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STRESS AND STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Abstract: The article discusses the problem of stress and the possibilities of its effective management. The author presents definitions of stress, presents stressful situations and explains why not all difficult situations become stressors. The article describes people's characteristic reactions to stress and lists symptoms of stress. It indicates that one's well-being and functioning depend on the level of stress and discusses the consequences of stress. The author explains how to cope with stress, characterises stress management strategies and points to the need to take preventive actions to eliminate excessive psychophysical overload and to create adequate health and safety conditions in one's work environment as these elements are frequent sources of stress and stressful situations.

Keywords: stress, difficult situations, stress symptoms and levels, resistance, stress management strategies

THE CONCEPT OF STRESS

The term 'stress' was introduced to science by Hans Selye, the biologist and physicist who defined it as 'a non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it' [1]. The definition was widely accepted. However, there still is not one, generally recognised stress theory in psychology. T. Kocowski defines stress as a complex of interrelated processes in the organism and nervous system, which is an individual's general reaction to stimuli and extraordinary, difficult, dangerous, unpleasant and harmful situations, aka stressors [2]. Thus, we can assume that stress is a state of the organism resulting from overload of the nervous system due to exposure to harmful factors.

Both in psychology and related sciences the term 'stress' usually refers to two meanings:

- the biological approach – a complex of physiological changes in the organism caused by stressors,
- the psychological approach – changes in psychological mechanisms and activities resulting from various difficult situations [3].

Although both meanings refer to a different range of reactions of the organism, they are closely related. They make the basis for the psychophysiological nature of stress.

STRESSFUL SITUATIONS AND CHARACTERISTIC REACTIONS

In many cases difficult situations may cause stress. The induction of stress depends on numerous factors, such as one's experience, type of the nervous system, state of health and personality, e.g. self-esteem, level of optimism, internal control, hierarchy of values and structure of needs. The following difficult situations can be classified as stressful:

- deprivation – when one's biological and mental needs are blocked,
- frustration – when there is an obstacle complicating the achievement of one's goal,
- pain – when an individual can feel physical or mental pain,
- danger – when one might lose valuable things,
- motivational conflict – when one needs to make a choice and the choice of one value causes the loss of another or involves unpleasant experience,
- overload – when one is not in good psychophysical condition and cannot achieve one's goal for this reason,

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- complications – when there are no instruments or tools to do the task.

Each stimulus causing a stress reaction is called a stressor. However, it is also important why a stimulus becomes a stressor. Sometimes it happens so as a result of cognitive interpretation, i.e. through the significance given to the stimulus. Otherwise, a stimulus becomes a stressor as a result of a sensory or metabolic process, which is stressful by nature. People react to the environment according to their own interpretation of the stimuli they experience. According to H. Selye, it is not important what is happening to us, but how we take it [4].

Stress is a process which consists of phases. We can distinguish the following three phases:

- a) the alarm phase – a state of tension disorganising one's behaviour develops in response to a stressful situation. The following reactions are possible, depending on the character of emotions experienced:
 - stupor – inhibition of activity,
 - aggression – physical or verbal aggression is targeted at people, objects or oneself. Destructive behaviour might be aimed at the source of the situation or shifted to the objects which give a possibility to ease one's tension relatively safely,
 - escape – moving away from the source of the situation, e.g. by doing other activities
 - fixation – persistent repetition of an activity that does not produce the expected effect,
 - regression – behaviour characteristic of earlier phases of development, e.g. an adult kicks a closed door.
- b) adaptation – long duration of a stressful situation or its recurrence results in making attempts to learn to manage it. These could be defensive actions, which reduce tension and fear. The use of energy resources and defence mechanisms enables adaptation to higher requirements.
- c) exhaustion – further duration of the same stressor or the emergence of others as well as the lack of a tension-reducing strategy causes a decrease or depletion of energy and defence resources. It results in negative consequences.

As is commonly noted, stress has negative features, but it is also noteworthy that there are some positive aspects of stress as well. H. Selye distinguishes between constructive and destructive stress. He claims that not all types of stress are harmful. Stress could be a positive strength providing motivation and causing improvement in one's subjective assessment of the quality of life. The author describes positive stress as 'eu-stress' (eu means 'good' in Greek) and negative stress as 'di-stress' (di means 'bad' in Greek) [5].

WELL-BEING AND FUNCTIONING VS STRESS LEVEL

Figure 1 shows how one's well-being and functioning depends on the stress level. Neither high nor low stress level is good. The optimal (medium) stress level positively affects one's well-being and it makes one's activity effective. There are individual differences between people in the optimal stress level. It depends on congenital biological conditions, e.g. related with one's resistance, as well as current physiological and behavioural conditions, e.g. one's trained efficiency [6].

Stress levels, their consequences and symptoms

1. Low stress level:
 - disengagement, disinterest, energy outflow
 - sense of boredom, apathy,
 - the belief that nothing makes sense
 - depression,



- simple tasks, in objective terms, are too difficult to be done
2. Optimal stress level:
 - relaxation, energy flow,
 - self-confidence
 - interest, engagement, greater attention,
 - awareness of good functioning,
 - tasks are easy to do
 3. High stress level:
 - physical indisposition, e.g. indigestion, sweating, chills, weakness,
 - psychomotor coordination disorder,
 - slower reaction time,
 - fear and sense of confusion
 - disordered concentration and thinking

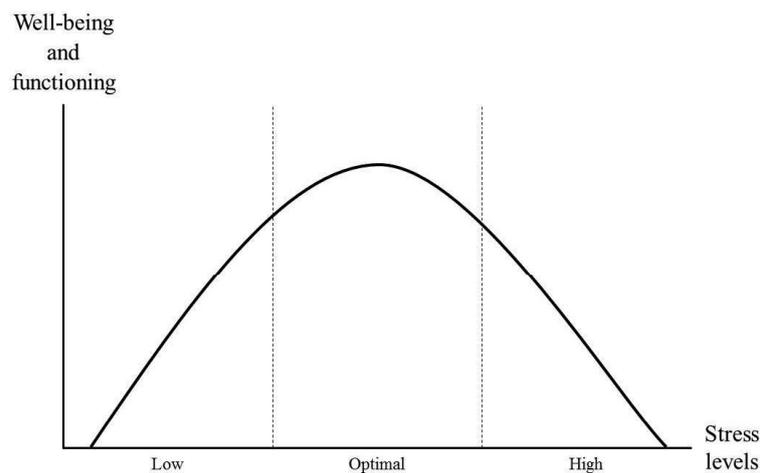


Figure 1. Well-being and functioning vs stress level

Source: S. Orłowski, *Istota i skutki stresu*, in: Sobczak-Matysiak J., *Psychologia kontaktu z klientem*, Poznań 1997.

Stress symptoms:

1. physiological symptoms:

faster heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, headache, backache, indigestion, blood pressure changes, frequent urination, insomnia, other somatic ailments

2. thinking-related symptoms:

general disinterest, schematic action, concentration disorder, memory lapses, forgetfulness

3. emotional symptoms:

fear, anger, irritation, embarrassment, nervousness



4. behavioural symptoms:

isolation from other people, impulsivity, speech problems, e.g. stuttering, nervous tics, shivering, high and nervous laughter, gnashing, distraction, unreasonable drug use, excessive drinking of alcohol, intense smoking, etc.

5. philosophy of life:

helplessness, questioning values, changing the orientation from the future to 'here and now', impersonal approach to tasks [7].

Stress releases defensive energy in case of psychophysical overload. This alarm mechanism has been present in humans for generations. Its aim is to guarantee survival by mobilising one to escape or to fight if there is direct danger. The development of civilisation caused changes in the specificity of dangers. At present there is a much wider list of harmful stimuli and direct danger is ranked after noise, crowd, haste, fatigue, unkindness, excessive demands in the environment, growing rivalry, etc. These stimuli are commonplace and they accompany people in their everyday lives. The impossibility to ease one's tension naturally makes one's primary defence mechanism destructive. Long-lasting and recurrent stress causes psychosomatic diseases such as gastrointestinal ulceration, cardiovascular diseases, including heart attack, stroke, hypertension, gallstones and others [8].

As far as health and effective functioning is concerned, it is important to recognise stress symptoms promptly, be able to manage stress, prevent it and cope with it.

Stress management

The following factors are decisive to stress management:

- type of a stressful situation,
- stress intensity,
- the stage of development of the person experiencing stress
- a map of one's personality

People should remember that their personality is constantly developing and it may undergo creative changes. It will be possible if people are aware of the process of their activity and do not concentrate on its effect only. Self-discovery lets us achieve greater sensitivity, which is chiefly oriented at the way we act and what we do.

Many people are unable to cope with stress because they apply ineffective strategies such as:

- escape coping – escaping problems through alcohol, illegal and designer drugs, sedatives, mood-enhancing drugs, replacement activities, seeking company, escape into the world of dreams and fantasy,
- emotion-oriented coping – concentration on reducing the emotional tension, on the emotional state and thinking about the problem without taking any action.

Task-oriented coping is the most desirable – one concentrates on actions, e.g. analyses the situation, takes the right action, learns from mistakes, uses the experience of earlier effective behaviour, etc. [9].

The ability to act effectively depends on one's resistance to stress. This resistance can be increased as one gains more experience and receives special training. There are special techniques and exercises, which teach people how to manage time, think positive and set achievable goals without being emotionally overloaded. The techniques which show how to manage excessive stress are easily accessible. In practice, relaxation techniques are the most common, e.g.:

- meditation,
- autogenic training, neuromuscular relaxation,
- diaphragmatic breathing [10].



It is necessary to emphasise the fact that the ability to cope with stress can be achieved when:

- one's attitude, behaviour and lifestyle changes,
- one can control one's thoughts and speak to oneself constructively,
- one can manage time effectively,
- one understands the importance of relaxation techniques.

CONCLUSIONS

Stress understood as a state of the organism caused by overload of the nervous system is one of many determinants of human health. Stress has accompanied people for ages and it has been a defence mechanism enabling survival. The continuous civilisation, technological and social development results in an increasing number of situations causing mental discomfort. It applies to many areas where people function. However, the work environment is a special place of the occurrence of stressors. This situation concerns both employers and employees. For this reason it is important for health care staff to be aware of the problem of stress at work. Stress may cause diseases and health problems related to work. However, it may also considerably influence the final result of the activity of a particular organisation. According to prognoses, we can expect that the role of appropriate working conditions will be increasing so as to ensure health and safety at work [11].

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