

Relationship between stress and work ¹

By Dr. Bruno Roque Cignacco

Looker and Gregson (2010) state that stress is a “mismatch between perceived demands and perceived ability to cope,” which implies that a person has too many demands or too few resources to deal with those demands. Sometimes stress can also stem from few demands, even though this is less common.

In other words, stress is a person’s defensive response to a perceived threat from the environment. Stressed people appraise that they will not be capable of dealing with the stressing factors effectively.

Csikszentmihalyi (2002, 2003) states that workers are more prone to become stressed when the level of work required from them is highly challenging as compared with their skills. From the psychological perspective, stressful events tend to be more impactful when they are uncontrollable or unpredictable.

Stress usually brings about physical symptoms (for example, tension, fast heartbeats, etc.), emotional states (anger, fear, etc.), thoughts (worries, ruminations, etc.), and behaviour (avoidance, inaction, self-medication, etc.). These aspects interact with each other in a negative cycle.

Stress can also be contributory to the development of different health conditions, such as backache, lowered immunity, depression, headaches, heart attacks, etc. Some say that a reasonable amount of stress improves achievement, but it is difficult to determine what is “reasonable”.

At first, when people feel stressed, they might feel more energised, but after a while they become depleted, out-of-control, and fretful. The mind–body system is only built for arousal for a short time. Perceived stressors trigger people’s fight-freeze-flight response, which lowers their discerning and creative skills, bringing about temporary cognitive impairment.

In this reactive mode, the person’s focus is narrowed down to the threatening factor. If this alarm system is activated for a period of time long enough, the body is not allowed to recover properly. Most business environments are intrinsically stressful because of multiple factors: multitasking, tight deadlines, scarcity of resources, absence of support, demanding requirements, unrealistic objectives, etc.

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For example, at work, some common stressors are a lack of autonomy, countless bureaucratic procedures, technological fast-paced change, role ambiguity, shift work, unfair treatment, unfamiliar tasks, lack of feedback and support, insufficient skills, authoritarian commands, confusing goals, unclear roles, boredom, bullying, overworking, unhealthy work–life balance, lack of planning, low-quality communication, lack of recognition, etc. Some relevant changes (change of job, promotion and demotion, downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, etc.) can also represent stressing factors.

A question for self-reflection: “How do I cope with stressful circumstances?”

References

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About the Author



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