Anthropological Bulletin

a peer reviewed international journal

Special Issue:
Women and Children's Perspectives

Guest Editor:
Daud Salim Faruquie

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Alleviation of workplace stress in Women through Eustress Techniques

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ABSTRACT

Occupational stress has shown to cost organizations an estimated $200 billion or more every year due to factors like low productivity, absenteeism, increased health care costs and compensations. Reducing the cost of occupational stress has become a major concern for organizations and governments. Workplace responsibilities are often perceived by employees as a source of stress or political victimization. They often try to circumvent these responsibilities; and if bound to accept, they perceive them as professional defeat and perform with low interest and efficiency. This situation draws them into a negative state of mind followed by feelings of depression, health issues, and low productivity. Studies have shown that women tend to suffer from occupational stress more often than men, which affects their professional as well as personal life. Moreover, a negative perception of stress amplifies its negative impacts on mental and physical conditions, while a slight change in perception not only alleviates its negative effects, but also improves productivity, hope, and quality of life. This positive perception of stress is termed as eustress, which inspires individuals to accept responsibilities as an opportunity to exhibit their efficacy and productivity. This paper presents positive impacts of eustress on women in high-demanding occupational environments. It further discusses the factors to stimulate eustress response and its impacts on productivity and health.

Key words: Stress Management, Eustress, Distress, Occupational Stress, Working women.

Introduction

Occupational stress and anxiety in the workplace has shown to cost organizations an estimated $200 billion or more each year due to the presence of absenteeism, compromised productivity, health care costs, and more worker's compensation claims (DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998;Farren, 1999). It is becoming a major concern of organization and national economies to reduce it. Stress and its implications on health have been the subject of active research for at least six decades(Shih, 2004) and stress is commonly known to hold negative connotations and is often perceived to be synonymous to distress (Selye, 1978).Stress is basically a natural or a biological response of the body triggered as a result of a demand or a stressor (Fink, 2009), therefore, stress is considered to be universal and unavoidable (Le Fevre, Matheny, & Kolt, 2003). A stressor may be pleasant or unpleasant (Selye, 1973). Stressors of different degrees and intensities affect the whole human system including an individual's thoughts, physiology, and behavior; and they all work together to produce an effective response strategy (Parrino,1979). In another study, stress is defined as an

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involuntary signal or situation that not only creates an unusual or extraordinary demands on a person but it also threatens or challenges them(Lazarus, 1968). The perception of a demand as being a threat or challenge depends on the mindset of the individual.

Hans Selye, known as the father of stress research, was the first to focus on the beneficial aspect of stress, he coined the term 'eustress' ("eu" being the Greek root for 'good') to refer to the positive conceptualization of stress. Selye described eustress as an adaption process and explained that it occurs when an individual reacts to stressors with positive emotions(Selye, 1975).In another study, eustress is defined as a stress response which brings healthy, positive, and constructive outcomes from a stressful condition. (Quick, Quick, Nelson, & Hurrell, 2004). Eustress is associated with hope, readiness, and enthusiasm and it places eustress within the framework of positive psychology and positive organizational behavior (Simmons & Nelson, 2001).

The Effects of Eustress

Many people consider their work-related responsibilities as the biggest source of stress and eventually suffer from various mental and physical health problems (Simmons & Nelson, 2001). The general response of body to any incident of workplace stress as negative, however, if the individual is trained to perceive stress in a positive manner or follow eustress response, it increases life experience and alleviates mental and physical burden (Cherry, N. 1978). In an interesting study, it is stated that any activity would be perceived as stressful if it is imposed on an individual, however, the same activity improves self-esteem, if the individual views it as a challenge and selects it by preference(Estrellas, 1996; Tippett, 1993).Based on this finding, employers must cajole an individual to perform an activity rather than impose it. In another study, it has been suggested that eustress may improve health by enhancing the production of anabolic hormones, high-density lipoprotein (HDL) Cholesterol, and other healthy bio-chemical substances (Edwards & Cooper, 1988). Edwards & Cooper (1988)further suggest that eustress enables an individual to maintain composure and emotional control when dealing with stressful situations. It may be concluded that eustress holds the potential to increase performance (Figure 1) and improves knowledge, experience and confidence.
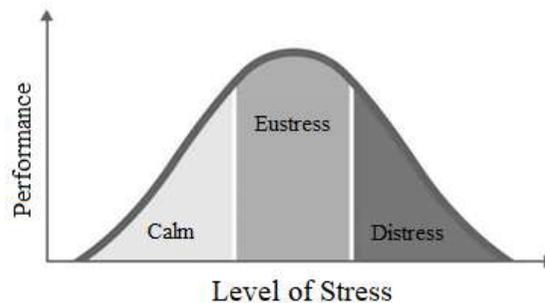

Figure. 1: Relationship between type of stress and performance as depicted by The American Institute of Stress (AIS)

Potential Stressors in Women

Stress is an inevitable phenomenon at a workplace and it is something that every employee experience at different point in his or her career. Individual stress within an organizational context has been defined as an "overarching rubric for the domain concerned with how individuals adjust to their environments" (Quick et al., 2004). The research on workplace stress has given attention to the aspects of jobs that might contribute to high levels

of stress, this includes factors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, underutilization of skills, responsibility without control (Taber, Beehr, & Walsh, 1985) The perception of stress influences an individual's stress response and its implications on their health (Baruch et al., 1987).Most of the researches on workplace stress have been focused on men and only recently researchers studied the sources and implications of work-related stress in women. According to a study (Remes, Brayne, van der Linde, & Lafortune, 2016) women are twice as likely to suffer from stress as men and are said to be more prone to chronic stress compared to men. Women are also exposed to stress associated with their roles in the workplace as well as at their homes(McDonough & Walters, 2001; Turner et al., 1995; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999). Research suggests that it is possible that womenare more likely to perceive certain situations as more stressful compared to men (Miller & Kirsch, 1987; Ptacek et al., 1994, &Ptacek et al., 1992). Often, women are the potential victims of gender-specific stressors such as sexism, misogyny, and domestic violence. Moreover, women are affected by the stress of those around them, as they tend to be more emotionally involved with colleagues than men(Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Turner et al., 1995).

Impact and Application of Eustress on working women

A study was conducted by the University of Maryland to determine the effectiveness of two multimodal stress management interventions in an occupational setting (Higgins, 1986). Multimodal interventions emphasize the importance of building both passive and active coping skills to deal with stressors. The participants recruited for the study were 53 working women with ages ranging from 26 to 60 years old. The first program made use of behavioral conditioning techniques which consisted of relaxation and systematic desensitization. The second involved cognitive coping skills using time management, rational-emotive therapy and assertive training. These programs were intended to trigger eustress in the participants and assess emotional fatigue, mental strain, and absenteeism among all the participants. It was found that the participant's emotional fatigue and personal strain levels were lowered significantly. It was concluded that both the programs were effective in implementing eustress and reducing negative impacts of work stress.

Some occupations are inherently more demanding than others; nursing was identified as one of the 40 most demanding jobs by US National Institute of Occupational Safety (Hemingway & Smith, 1999). Employees in this profession are considered to be under high influence of stressors like the pressure of overload, shift work, dealing with dying patients, and conflict with physicians (Tyler & Ellison, 1994).The effect of eustress due to job demands of nurses has been shown to cause alertness and enhance ability to work under pressure(Hay & Oken, 1972)

A study related to eustress was conducted which examined the relationship between the positive response to work demands and health in hospital nurses. The focus of the study was on the application of eustress techniques in a stressful environment and positive psychological states such as hope, positive effect, and meaningfulness were used as indicators of eustress, and the negative psychological states as an indicator of distress. A post hoc analysis was conducted to examine the differences in levels of hope between intensive care unit (ICU) nurses and nurses practicing in other parts of the hospital. The nurses working in intensive care units reported surprisingly lower levels of stress. All the participants in this study were diligently occupied with their work, their higher dedication was seen as a positive response to the work demands they had to face on a daily basis. This study discovered a positive relationship between hope and improvement in health. The higher levels of hope within the work environment inspired nurses to be productive by carrying out their roles and fulfilling duties properly. The findings of this study suggest that the ability to focus on the essential tasks of their job may cause individuals to actively engage in their work regardless of the demands and pressure placed on them (Hay & Oken, 1972).

This study aimed to encourage the implementation of eustress in response to the demands of the workplace to create a better working environment. In order to provide optimum care to patients, it is important that the providers of health care are healthy themselves. The way patients are cared for in the hospital is as important as the quality of service they receive and the nurses that exhibit a positive outlook on the demands placed on them can have considerable impact on the image of a hospital.

Discussion on Results

Workplace stress is clearly recognized as a major concern for both employees and enterprises. For organizations, stress-related problems result in low productivity, absenteeism of employees, and high medical expenses of organizations (Wallis, 1983). For employees, it is often a factor that is instrumental in low productivity, conflicts between employees and between employees and management, alcoholism, chronic diseases like coronary heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension (Davidson & Cooper, 1981). In view of all these problems, above studies have shown that positive perception of workplace stress leads to a win-win situation for both the employee and organization. Eustress is an ideal solution to stress management because it evokes positive feelings of fulfillment, hope, satisfaction, and well-being in a person. Eustress can help a person feel energized and confident when encountering stressors in daily life. It helps develop resilience which is beneficial for emotional health. Distress can be converted into eustress depending on the mindset of a person. Understanding the necessity of the right perception of stress is important for advancing knowledge of the implications of stress on a person's wellbeing and appropriately designing stress management interventions that aim to reduce the harmful consequences of stress on health

Conclusion

Workplace responsibilities and demands can trigger stress and speculations in employees, which can compromise productivity of an individual. Any organization would be negatively affected if its employees start viewing their duties and responsibilities as a source of debilitating stress. The workplace stress affects employees across all ages and genders; however, research has shown that it affects female employees more than male employees. Here, the role of eustress is highly instrumental in switching the negative outlook of stress into a positive one that increases motivation. This slight change in perception of stress not only enhances performance but it also improves general health and wellbeing. An extensive study on working women in which they were given stress management training to encourage eustress, has shown to alleviate their distress levels through the improvement in two stress indicators; namely, emotional exhaustion and personal strain. The perception of stress as a stumbling block or as a spring board to success actually makes a significant difference and this perception would be activated by converting distress into eustress.

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