

CHAPTER 24

STRESS MANAGEMENT

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1

INTRODUCTION

Stress is an enormous problem in the animal protection movement. The potential workload is massive and many animal protection societies attempt to tackle far too many issues. Also, mission-driven staff members do not like to refuse to tackle any issue or to turn away any suffering animal. This leads to overload, stress and eventual burn-out for many. Stress and burn-out are key factors in staff absence and rapid staff turnover. There can also be serious physical consequences in the case of prolonged stress. It is vital to recognise this problem and to tackle it in the workplace.

Most of our work stress comes from things like work overload, conflicting priorities, inconsistent values, over-challenging deadlines, conflict with co-workers, unpleasant environments and so on. Not only do these reduce our performance as we divert mental effort into handling them, they can also cause a great deal of unhappiness.

This chapter examines the main symptoms and effects of stress, and gives an overview of the main stress management strategies.

2

WHAT IS STRESS?

There are various definitions of stress and this is further complicated because we all intuitively understand what stress is – although different people feel stress very differently. The most commonly accepted definition (mainly attributed to Richard S. Lazarus) is that ‘stress is experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources that the individual is able to mobilise.’ Stress is an effect that our bodies can experience as we struggle to cope with our continually changing environment; it has physical and emotional effects on us and can create positive or negative feelings.

People feel little stress when they have the time, experience and resources to handle a situation. They feel great stress when they do not see themselves as being able to handle the demands put upon them. Stress is then a negative experience. It is not an inevitable consequence of an event. It depends on real ability to cope with a situation and on personal perception of the situation.

But stress is not necessarily bad. For example, the stress of creative, busy, but successful and productive work is beneficial and exhilarating. But stress can be negative and can result in feelings of being overwhelmed, feelings of distrust, rejection, anger and depression, which in turn can lead to health problems such as headaches, upset stomach, rashes, insomnia, ulcers, high blood pressure, heart disease, strokes.

a) Signs of Stress

The symptoms of stress can be physical and/or mental and can include any of the following:

Physical symptoms

- Loss of appetite, or a craving for food, when under pressure
- Frequent indigestion, heartburn or stomach upsets
- Sleeplessness, constant tiredness, fainting or dizziness
- Headaches, migraine, backaches, cramp of muscle spasms
- Impotence, frigidity, frequent tears or the urge to cry.



Mental symptoms

- Frequently feeling irritated
- Difficulty in relaxing
- Obsession with fear or disease
- Feeling hated or neglected
- Inability to make decisions
- Lack of interest in other people
- Feelings of guilt or sense of failure
- Fear of open or confined spaces, or of being alone.

b) Effects of Stress

The effects of stress are increasingly recognised:

- 1992 UN report called job stress 'The 20th Century Epidemic'
- The World Health Organisation called job stress a 'World Wide Epidemic'
- The US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reports stress related disorders as fast becoming the most prevalent reason for worker disability
- It is estimated that around 40% of worker turnover is due to job stress.

The effects of stress can be seen and felt in a number of ways. For example, you can:

- Feel anxious, depressed, frustrated, irritable, lonely and weary – perhaps all at the same time
- Behave carelessly, be accident prone, over-emotional, eat or drink to excess, tremble and become incoherent
- Find it difficult to concentrate, make decisions, or become hypersensitive.

Excessive stress causes increased blood pressure, aggravates asthma and brings on angina or coronary heart disease. It can affect both your working and private life, perhaps by increased sick leave or by reducing the amount of effort you can make. This in turn can upset your relationships with family, friends and colleagues.

c) Types of Responses to Stress

There are two types of instinctive stress responses, which are important to the understanding of stress and stress management: the shortterm 'Fight-or-Flight' response and the long term 'General Adaptation Syndrome'. The first is a basic survival instinct, while the second instinct is a longterm effect of exposure to stress.

Fight-or-Flight: Some of the early research on stress, around 1932, established the existence of the well-known Fight-or-Flight response. This showed that when an organism experiences a shock or perceives a threat, it quickly releases hormones that help it to survive. In humans, as in other animals, these hormones help us to run faster and fight harder. They increase heart rate and blood pressure, delivering more oxygen and blood sugar to power important muscles. They increase sweating in an effort to cool these muscles and help them stay efficient. They divert blood away from the skin to the core of our bodies, reducing blood loss if we are damaged. In addition to this, these hormones focus our attention on the threat, to the exclusion of everything else.

The Fight-or-Flight response is triggered not only by life-threatening danger. It also comes into play when we encounter something unexpected. The body's mobilisation for survival can have clear negative consequences. We become excitable, anxious, jumpy and irritable, which reduces our ability to work effectively. The intensity of our focus on survival interferes with our ability to make fine judgments and makes us more accident prone.

General Adaptation Syndrome: While the Fight-or-Flight response works in the very short term, the General Adaptation Syndrome operates in response to longer term exposure to causes of stress.



Researchers identified that when pushed to extremes, organisms react in three stages:

- First, in the **Alarm Phase**, they react to the stressor
- Next, in the **Resistance Phase**, the resistance to the stressor increases as the organism adapts to and copes with it. This phase lasts for as long as the organism can support this heightened resistance
- Finally, once resistance is exhausted, the organism enters the **Exhaustion Phase** and resistance declines substantially.

In a work environment, this exhaustion contributes strongly to what is commonly referred to as 'burn-out'.

3

OPTIMAL STRESS LEVEL

There is no single level of stress that is optimal for everyone. We are all individuals with unique requirements and our physiological and psychological responses to stress vary greatly. What is distressing to one may be a joy and a pleasure to another.



Many illnesses are related to unrelieved stress. If you are experiencing adverse stress symptoms, you have gone beyond your optimal stress level; you need to reduce the stress in your life or improve your ability to manage it.

There is a recognised relationship between pressure and performance. When pressure is low, performance is normally low, because other activities compete for attention and we may even feel bored and depressed. When pressure and stress are high, anxieties and disturbances can overload our thinking, reducing our ability to concentrate on a task and thereby reducing our performance.

However, there is an optimum level of pressure at which we can concentrate effectively. At this level, we become involved and immersed in our work and produce the best results without adverse effects. The goal of stress management is to help us to manage stress so that we can maintain this state of optimum involvement and deliver exceptional performance.

4

STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

There are three major approaches that we can use to manage stress:

- **Action-oriented:** in which we seek to confront the problem causing the stress, often changing the environment or the situation
- **Emotionally-oriented:** in which we do not have the power to change the situation, but we can manage stress by changing our interpretation of the situation and the way we feel about it
- **Acceptance-oriented:** where something has happened over which we have no power and no emotional control and where our focus is on surviving the stress.

An action-oriented approach is often best used when you have some power to change a situation. Where you do not have power, it may be appropriate to take an emotionally-oriented approach. With this approach, you seek to change your understanding of and response to, the situation. Lastly, if you have no power and a changed appreciation of the situation is not appropriate, then an acceptance-oriented approach may be best.

a) Action-orientated Approach

Action-oriented approaches are best where you have some control over your situation:



- Recognise what you can change.
- Change your stressors by avoiding or eliminating them completely.
- Reduce their intensity (manage them over a period of time instead of on a daily or weekly basis).
- Shorten your exposure to stress (take a break, leave the physical premises).
- Devote the time and energy necessary to making a change (goal-setting, planning and time-management techniques may be helpful).
- Review your obligations from time to time and make sure they are still good for you. If they are not, give them up.

b) Emotionally-oriented Approach

Where you do not have power, it may be appropriate to take an emotionally-oriented approach:

- Become aware of your stressors and your emotional and physical reactions.
- Notice your distress. Do not ignore it. Do not gloss over your problems.
- Determine what events distress you. What are you telling yourself about the meaning of these events?
- Determine how your body responds to the stress. Do you become nervous or physically upset? If so, in what specific ways?
- Reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions to stress (the stress reaction is triggered by your perception of danger – physical danger or emotional danger).
- Are you viewing your stressors in exaggerated terms or taking a difficult situation and making it a disaster?
- Are you expecting to please everyone?
- Are you overreacting and viewing things as absolutely critical and urgent?
- Do you feel you must always prevail in every situation?

Work at adopting more moderate views:

- Try to see the stress as something you can cope with rather than something that overpowers you.
- Try to temper your excess emotions.
- Put the situation in perspective. Do not dwell on the negative aspects and the 'what ifs'.
- Don't let one thing dominate you, such as your animal protection work – strive to achieve balance.
- View life as challenges to seek, not obstacles to avoid.
- Take responsibility for your life and your feelings, but never blame yourself.
- When worries start to build up, talk to someone.

c) Acceptance-oriented Approach

If you have no control over the situation and a changed appreciation of the situation is not appropriate, then an acceptance-oriented approach may be best:

- Learn to moderate your physical reactions to stress.
- Slow, deep breathing will bring your heart rate and respiration back to normal.
- Learn and practice relaxation or meditation skills.
- Try to avoid the use of sleeping pills, tranquilisers and other drugs, if possible. Learning to moderate these reactions on your own is a preferable long term solution.
- Build your physical reserves.
- Eat well-balanced, nutritious meals.
- Maintain your ideal weight.
- Avoid nicotine, excessive caffeine and other stimulants.
- Get enough sleep. Be as consistent with your sleep schedule as possible.
- Maintain your emotional reserves.
- Develop some mutually supportive friendships.
- Pursue realistic goals that are meaningful to you, rather than goals others have for you that you do not share.
- Expect some frustrations, failures and sorrows.
- Always be kind and gentle with yourself – be a friend to yourself.



- Engage in a vigorous physical exercise that is convenient and pleasurable.
- Protect your personal freedoms and space. Do what you want and feel, but respect the rights of others.
- Find a time and place each day where you can have complete privacy. Take time off from others and pressures.
- Mix leisure with work. Take breaks and get away when you can.
- Open yourself to new experiences. Try new things, new foods and new places.

5

FURTHER RESOURCES

Websites

Centre for Stress Management

www.managingstress.com/

Indiana University: Stress Management

www.indiana.edu/~health/stres.html

International Stress Management Association

www.isma.org.uk/

Mind Tools – Stress Management

www.mindtools.com/smpage.html

Online Safety Library: Stress Management

www.pp.okstate.edu/ehs/links/stress.htm

The Stress Management Society

www.stress.org.uk/

Stress Model

www.stressfree.com/model.html

Books

At Ease with Stress

Wanda Nash

Publisher: Darton, Longman and Todd (1988)

ISBN: 0232517770

The Book of Stress Survival

Alix Kirsta

Publisher: Guild Publishing, London, UK (1987)

ISBN: 0041320220

Complete Guide to Stress Management

Dr. C. Patel

Publisher: Vermilion (1996)

ISBN: 0091813662



Conquer Your Stress

Cary L. Cooper, Stephen Palmer
Publisher: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2000)
ISBN: 085292853X

Living With Stress

Cary Cooper, Rachel Cooper, Lynn Eaker
Publisher: Penguin (1988)
ISBN: 0140098666

The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook

Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, Matthew McKay
Publisher: New Harbinger Publications
ISBN: 1572242140

Stress Management for Dummies

Allen Elkin
Publisher: John Wiley and Sons Inc
ISBN: 0764551442

Teach Yourself Managing Stress

Terry Looker and Olga Gregson
Publisher: Hodder Arnold Teach Yourself (2003)
ISBN: 0340860073

The “Which?” Guide to Managing Stress

Mark Greener
Publisher: Which? Books (2003)
ISBN: 0852029268

What’s All This About Stress

Brenda Davison
Publisher: Liverpool Academic Press (1999)
ISBN: 187280733X