

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in the workplace and how the signs and symptoms of stress can be recognized by individuals both in themselves and others. Furthermore, the paper will discuss ways through which a stressed team member can be approached to help them realize that their stress is negatively impacting their work and the work environment. Finally, the paper will broadly discuss coping mechanisms that can assist individuals deal with stress and thereby enhance productivity.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Stress in the Workplace

Stress is defined by Selye as the “physiological response of an organism to any demand for change (Selye, 2011) and the consequence of the interaction between a stimulus and response (Yang, Koh, Ng, Lee, Chan, Dong, Goh, Anantharaman, & Chia, 2002). Selye’s theory of stress and illness also differentiates between “eustress” and “distress”. Eustress is a positive response to the environment and facilitates growth; however distress is a negative response that leads to physical and psychological maladaptation.

Stress has been linked to impaired performance in both public and private organizational settings. The adverse effects of stress on performance have been attributed to altered cognitive processes (e.g., attention, memory, and decision making) (Young, 2008). Several other types of stressors have also been shown to negatively affect performance, including noise, thermal stress (e.g., heat and cold), and fatigue (Staal, 2004).

Stress in the workplace is a growing concern in the current state of economy, where employees increasingly face conditions of overwork, job security, low levels of job satisfaction, and lack of autonomy. Workplace stress has been shown to have a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of employees, as well as a negative impact on workplace productivity and profits. There are measures that individuals and organizations can take to alleviate the negative impact of stress, or to stop it from arising in the first place. However, employees first need to learn to recognize the signs that indicate they are feeling stressed out, and employees need to be aware of the effects that stress has on their employees’ health as well as on establishment profits.

The phenomenon of stress has become very common in the modern complex world. In the fast changing world of rapid technological advancement, more and more people are becoming victims of stress and this is true of people in all organization and at all levels. A study conducted by W.H.O in 2001 reveals that every fourth person in the world is suffering from high level of stress, and by 2020, depression will be the world’s second largest cause of urban disease after heart ailments (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2001). The role of stress in everyday life therefore needs hardly to be over emphasized. Stress as well as its prevention and management has now become an integral and essential part of the modern life.

Stress affects ability to remember things already known, to process new information and to apply both to analytical situations and physical tasks that require concentration. When individuals are mentally exhausted from all of the worries, anxieties and tension brought on by a stressful environment or lifestyle, they are more easily distracted and prone to make costly, harmful or even fatal mistakes on the job.

2.2. Concept of stress

Stress has been linked to impaired performance in workplace settings (Driskell, Salas, and Johnston, 1999; Johnston and Cannon-Bowers, 1996; Orasanu and Backer, 1996). The

adverse effects of stress on performance have been attributed to altered cognitive processes (e.g., attention, memory, and decision making) (Young, 2008). For example, military personnel experiencing high task loads and time pressures lose a sense of team perspective through narrowed attention, resulting in decreased performance (Driskell, Salas, and Johnston, 1999). Several other types of stressors have also been shown to negatively affect performance, including noise, thermal stress (e.g., heat and cold), and fatigue (Staal, 2004).

A variety of concepts and models have been developed to describe and predict how people respond to stress. In general, modern theories of stress emphasize at least two core components influencing how people respond to stress: (1) an appraisal process and (2) self-regulatory systems (Hancock and Szalma, 2008). The appraisal process, emphasized heavily by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), involves an individual’s evaluations of potentially stressful situations to determine if he has the ability and resources necessary to effectively cope with the situation. That is, the individual engages in primary appraisal to determine if a threat is present, followed by a secondary appraisal to determine options for coping with the threat (Adler *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, the situation is not inherently stressful but rather it is the person’s interpretation of his inability or lack of options to effectively handle the situation that results in stress. In addition to these appraisals, modern stress theories also emphasize the mechanisms individuals use to control their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors as they encounter potentially threatening situations. These self-regulatory systems are important, in part, for controlling efforts directed toward goal attainment in difficult conditions (Hockey, 1997). Taken together, these processes help explain why some individuals continue to perform well under stress, whereas others make critical errors or even fail to perform. To combat the negative consequences of stress, organizations can provide three general types of interventions: primary, secondary, and tertiary (Lamontagne *et al.*, 2007).

Primary interventions aim to reduce exposure to stress by modifying the work environment or removing the stressor. Although this type of stress intervention may be useful in noncombat environments, environments to which participants are deployed are often unpredictable and difficult to control. Secondary interventions involve training to provide education and skill development to improve participants’ knowledge, skills, and ability to deal with stressful situations. Finally, tertiary interventions focus on the provision of care and support to those experiencing symptoms from exposure to stress. Ideally, the Air Force would reduce the number of those needing support from tertiary interventions by providing effective primary and secondary interventions. In situations where primary interventions may be difficult to design for airmen deployed to combat environments, emphasis should be placed on secondary interventions that promote the development of cognitive and behavioral skills to manage such environments.

Of the specific secondary interventions, SIT has been proposed as an effective strategy for mitigating the adverse effects of stress. With roots in clinical psychology, SIT attempts to build resistance to stress through cognitive and behavioral skill training and exposure to stressful stimuli. In many ways, stress inoculation is analogous to “medical inoculation against biological diseases” (Meichenbaum, 1985, p. 21), in that individuals are exposed to just enough stress to arouse defenses (e.g., coping skills); however, exposure must not be so great that it overwhelms the individual. Through appropriate exposure to stressors and training on ways to deal

with stress, individuals will develop the confidence necessary to handle even greater levels of stress in the future.

The following seven objectives provide the foundation for SIT (Meichenbaum, 1985, p. 22).

1. Teach clients the transactional nature of stress and coping.
2. Train clients to self-monitor maladaptive thoughts, images, feelings, and behaviors in order to facilitate adaptive appraisals.
3. Train clients in problem solving, that is, problem definition, consequence, anticipation, decision making, and feedback evaluation.
4. Model and rehearse direct-action, emotion-regulation, and self-control coping skills.
5. Teach clients how to use maladaptive responses as cues to implement their coping repertoires.
6. Offer practice in in vitro imaginal and in behavioral rehearsal and in vivo graded assignments that become increasingly demanding, to nurture clients' confidence in and utilization of their coping repertoires.
7. Help clients acquire sufficient knowledge, self-understanding, and coping skills to facilitate better ways of handling unexpected stressful situations.

2.3. Theoretical Explanation of Workplace Stress

Much research attention has been focused on the issue of workplace stress, so much so that theories have emerged to explain the relationship that exists between stress and the work environment. The three most influential and prevalent theories of occupational stress include the person-environment (PE) fit theory, the framework of occupational stress, and the demand control support model (Vandenberg, Park, DeJoy, Wilson, & Griffen Blake, 2002).

The basic premise of the person-environment (PE) fit theory is that stress arises from a misfit between person and environment not from the two components separately, but as the factors of each relate to one another. When individuals perceive that their work environments are not good, or do not fit well with the needs, wants, and desires that they personally would like fulfilled from work, the discrepancies create diverse strains, which are then hypothesized to affect workers health and wellbeing. Environmental demands here include job requirements, role expectations, and group and organizational norms. Countering these demands are the individuals abilities represented through aptitudes, skill training, time and energy the person uses to meet the demands. The idea is that the larger the discrepancy between person and environment, the greater the likelihood that strain, and a need for coping, will arise.

The framework of occupational stress is based around the same foundation as the PE fit theory. They share two basic premises, first, that stress arises from the misfit between person and environment, and second, that subjective perceptions of work environments primarily determine strains. The difference between the two viewpoints is the frameworks core definition. It states that occupational stress is a total process including the environmental sources of stress and the individual s perception of them, short-term and long term physiological, psychological and behavioural responses, as well as a number of modifying factors that influence the relationships among variables in the stress process (such as social support, and the quality of interpersonal relationships within the work environment).

Perceived stress and the resulting strains are explained as a snowball effect, a reciprocal association where the negative

feelings regarding work increase strains, which in turn contribute even more to the negative feelings. The end result is that the accumulation of physiological, psychological and behavioural strains will eventually result in long term outcomes such as acute depression, alcoholism, unemployment, physiological problems (e.g., cardiovascular problems) and other costly results.

Finally, the demand control support model emphasizes the role of work content as the major source of workplace stress. Work content here is divided into two components: worker perceptions regarding the tasks that need to be completed in performing the job (job demands), and worker perceptions about the degree of control or discretion they have in performing the job tasks (job control). These two constructs are thought to interact with one another in affecting the amount of strain experienced by employees. The strongest levels of strain, and hence, the greatest levels of occupational stress were expected to occur in situations where there were extremely high demands, and very low control.

2.4. Recognizing Signs and Symptoms

It is imperative that stress in individuals be identified as early as possible in order to devise the best possible remedy to the situation (Weiss, 2012). There are various signs and symptoms that can indicate if an individual is stressed. But, to raise the likelihood of making an accurate assessment, it is preferable to establish a candid baseline under "normal" conditions to account for the character traits of each individual. Once you have established a baseline, you can use the indicators provided below to recognize stressed individuals and devise the most appropriate means of intervention:

a. External Signs and Symptoms: Loss of interest in work is the first sign that can be used to tell that an employee is too stressed (Weiss, 2012). Such workers feel indifferent and bored at the workplace. Another symptom is when workers become too anxious, depressed and irritable. This leads to a situation where the workers become short-tempered and moody. They look worried, unhappy, miserable and sad away from the normality. Another sign is social withdrawal and trouble concentrating. Employees who at some point suddenly avoid the company of their colleagues are usually experiencing too much stress. Finally, they will lose concentration and become inattentive.

b. Self-assessment: In order to determine if you are under excessive stress, you must be able to conduct a frank introspection. First and foremost, you may feel increased or unusual fatigue (Weiss, 2012). You may feel weary, exhausted, drained and tired. You may have trouble sleeping and exhibit other physical symptoms such as stomach upsets or even panic attacks. Unexplained muscle tensions and headache are also signs of too much stress in oneself (Long, 2006). Impatience, irritability, and nervousness are all common symptoms. Finally, intense desires to withdraw from friends and co-workers as well as feeling depressed and anxious about nothing are serious indicators of stress requiring immediate attention.

c. Intervention: There are various ways through which an individual can be approached and informed on how their stress is impacting their work and their working environment. Predominantly, select the right time depending on the workers state of well-being. This will help ensure it does not make

them feel like they are being subjected to intimidation and humiliation, thus reduce the risks of increased situational stress brought about by your intervention. Then, arrange for a discreet meeting with the individual in a private setting. A discussion of the problems could be initiated with the stressed individual by giving insight on how you have been personally affected. Make the worker understand how being stressed is costing him/her. Discuss the psychological and physical health hazards that might impact them and eventually compromise their ability and capacity to perform at the workplace. Then, help them identify the sources and types of stress they are suffering from. Alternatively, offer advice to reduce sources of stress outside of your sphere of influence. Finally, equip the individual to cope with the residual stress. It is important to let them understand that given their status (boss, subordinate or worker), their stress reactions negatively affects the workplace. This is not the end. Follow-up is absolutely essential to ensure that the individual is overcoming his/her stress. In the unfortunate cases where stress levels fail to recede, you will need to consider referring the individual to health professionals.

2.5. Coping Mechanisms

Aldana (1996) establishes a direct relationship between personal habits and perceived stress. In short, it states that healthy habits including regular exercise, healthy nutrition, and regular sleep directly impact an individual's perception and resistance to stress. Moreover, avoiding unhealthy lifestyle choices such as alcohol/drug abuse, gambling, and abusive relationships will further strengthen one's ability to deal with stress. Therefore, the easiest way to deal with all types of stress is to adopt healthy habits. Once an individual is adequately equipped to deal with stress in general, it is easier to deal with specific workplace stressors. Viet, (2011) offers four different mechanisms through which individuals can cope with workplace stress:

a. Behavioral coping: This refers to the physical activities that an individual involves in and helps cope with stress. These actions are meant to address any demands that the individual is subjected to. For instance, where one has a lot of work and the deadline is approaching, they may decide to reprioritize their efforts and/or seek additional help (Viet, 2011). This is especially effective against time stress.

b. Cognitive coping: This is where the thoughts and perspective of individuals are used to cope with stress. Here, individuals will apply a mental filter to focus on the positive side of something rather than the negative side (Krohne, 1993). In essence, they do away with the negative thoughts. Positive encouragement and self-talk are effective approaches to help individuals reduce their stress levels (Monat & Lazarus, 2001). This is particularly suited to counter Situational stress.

c. Problem-focused coping: This mechanism is focused on the problem at hand and seeks the most appropriate solution. Individuals try eliminating the source of stress by seeking the means to address and correct the problem in the most effective way (Krohne, 2002). This method works well to help individuals deal with anticipatory stress.

d. Emotion-focused coping: This refers to the various ways that individuals recognize and manage their own emotional responses to situations they find stressful. It is based on how

individuals channel their feelings into positive results and is highly effective when dealing with encounter stress.

While the above coping mechanisms have been identified to help deal with each of the four types of stress, the choice of which mechanism to use under a specific circumstance must rest on the stressed individual. Furthermore, the individual does not need to commit to a single coping mechanism. A hybrid solution may very well be the best approach under certain circumstances. Most importantly, the individuals must select an approach that suits their situation and can effectively reduce their stress levels and that of their colleagues.

3. Concept of Stress Inoculation Training

Stress Inoculation Training was developed by Meichenbaum (1976), who believes it should be undertaken before stress reaches a critical level. It is an example of a cognitive-behavioural approach to stress management. Its aim is to change the way we think about stress (cognitive restructuring). Changing the way we one think about stress will change the way we behave towards it. STI assume that people sometimes find situations stressful because they think about them in 'catastrophising' ways (that is, they always think the worst). STI tries to change negative ways of thinking to positive ways in three stages: (1) Cognitive preparation ('Conceptualization'), (2) Skills training and practice (3) Real-life application ('application and follow through').

A central concept underlying SIT is that of inoculation which has been used both in medicine and in social-psychological research on attitude change. In 1796 Edward Jenner noted that inoculation of humans with cowpox conferred immunity against the more deadly smallpox virus. In medicine, vaccinations often involve exposure to weaker forms of a disease so as to ward off more severe reactions. In such cases, the earlier exposure is generally to a more moderate form of the stress or disease to be guarded against. Such exposure produces antibodies and physically prepares the body for future attacks.

Consistent with the concept of inoculation, Aldwin and Levenson (2004) highlight an area of biology called *hormesis* that studies the positive results that derive from exposure to small amounts of toxins that in larger amounts might prove lethal. A series of studies on animals indicated that small and brief exposure to stressors can contribute to the development of repair mechanisms that protect against the impact of subsequent, more intense stressors (Calabrese & Baldwin, 2002). In a comparable fashion SIT, which is designed to intervene with humans at the psychosocial level, provides individuals with experience with minor stressors that fosters psychological preparedness and promotes resilience.

Similarly, in the area of attitude change, McGuire (1964) has observed that prior exposure to attitudinal information can protect or "inoculate" individuals from subsequent, more intense efforts at persuasion. Such prior exposure to persuasive efforts mobilizes counter attitudinal strategies that can be used in subsequent conversion efforts. In both medical and attitudinal inoculations, a person's resistance is enhanced by exposure to a stimulus strong enough to arouse defenses and coping processes without being so powerful that it overwhelms the individual. SIT is based on the notion that exposing clients to milder forms of stress can bolster both coping mechanisms and the individual's (group's, community's) confidence in using his or her coping repertoire. SIT is designed to bolster individual's preparedness and develop a sense of mastery.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

Stress is not something to be dismissed as being just part of the job experience or the price to be paid for being successful in career. Stress has been identified to be either directly or indirectly responsible for early and untimely death through heart attack, stroke, high blood pressure, and a multitude of other stress-related illnesses. While the mental and physical health of employees is suffering due to unhealthy work environments, stress is still seen by employers as a sign of weakness on the part of employees. It is therefore important for employers and employees to understand the nature of their work, get insight into the origin of stress and prevent it before individual get "turn off".

A better understanding of stress-inoculation training indicates that it could be effective in reducing stress experienced by employees. Employers and employees should get together and make way for changes that will reduce stress-related illness, remove the damaging effects of workplace stress, and increase awareness of the widespread nature of this problem. Organization could explore the stressors that are present in their workplace and take steps to reduce and/or prevent stress in the work environment as well as maintain health and well-being of employees through the knowledge of SIT.

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