

DUAL RESPONSIBILITY OF MANAGING STRESS, EUSTRESS, DISTRESS, RUST-OUT AND BURN-OUT IN LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the causes and symptoms of stress, eustress, distress, rust-out and burnout. Suggestions on what both individuals and organizations can do to manage them are given. The paper recommends continual development of one's awareness as one of the most important general stress-management strategies regarding the type and mix of resources one needs for coping with one's source of stressors, and an organization may help towards achieving these goals by providing training programmes and counseling services.

INTRODUCTION

Stress, eustress, distress, rust-out and burn-out, associated with tension and anxiety, are common features in organizations and life in general. They all relate to pressure of coping with challenges imposed on an individual. One's physiological and psychological reaction to a challenge imposed on him/her may end up with negative or positive impacts of different degrees. Although all the five words have something to do with pressure, they stand for different situations. Thus, it is important that all the five terms are defined in order to have a clear understanding of what they represent in real life.

Davis and Newstrom (1989:482) define stress as "the general term applied to the pressures people feel in life" while Bunge (1990) and Chruden and Sherman (1980) define it as any adjustive demand to one's physiological and psychological reaction to a challenge imposed on an individual, that requires coping behaviour. Distress is negative stress while eustress is positive stress and burn-out is "a situation in which employees are emotionally exhausted, become detached from their work, and feel unable to accomplish their goals" (Davis and Newstrom, 1989:484). Rust-out could be equated to a state of

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dormancy/boredom or lack of urge to do anything exciting to face challenging situation/environment. Common sources of rust-out are lack of control, repetitive jobs/tasks and boredom.

Stress is not a new phenomenon in work situations, nor is it avoidable in the strictest sense. However, very often people do not realize that stress is a very natural and important part of life. Our bodies are designed to react to both types of stress. While eustress helps keep us alert, motivates us to face challenges, and drives us to solve problems, distress, on the other hand, causes bodies to over-react to events, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion that involves a negative self-concept and negative job attitudes. Although stress can be destructive both physically and psychologically, it is, nonetheless, essential for life. Human being's activities are stimulated and guided by stress at varying degrees. In fact without stress there would be no life at all. What is important for an organization and an individual to note is the regulatory aspect of stress. Unmanaged stress, whether positive or negative is undesirable. Thus determining the right level of stress helps in preventing both rust-out and burn-out.

SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

Typical symptoms of stress are manifested in physical, psychological or behavioral form. These include: irritability, emotional instability, feeling of inability to cope, constant hurrying, uncooperative attitudes, resistance to change, problems with sleep, excessive use of alcohol, drugs, and/or smoking, inability to relax, working long hours, chronic worry, nervousness and tension, high blood pressure and digestive problems.

SOURCES OF STRESS

A single or multiple factors can cause stress. An individual's perception and the characteristics of the job within the organizational structure play a significant role in determining the level of stress and the source(s) of an individual's stress. Typical causes of distress on the job include: role conflict and ambiguity; work overload; time pressure; and inadequate authority to match responsibilities. Others are poor quality of supervision; lack of communication (with others or with one's self); failure to show appreciation for a job well done; differences in values between the

employer and his/her employee; change of any type, especially when it is major or unusual; frustration; minor irritations; and insecure environment.

Eustress is caused by demands related to challenges of more responsibility or a change of situation that is looked upon positively. It is accompanied by a sense of satisfaction to be derived from facing challenges and being able to resolve problems maturely. Eustress is common among high-fliers. This group of employees, normally composed of workaholics, is competitive and sets high standards for itself. The group members virtually survive on high levels of stress and need constant restoration of physiological and psychological balance to cope with the high expectations they impose on themselves and at times on their colleagues. However, when the equilibrium is disturbed, eustress may turn to distress.

Work overload and work underload.

Stress runs “ from stressful under-stimulation, through healthy levels of stimulation, to unhealthy overstimulation” (Stewart, 1987:253). The “hectic pace” syndrome has been noted (Bunge, 1990 and Caputo, 1991) as the second major stressor in the library and information work situation. There may not be enough staff to match the speed of patrons’ expectations; some tasks remain undone; some partially done and worse still, there is not enough time to be thorough. Conversely, situations may arise where individuals find their skills underutilized. Under-utilization of skills may be as stressful as work overload because individuals normally want to feel useful and needed, and develop their skills further.

The actual or perceived failure to cope with too much work may be stressful to individuals. The extent of stress will depend on the individual’s ability to adapt to the situation and the cooperation one gets from the organization in managing such conditions.

Time pressures

The competitive nature of world markets, as an integral part of the work environment is very demanding on individuals’ time and energy. Over-pressurized working conditions cause stress to employees in organizations. Recent developments have speeding

up effect on corporate life. Consequently employees find themselves with less and less time for leisure and personal life in general. Ultimately they lose control over their time. Again the ability to manage these situations is determined by individual's ability to adapt to situations and the support s/he gets from both within and outside the organization.

Role conflict and ambiguity

Role conflict emanates from conflicting demands where different groups of people with whom an individual interacts hold different views on how that individual should behave. An individual may, therefore, find him/herself pulled in different, and in some instances, incompatible directions. Role ambiguity occurs under conditions where individuals are not certain about several issues pertaining to their jobs or conflict between what s/he wants to do and can do. "Much stress arises from being criticized for not doing a job well when the standards have not been made clear in the first place and training limited" (Stewart,1987:269). Issues to be considered include the scope of their responsibilities, the limits of their authority and that of others, the organization's regulations, work evaluation procedures and job security. The role played by ambiguity of roles in influencing job satisfaction, performance and reward systems, is not difficult to understand although no scientific correlation has yet been made between these elements.

Librarianship and information work is one of the professions that continuously suffer from tension-related problems between its professionals and paraprofessionals/technical staff because of unclear career structures. There seems to be no clear cut lines between skills required for what is considered as professionalism as it relates to various activities undertaken in libraries. This problem has been on for a long time. It has been observed in various studies conducted in the 1960s (Wasserman and Bundy, 1966) through the 1980s (Cronin, 1982), to the 1990s (Sturges and Neill, 1990 and Nawe, 1995). Apart from tension, the blurred roles between two categories of library workforce affects significantly the overall expectations of the employees.

Inappropriate delegation of work/assignments

Inappropriate delegation of work in terms of mismatch of interests or inappropriate priorities in terms of flow of priorities may be stressful. Definitely no one wants to do someone else's 'dirty work' often, or for no sound reason. Thus an effective delegator will make sure that delegated work is positively perceived, by matching as much as is feasible, with individuals' interests, the value attached to the assignment by others in relation to whether or not there are sound reasons for delegating relevant tasks at specified time(s).

Differences between an organization and employee values

Often times the values of an organization and an employee are not congruent. The extent of this difference has a close relationship with the extent of stress of an employee in coping with work-related stress. As argued by Davis and Newstrom (1989:485) "substantial differences can lead to significant mental stress as an effort to balance the requirements of both sets of values".

Unexplained differential treatment

Employees appreciate equal and just treatment based on a clear career structure. They want to perceive it as an accepted principle of management. As argued by Chruden and Sherman (1984:272-3) "the extent to which the employee perceives the reward to be equitable has been found to be important" in determining the level of satisfaction, and ultimately, the level of stress.

Undefined relationships can help to destroy the cohesion of an organization, while job satisfaction has a tremendous impact on giving personal identities as well as institution's identity, particularly to labour intensive institutions such as libraries (Conroy, 1984:21). In the library work situation the degree of clarity of authority structures in relating to patrons and colleagues has a strong bearing on the level of stress and strategies for managing it. Under library working environments the stressors are normally of two types: those based on individual's characteristics and those emanating from external factors. It is also ironical that in library environment same factors act as both sources of satisfaction and stressors (Bunge, 1990:115):

Other people, both patrons and colleagues, are a chief source of satisfaction, but they can also be important sources of stress. We take joy in the variety that our work offers, but the accompanying fragmentation and lack of predictability can be frustrating. Learning all the time from challenging responsibilities can be fulfilling; but sometimes it seems that the more we know the more we should know, and at times the challenge seems overwhelming.

Change

People resist change because of the uncertainty of its likely impact. In a working environment it may disrupt social relationships. Employees would not like to see their relationships disrupted if they are not assured of a better future. Therefore change of any type, especially when it is major or unusual, and not well assimilated by the employees, even where it is for their own good, may be stressful. Management's assumption that its thinking is rational and that of employees is not does not hold water. People have every reason to view change with suspicion. Who would like to lose the security provided by what is familiar to him/her? Change is inconvenient for it disrupts the status quo. Employees definitely contextualise any change within this mindset. Thus change needs to be managed properly such that a right amount/level of stimulation and acceptance is maintained for respective working groups/individuals to manage stress respectively.

Technology is changing the nature of librarianship tremendously. Library and information work professionals are now faced with the growth of specialties within the discipline. In addition, they also deal with an expanding range of issues. Each of these development trends carries with it the positive and negative elements. There are "the dramatic and liberating benefits of information technology", on the one hand, and the "new time demands, knowledge/skill deficiencies, and psychological pressure" (Kupersmith, 1992:8) on the other. Overselling of technologies causes anxiety, surfacing in the form of irritability and resistance to learning about the computer, and in extreme cases, an outright rejection of computers and what they can offer. Apart from the demand for new and different skills, new technology raises the fundamental issue of the change in the nature and perception of the library workforce:

Whatever its undoubted benefits, in daily practice the expansion of end-user searching tends to further erode the perception of expertise. It gives the librarian less control over events, and in many cases less prestige, than the reference-expert or mediated-search models. At those moments when the person who once functioned as an expert searcher is reduced to the role of CD-ROM attendant, fiddling with paper jams and spent ink cartridges, the question becomes one of dignity (Kupersmith, 1992: 9).

This development calls for an increased need for continuing education in order to manage change without undue stress. Employees need to be psychologically prepared for the undesired effects of technology, including the loss of jobs or need for constant retraining as skills become obsolete, and stressful situations resulting from the imbalance between the realities and the overseeing of technologies dominate the scene. The most important thing to note and appreciate is that change is not only ubiquitous, but also continuous and universal. There is no simple or single solution in dealing with it, other than having an open mind and the will power to face it positively.

Frustration

Frustration normally results from a blocked goal and the extent of frustration is determined by the degree of motivation. Frustration could be handled by matching motivators with supporting resources so as to keep the challenges within the employees' ability to handle them.

Dealing with feelings of incompetence

The library and information workforce is interested in "serving information needs of clientele... even in a time of significant library automation" (Conroy, 1984:21). Actual or perceived failure to meet this requirement is noted to be stressful. Bunge (1990) noted that failure to serve patrons' needs, finding an answer too late and not knowing the resources ranked third as a source of stress among public services librarians. For instance, "the riotous non-uniformity of CD-ROM systems may be necessary and even salutary as vendors compete to improve and refine their proprietary user interfaces, but librarians generally have little chance to

practise on these heavily used systems” (Kupersmith, 1992:9) and yet they are expected to be experts in their use. This situation makes them more vulnerable to effects of performance anxiety, expressed in feelings of inadequacy.

Responsibilities unmatched to support systems

Accountability for volume of high-quality work not backed by sufficient on-and off-the-job training, good supervision and adequate communication mechanism within an organization have been noted as common stressors (Davis and Newstrom, 1989:487-8). Experience in the form of ample exposure, practice and training to deal with stressful situations is an invaluable resource for facing such situations more positively (Wilson and Rosenfeld, 1990:101).

Other sources of stressors in this category are lack of autonomy and control embedded in complex bureaucratic structures. In order to combat these problems organizations could simplify bureaucratic structures. This could be supplemented by concrete training and staff development programmes, time off, sabbaticals, which meet various working tools extending from job skills and interpersonal skills to enhance an all-round support system between its employees.

WHY MANAGE STRESS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Stress is a major cause of low productivity, high absenteeism, poor decisions, misguided judgement, misallocation of resources, and poor morale. There are several reasons as to why organizations should take account of stress and should do something about it:

- They have the social responsibility to provide a good quality working life
- Excessive stress causes illness
- Excessive stress leads to high absenteeism
- High turn over of staff
- It can result in inability to cope with the demands of the job (this creates more stress)
- Excessive stress can reduce employees effectiveness and therefore organizational performance
- Poor communication
- Poor decision making
- Poor safety records

- Law suits/litigation
- Burnout of senior staff

STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Individuals' bodies are designed to react to both eustress and distress. However, both positive and negative forms of stress need tactful management. Effective stress management strategies require concerted efforts of both the employer and the employees. Management needs to understand employees' expectations, wants, needs and values, whether innate or learned, and adjusting as far as possible working environments to match these aspects of the employees (Wilson and Rosenfeld, 1990:101 and Rubin, 1991:279). There are several ways of helping employees cope with job related stress. These include improved communication, participatory organization/personal career development and the redesign of jobs (by expanding and varying some tasks in the case of work under-load), social support and biofeedback, and above all, through creation of atmosphere that encourages mutual appreciation of each other's efforts. A simple 'thank you', a pat on the back for a piece of work well done or any gesture of appreciation may prove invaluable in harmonizing working relations.

Providing opportunities for continual development of employees' awareness of possible challenges and demands could reinforce these measures and the resources they could draw on to cope with such challenges and demands, including tips on self administered techniques engraved in mentoring process or intelligently planned self stress management programmes for employees. For instance, creating environments that encourage sharing of experiences may stimulate introverts to share occasionally their experiences, and gradually develop habits of sharing their experiences with others. Doses of occasional sharing of deep feelings or thoughts can reduce stress significantly. Briefly, both positive and negative stress can be managed by:

- Giving employees as much autonomy as possible
- Acknowledging all people at work are subject to stress
- Building variety into routine jobs
- Providing opportunities for continuing education (through both conventional and non-conventional modes). When

opportunities are extended/advertised to non-organizational employees e.g. scholarships etc organizational employees, so long as they qualify, should be given high priority.

- Paying attention to time
- Recognizing and eliminating stress carriers
- Acknowledging employees efforts openly
- Paying an attractive retentive package to employees

How employees deal with stress depends on three things: their personality, tolerance for ambiguity and ability to live with change. While some employees revel in highly pressurized jobs, others fail to cope. An overworked manager may adapt successfully by delegating some work or take upon himself/herself the overload with a consequence of failing to meet the desired results. Likewise adaptive employees may deal with role ambiguity by seeking clarification from relevant persons while non-adaptive ones may withdraw from some of their roles. However, one of the key ways of coping with stress in general is to modify over-reactions to situations. Learning effective use of parasympathetic nervous system may reduce tendencies of viewing situations as psychologically or physically threatening. At an individual level, there are also self-administered techniques. These include:

Relaxing

Learn to take short breaks throughout the day. Sit-down and get comfortable, slowly take a deep breath in, hold it, and then exhale very slowly, with your whole body relaxed, and your mind fixed on a positive past experience. Get sufficient rest at night, about eight hours sleep.

Acknowledging different point of views

Just as you would like your views to be considered, you also need to listen to other people's views. Your friends may have different ideologies from yours. Do not force them to change their views, nor let them force you to agree with them. Accept the situation as a reality of life. The chances of managing stress are greater if you act responsibly.

Setting realistic goals

Make sure that goals set are guided by SMART principle. Human beings always want to see output. The chances of failing to see output of goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound is very slim. Breaking tasks into small units may help in prioritizing activities and in producing noticeable results within a short period. The feeling of completing one activity after another may be stimulating in moving further and may control stress to a desirable level.

Living a healthy life

Physical exercises provide relief from stress. Develop a regular exercise program (walking, jogging, yoga etc) to help reduce the effects of stress before it becomes distress. Remember stress accumulates very quickly. Always be on the watch out on your individual signs of stress. It could be stomachache, irritation, too much worrying etc.

Apart from exercise, watch your other habits. For example, taking balanced diet help in providing all the necessary energy needed during the day. Be mentally and physically alert to deal with stress. Avoid non-prescription drugs and avoid or minimize alcohol use. Be mindful of the effects of excessive caffeine and sugar on nervousness. Cigarettes restrict blood circulation and affect the stress response.

Operating with a principle of “pace not race”

Unprecedented changes are driving people at a speed never experienced before. Everywhere there are deadlines to be met, and in most cases, within a short notice. Because of almost instant communication facilities, people’s expectations have gone beyond imagination. Nonetheless, where possible, try to plan your schedule ahead of time, and give yourself reasonable time to get things done. So if you frequently check your watch or worry about what you do with your time, learn to take things a bit slower. Certainly, there is always something that needs to be done, and there will never be enough time to do everything that needs to be done. One of the best ways to go about this problem is to list tasks according to the order of their importance and to deal with them accordingly by setting realistic targets. At the end of any targeted period what has

been achieved can be measured against the original workload. This might help to build confidence and a sense of satisfaction and in the course ease the level of stress. Recognize that you can only do so much in a given period; and that be guided by the principle of “pacing rather than racing”.

Relating to events according to demand

Learn to adjust your approach to events according to demands. Not all situations in life require competition. Also learn to take responsibility for your actions as appropriate instead of looking for scapegoats. Think through whether the situation is your problem or the other's. But do not be too hard on yourself or others. Try as much as is possible to be positive in life by learning from mistakes rather than taking condemnation approach. Learn how to be a rational thinker!

Apportioning day/time appropriately

Balance your family, social, and work demands with special private times. Develop a realistic schedule of daily activities that includes time for work, sleep, relationships, and recreation. Use a daily “things to do” list. Use time and energy as effectively and efficiently as possible! Improve your physical surroundings by organizing your office and making sure that the place is clean. Hobbies are good antidotes for daily pressures. Unwind by taking a quiet stroll, listening to calming music, meditating, or any other activity that has a quieting/relaxing effect.

Sharing time and experiences with friends

Friends can be good medicine. Daily doses of conversation, regular social engagements, and occasional sharing of deep feelings and thoughts can reduce stress quite nicely.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING RUST-OUT AND BURN-OUT

Studies on burnout in libraries are very few. However, burnout seems to be not a very common phenomenon in libraries where application of information technologies is not very sophisticated. Stern and Yitzhaki (2000) in their study on burnout among librarians in Israeli universities, noted that on the average burnout

was very low. Their sample consisted of 218 respondents (one third of the population) from five University libraries in Israel, with most respondents being over 40 years of age. From my own experience when the University of Dar es Salaam library, in Tanzania, began automating its services, about 60% of the staff were apprehensive, despite the fact that there had been several efforts made (general staff and consultative meetings, training, counseling etc) in preparing staff for the change. Although no burn-out was noted, there was a clear indication that careful planning is needed in developing sustainable supporting mechanisms to assist staff cope with developments and changes. Nonetheless, studies conducted on technostress (Harper, 2000) indicate that as application of information technologies become more sophisticated, burn-out become more pronounced. Thus, burn-out should be taken very seriously at both organization and individuals' levels by putting in place preventive/coping strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

Ironically, major sources of both satisfaction and stress to the library and information workforce are patrons and their colleagues. They also experience stress in response to budget cuts; low status accorded to the profession; coping with the demands of an endless proliferation of software interfaces, varying equipment and configurations. They also experience stress in response to escalating user demands; lack of specialist knowledge; excessive workload; communicating with strangers; unsatisfactory working conditions; bad/exclusive management, and monotony of work. The worst of it all is working in an environment where a combination of imagining and information with innovation and imagination to create solutions tailored to specific needs is demanded in the midst of concepts and thinking geared to globalization. The ever-fading feeling of human touch in communication as machines dominate the scene makes the situation worse. This is particularly so for those professionals who were drawn to the profession by human touch and have tuned themselves to live through anticipated gradual changes. For them to work in a world where activities are increasingly guided by "upside down thinking"; an environment where life is under constant threat of uncertainty; and a world where a safety valve is

to be found in acceptance of living with uncertainty is obviously very stressful. Nonetheless, it is important for an organization not to be over anxious about stress-related behaviours. Some of these behaviours could be an outward sign of coping with stress. As already noted above, stress is a fact of life, and an appropriate level of stress is necessary for maximum performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The continual development of one's awareness is one of the most important general stress-management strategies regarding the type and mix of resources one needs for coping with one's source of stressors. Organizations may help towards achieving these goals by providing training programmes and counseling services that will help both type A (aggressive and competitive) and type B (more relaxed and easygoing) employees cope with supervisors who have different work habits and expectations from theirs. They can also encourage their employees to have and nurture work-related supportive networks. Good, supportive work relationships have a positive effect on job satisfaction and one's general sense of wellbeing, thus organizations should strive to concentrate on management styles that enhance supportive systems.

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