



Tracing The Roots of Acute Stress

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Dr. Aditya Sharma

Assistant Professor, Institute of Management Studies,
B.J.S.Rampurja Jain College, Bikaner

Mrs. Chhaya Parihar

Research Scholar, Pacific University Udaipur.

ABSTRACT

Acute stress reaction is a psychological condition arising in response to a terrifying or traumatic event. It is the result of a traumatic event in which the person experiences or witnesses an event that causes the victim/witness to experience extreme, disturbing or unexpected fear, stress or pain, and that involves or threatens serious injury, perceived serious injury or death to themselves or someone else. Acute stress reaction is a variation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. This article traces the roots of acute stress.

Introduction

"Acute stress response" was first introduced by Walter Cannon in the 1920s as a theory that animals react to threats with a general discharge of the sympathetic nervous system. The response was later recognized as the first stage of a general adaptation syndrome that regulates stress responses among vertebrates and other organisms.

Symptoms of Acute Stress Disorder

Common symptoms that sufferers of acute stress disorder experience are: numbing; detachment; muteness; de-realization; depersonalization or dissociative amnesia; continued re-experiencing of the event by such ways as thoughts, dreams, and flashbacks; and avoidance of any stimulation that reminds them of the event. During this time, they must have symptoms of anxiety, and significant impairment in at least one essential area of functioning. Symptoms last for a minimum of 2 days, and a maximum of 4 weeks, and occur within 4 weeks of the event.

Emotional distress — some combination of anger or irritability, anxiety and depression, the three stress emotions.

Muscular problems including tension headache, back pain, jaw pain and the muscular tensions that lead to pulled muscles and tendon and ligament problems.

Stomach, gut and bowel problems such as heartburn, acid stomach, flatulence, diarrhea, constipation and irritable bowel syndrome.

Transient over arousal leads to elevation in blood pressure, rapid heartbeat, sweaty palms, heart palpitations, dizziness, migraine headaches, cold hands or feet, shortness of breath and chest pain.

Ostermann has found that the level of stress is determined by three dimensions -- life situations, work and self -- and that the balance between the causes of stress and available systems of support must be considered. An inter nationally applicable measure of stress developed by Ostermann, named SWS for situations, work and self, encompasses all three dimensions because, Ostermann says, "surveys that only look at work factors are not giving the full picture."

Sources of stress vary tremendously. For factory workers, stress often is related directly to the work situation, such as

dealing with dangerous heavy equipment or working in an uncomfortable environment. In contrast, office workers are more likely to experience stress related to inter-personal relationships on the job. "People pressures" such as unclear supervision, tension among team members and fear or aversion of conflict can cause stress.

"For many people the core of their social life is the people with whom they work," explains Ostermann. "But work is not a social situation, so you begin to get some things that are antagonistic to good relationships, such as rumors and power plays among executives who are competing for the next promotion." Stress is not related only to what goes on at work. Conflicts between the demands of the workplace and of home life are increasingly common. According to a survey completed for the U.S. Department of Labor, 10 percent of people who are married or living with children under 18 experience severe work-family conflict, and an additional 25 percent report moderate levels of conflict.

Internationally, Ostermann has observed, "There is less stress in developing countries than in developed countries." This may be due in part to increased consumerism and the growing influence of advertisers who "try to convince the consuming public that a want is a need." The sense of values also is different in many of the developing countries. In developed nations, there often is an emphasis on what is possessed or how much money is earned. "In many developing countries," Ostermann states, "the value of family and nation is much stronger than it is here in the U.S." This strong value system provides support for people in these cultures and may enable them to deal with greater amounts of stress. Some cultures -- like those in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore -- are emulating the American model and, therefore, Ostermann has found, are growing more stressed.

Joel Harmon, associate professor of management and chair of the management, marketing, information systems and sciences department on the Florham-Madison Campus, says, "The greatest reported cause of stress is workload. Employees work more today than they did 25 years ago -- the equivalent of a 13th month every year. Staff are getting downsized but the work remains, so workloads are getting upsized."

Changes in office procedures are happening more rapidly

than at any other time in history. "Fifty years ago, the nature of someone's job did not change during their entire tenure at that job," Ostermann says. "Now, everything is different." And, in the current "information age" things move at a faster pace than ever before with faxes and instant e-mail messages. Some professions are especially prone to stress resulting from changing technology. Take airline pilots, for example: "They are flying more complicated planes, carrying more people under more pressing time demands and with much more airport traffic than ever before," Ostermann observes.

Technology in automation has enabled employers to eliminate many jobs. Not only does this result in a fear of being replaced by a machine, but those who keep their jobs must undergo retraining and tend to have a higher level of responsibility, and thus greater stress, thrust upon them. "Other organizational changes," Harmon adds, "especially increased use of part-timers, management changes, increased diversity and pay cuts or freezes," lead to increased levels of job insecurity. "Now only about half of managers and employees rate security as good or very good, down from 75 to 80 percent in the 1980s."

A particularly alarming cause of stress, and part of a vicious circle as it also is a symptom of stress, is aggression or violence in the workplace. It is estimated by the U.S. Justice Department that each year more than a million people are the victims of violence at work, accounting for about 15 percent of all violent crime in the country. This causes a half million workers to miss time on the job at the rate of 1,751,000 work days per year, costing \$55 million in lost wages.

Everyone has heard cases of disgruntled employees "going postal," an expression derived from a 1986 incident at an Edmond, Okla., post office in which 14 postal workers were shot to death by a co-worker before he turned a gun on himself. And, people worldwide witnessed the stress that teachers and students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., and their families endured when two gun-toting students massacred 12 of their peers and a faculty member and laced the school property with explosives. (For more on violence in schools, see "Those Who Can, Teach," 1998 spring/summer.) More common than such extreme cases is violence that occurs in retail or service industries: attacks on taxicab drivers, health care employees, convenience store clerks, workers in government offices and police officers, among others.

According to Harmon, aggressive behavior in the workplace ranges from the rare "serious instances of physical assault" to the more widespread "'passive' forms of aggression, such as withholding resources, not responding to phone calls and memos and being late to meetings." Though these passive-aggressive behaviors seem benign, Harmon notes that "when constantly repeated, they can result in great psychological harm and loss of personal and organizational productivity."

Consequences of Acute Stress

The physical effects of excessive stress have long been recognized -- from heart attacks and strokes to ulcers and other gastrointestinal disorders. Continual stress also takes a toll on the body's immune system, causing frequent colds and other illnesses. Psychologically, stress can lead to depression, anxiety and even panic attacks. Specifically, the stress produced by aggression in the workplace has "been associated with physical and psychological distress,

resulting in decreased productivity, commitment and loyalty," says Harmon. Also, victims of or witnesses to violence in the workplace may suffer from a range of trauma-related illness including post-traumatic stress disorder.

Sixty percent of lost workdays each year can be attributed to stress. In addition, an estimated 75 to 90 percent of visits to health care providers are due to stress-related conditions, costing employers in increased health care costs. A list of physical and psychological warning signs of stress exhaustion appears on this page. Stress also can have a direct effect on the way people handle their jobs. Employees under stress may make more mistakes, have trouble concentrating, become disorganized, become angry or just stop caring about their work. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that one third of people surveyed considered quitting their jobs because of stress and 14 percent actually did.

Coping with stress

Many people look for help to resolve their problems with stress, and employers are responding. "We look for support systems, things that will offset the stress," comments Ostermann. Options include flexible work weeks, telecommuting opportunities and encouraging personnel to live balanced lives. Harmon cites the Business Work-Life Study conducted by the Families and Work Institute, which "suggests that organizations adopt work-family programs, inform employees that help is available and hold managers accountable for sensitivity to their employees' work-family needs."

On the physical side, some organizations provide health clubs where employees can work out and keep fit and cafeterias where workers can choose from a healthy range of meals. Most corporations make counseling readily available, if not on site then through the health care benefits they provide their employees. Handling stress, however, is a very individual matter. Alice Mills, co-director of counseling services in the Teaneck-Hackensack Campus Wellness Center, suggests several ways individuals can deal with stress. "The first step is to analyze the situation to determine what is causing the stress and what techniques might best suit the individual," she says.

Mills notes that there are many relaxation skills including the use of music, meditation, diaphragmatic breathing exercises, aerobic exercise, muscle relaxation and imagery. Many of these techniques can be learned through books and video- and audiotapes such as those that the Wellness Center makes available to students, faculty and staff through its stress lab. Some people bring stress with them to the workplace through their disposition. "By telling yourself you're going to fail or by expecting negative reactions from other people, you may create your own stress," Mills says. Cognitive techniques help people monitor their thinking, identify "unrealistic" negative thoughts and replace those thoughts with more positive coping statements. These techniques, used by psychiatrists and other professional counselors, help reduce negative moods such as anxiety and depression.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that acute stress comes from demands and pressures of the recent past and anticipated demands and pressures of the near future. Acute stress is thrilling and exciting in small doses, but too much is exhausting. It can be avoided by doing yoga, meditation, walking early in the morning, etc.

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