

Mental Stress in Social Work Environment

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Abstract

The contemporary world is characterized by rapid technological progress, increase in work pace and flow of new information. These all lead people to overall exhaustion and stress. Stress is a so-called excess or over-the-limit load. The objective of this report is to describe and investigate stress and its management in the social work environment and on the basis of the results of an analysis to propose solutions of the detected problems. To detect stress management we used the SVF 78 (Stress Coping Questionnaire) on the sample of 121 respondents.

Keywords: stress, mental load, social work environment

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1. Stress

Early definitions in literature describe stress as an external stimulus, physiological reaction, or an environment condition. Later definitions accentuate the active role which an individual plays in the process of stress, and they indicate that stress is better understood as a result of mutual interactions or certain unbalance between an individual and the aspect of environment (Cox 1978). What is important for the definition of stress situation is the relationship between the degree of a stressogenic situation (stressor or stressors) and the power (abilities, possibilities, etc.) to manage the given situation. We talk about the stress situation only when the degree of the intensity of the stressogenic situation is higher than the ability or possibility to manage it.

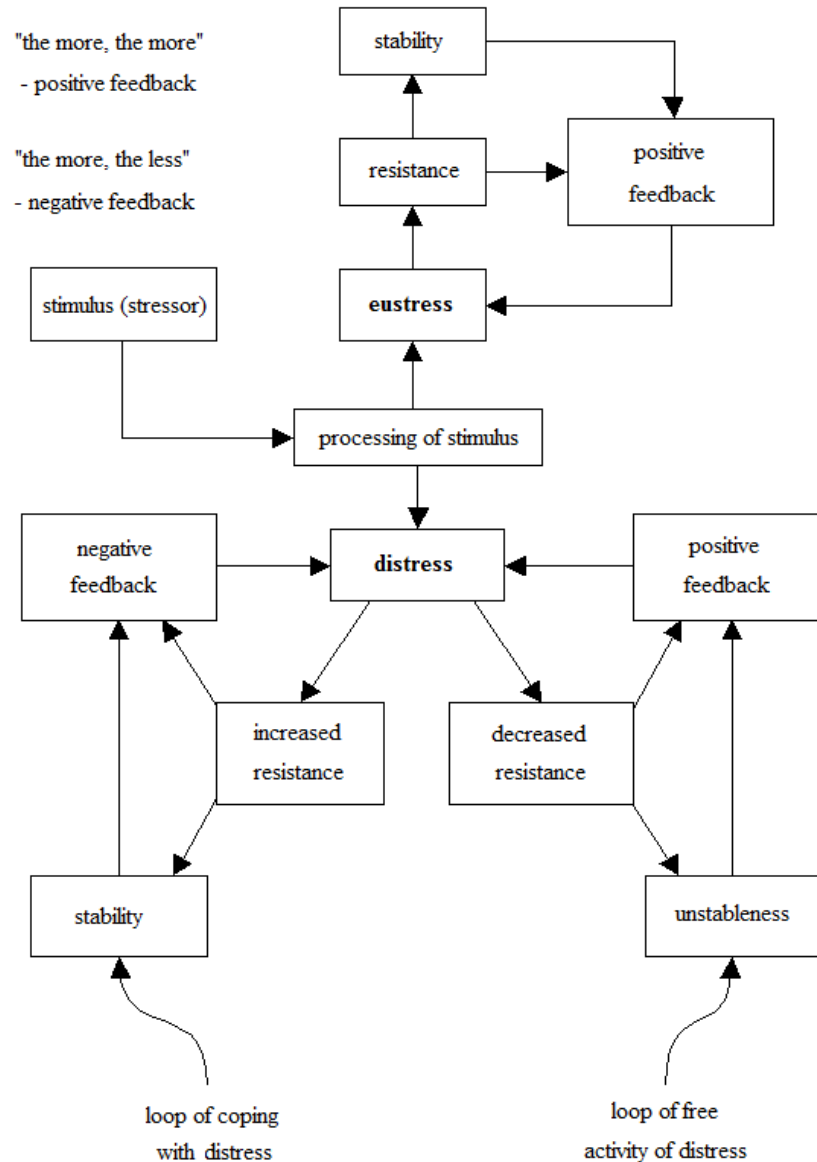
Generally we talk about a so-called excess or over-the-limit load, which leads to internal tensions and critical disruption of the equilibrium (homeostasis) of an organism. Over-the-limit load is a whole stressogenic situation. It can be only one stressor or a combination of more stressors (Dobříková 2007). Foster (1993) claims that from the human point of view, stress is any reaction of an organism to the activity of forces called stressors. He also points out that American Heart Association Company defines stress as a physical or mental tension caused by physical, chemical, or emotional factors. This definition could be expanded by claiming that stress is any situation which requires adapting. It is a permanent part of life which involves mutual interactions between an individual and the physical, psychological, spiritual, and social demands. Stress can be caused not only by life crisis, but also by all subsistence needs which may be stressors.

The founder of the study of stress is the physiologist Hans Selye. Schreiber (2000) paraphrases his original definition which says that stress is an unspecified (that is, stereotypically following various burdens) physiological reaction to any challenges posed on an organism. According to Pauknerová (2006), it is a characteristic physiological response to damage or threat to an organism, which manifests itself by means of the adaptation syndrome. It is a typical result of an increased burden. People vary in their reaction to mental load or burden depending on the sensitivity of the nervous system. Our resistance to stress can be positively or negatively influenced by other personality traits (tendency to risk, ambitions, responsibility). Coping with stress is however depending also on upbringing and personal experience the given person acquired in stress situations and in managing them.

In accordance with Richards (2006), stress can be divided into:

1. Positive stress:
 - a) opportunity to show one's qualities;
 - b) given deadline motivates to better performance;
 - c) positive emotional charge.
2. Negative stress:
 - a) performance decreases;
 - b) approaching deadline causes panic;
 - c) efforts to release the tension by over-consumption of food, cigarettes, and alcohol.

Figure 1: Loops of stress



Source: Plamínek 2008

Stress is described as an event or a series of events which usually cause reactions in the form of distress (bad stress), but sometimes also as a strain situation which leads to the feeling of joyful mood or eustress (good stress). The notion of stress is particularly ambiguous. It is mostly used in the sense of the activity of events (stressors), sometimes as a reaction to such events (stress reaction) (Joshi 2007). According to Plamínek (2008), eustress is the friendly face of stress. The more eustress, the greater resistance and stability in case of arrival of distress, and the more eustress (it is a typical positive feedback). It is therefore important to actively seek eustress. People who are able to search for and find joy in ordinary life situations or, eventually, in managing difficulties that life brings are strongly resistant to stress, thus they have greater presupposition to be stable persons.

The most important thing for every one of us is to recognize stress, understand it, be able to use eustress for our benefit, and deal with distress, overcome it in family, work, social situations, as well as living environment.

In the United States, 30-40% of incapacity to work is caused by mental disorders and stress, and the following main factors of it are stated by Schreiber (2000):

- too fast working process or disappointment with not being promoted;
- too much or too little work;
- displacement, change of work environment, change of co-workers;
- change in the nature of work or managing style;
- unclear relationships with the superiors, insufficient space for own decision-making;
- irregular or too long working hours, monotony of work;
- dangerous work (feeling of risk), violence at the workplace.

These all strongly depend not only on the nature and intensity of stress, but also on personality traits of an individual.

2 Stress and social work environment

In accordance with Szarková (2009), mental disorders such as mental load, frustration, and stress appear particularly among employees working in the areas of management and leadership, and they transfer mainly to the area of their complex ability to cope with a non-standard or conflict work situation on a professional level. Work stress threatens mostly managing workers and then professions in which the workers come in contact with other people (Pauknerová 2006). Vávrová (2004) adds that the managing workers would not be able to enter into interpersonal relations with other members of the group without satisfactory socialization. Mental load and stress can be the factors which positively or negatively influence motivation and efficiency of the manager. In the beginning, stress leads to greater performance and creativity. Certain level of stress is therefore meaningful – for example, tension during a speech, sports, hardening against cold, etc. Such stress is also called stimulated stress. However, stress may also lead to pathological habit. Permanent and excessive amounts of stress are very damaging and they block creativity. However, stress limit varies from person to person (Merg, Knodel 2007).

Several American and Japanese authors (Hirsch, Melton, Brigge, according to Szarková 2009) examined managers for stress. They started from an assumption that stress always arises in such interpersonal relations which require strong self-control and flexible thinking of employees and managers, block the use of usual stereotypes in behavior, demand quick decision-making and assuming attitude towards work problems and situations. These situations in interpersonal relations in the social work shape emerge particularly in the work of a manager. On the basis of research, a so-called vegetative threefold, which consists of three phases of stress varying in time and degree of intensity, was created. The three phases are:

- preparatory phase,
- emergency phase,
- recovery phase.

Based on an analysis of the vegetative threefold, the aforementioned psychologists divided stress into three types:

1. Physiological stress: originates as a result of the activity of extreme physical conditions of stimulation, motivation, and high aspirations.
2. Psychological stress: is above all a result of indirect intensive stimulation, motivation, and high aspirations.
3. Combined stress: is a result of both types of concurrently functioning factors which create stress.

From the viewpoint of successful managing and leading employees in social work process, it is very important for the manager to have an ability to identify and classify basic manifestations of the aforementioned maladaptive mental states of their subordinates, co-workers, as well as superordinates, to be able to find an optimal formula for communication and interpersonal relations with such people, and not to waste energy on things which are often unsolvable from their position. For this reason it is necessary to become acquainted at least with the primary psychosomatic reactions of those employees who are either in the state of mental load, internal conflict, frustration, or stress.

3. Research

3.1 Objective of research

On the basis of a selected sample of respondents, the main objective of this research was to detect and evaluate how managers and efficient workers cope with stress in the social work environment. We also wanted to compare the differences in the strategies of stress management between men and women. The responses illustrated how these respondents cope with stress. Based on the results we made recommendations.

3.2 Hypotheses

H1: We assume the statistical significance in the strategies of stress management of managing workers in the area of controlling the situation and of efficient workers prone to the strategy of acquiescence.

H2: We assume that the values within the individual strategies of stress management will be statistically significantly higher among women than among men.

3.3 Research sample

The research file consisted of 121 workers from selected insitutions, 61 of them were male and 60 female. There were 60 managers and 61 efficient workers.

3.4 Research method

In order to detect stress management we used the SVF 78 (Stress Coping Questionnaire) by Wilhelm Janke and Gisela Erdmannová (2003). The questionnaire demonstrates procedures which are used when coping with stress, that is, managing strategies.

Table 1: Description of the sub-tests of the SVF 78

Subtest	Strategies of stress management	Characteristics
1	Underevaluation	Attribution of smaller amount of stress, compared to the others
2	Denial of guilt	Emphasise that it is not own responsibility
3	Diversion	Diversion from burdening activities/situations, or inclination to situations which are incompatible with stress
4	Alternate satisfaction	Turn to positive activities/situations
5	Control over situation	Analyze situation, plan and peform a deal in order to control and solve the problem
6	Control over reactions	Secure or keep control over own reactions
7	Positive self-instructions	Self-attribution of competence and ability to control
8	Need for social support	Wish to ensure an interview, social support and help
9	Avoidance	Resolution to block or avoid burdens
10	Escape tendency	(Acquiescence) tendency to escape a burden situation
11	Perseverance	Inability to avert thoughts, reflect on things for a long time
12	Acquiescence	Give up with the feeling of helplessness, despair
13	Self-blame	Attribution of burdens to own wrong actions

Source: Janke, Erdmannová 2003

The questionnaire includes 78 statements which describe possible ways of reacting in situations when by something or somebody an individual is harmed, internally agitated or shaken. Separate statements are divided into 13 factors whereas each factor consists of 6 items. Respondents evaluate to what degree each statement corresponds with their way of reacting on a five-point scale (0 – not at all; 1 – rather not; 2 – maybe; 3 – probably; 4 – very likely). Statistical evaluation was carried out by means of the SPSS for Windows (software for statistics, version 16.0).

3.5 Analysis of hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: We assume the statistical significance in the strategies of stress management of managing workers in the area of controlling the situation and of efficient workers prone to the strategy of acquiescence.

Table 2: T-score of stress management strategies according to the job title

Stress management strategies	Job title	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Test criterion	Significance
Denial of guilt	managing worker	60	11.650	4.075	-2.598	.011
	efficient worker	61	13.541	3.931		
Diversion	managing worker	60	12.417	4.589	-3.722	.000
	efficient worker	61	15.197	3.572		

Alternate satisfaction	managing worker	60	9.600	5.384	-3.642	.000
	efficient worker	61	13.410	6.106		
Avoidance	managing worker	60	14.667	5.180	-2.805	.006
	efficient worker	61	17.033	4.037		
Escape tendency	managing worker	60	7.617	3.566	-3.776	.000
	efficient worker	61	10.115	3.711		
Acquiescence	managing worker	60	5.650	3.565	-3.987	.000
	efficient worker	61	8.525	4.334		
Control over situation	managing worker	60	19.283	3.211	-2.614	.019
	efficient worker	61	18.262	3.723		

Graph 1: T-score of stress management strategies according to the job title



The strategies of Denial of guilt, Diversion, Alternate satisfaction, Avoidance, Escape tendency, and Acquiescence were shown as significant. We were mostly interested in the managing workers. As it is visible in Graph 1, the managers most frequently used the strategy of Avoidance. This strategy was also most frequently used by the efficient workers. It means that the respondents were prone to avoiding burden. Another significant strategy was the strategy of Diversion, which was only with a little difference followed by the strategy of Denial of guilt. This means that the managing workers felt greater responsibility for the burden than efficient workers. Furthermore we assumed that efficient workers would be prone to Acquiescence, *which was confirmed*. The graph also illustrates that efficient workers reached higher values in the strategy of Acquiescence. It expresses the subjective lack of possibilities to manage burdening situations. These respondents might have had frequent feelings of helplessness and despair in relation to a certain stress situation and to own possibilities to manage them, which leads an individual to give up on further efforts to overcome the situation.

As it can be seen in Table 2, the managing workers reached higher values in the strategy of Control over situation, which made our hypothesis confirmed. We assumed that the efficient workers would show significance in the strategy of Acquiescence, *which was also confirmed*.

Hypothesis 2: We assume that the values within the individual strategies of stress management will be statistically significantly higher among women than among men.

Table 3: T-score of stress management strategies of men and women

Stress management strategies	Gender	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Test criterion	Significance
Diversion	male	61	12.672	4.603	-3.046	.003
	female	60	14.983	3.703		
Alternate satisfaction	male	61	9.115	5.027	-4.802	.000
	female	60	13.967	6.048		
	female	60	17.333	3.297		
Need for social support	male	60	12.567	4.630	-2.961	.004
	female	60	15.183	5.040		
Avoidance	male	61	14.541	4.985	-3.185	.002
	female	60	17.200	4.169		
Escape tendency	male	61	7.836	3.747	-3.115	.002
	female	60	9.933	3.659		
Perseverance	male	61	11.115	5.474	-2.943	.004
	female	60	14.083	5.622		
Acquiescence	male	61	5.852	4.312	-3.429	.001
	female	60	8.367	3.728		
Self-blame	male	61	8.082	3.938	-2.399	.018
	female	60	9.917	4.462		

Graph 2: T-score of stress management strategies of men and women



To compare the differences in the preference of management strategies between men and women we used the t-test for independent samples, divided according to gender. Statistically significant difference (5% level of significance) was shown in the strategies of Diversion, Alternate satisfaction, Need for social support, Avoidance, Escape tendency, Perseverance, Acquiescence, and Self-blame. As it can be seen in Graph 2, women scored higher in all strategies. The highest value was manifested in the strategy of Avoidance, which means that women tried to avoid stress more, and it involves the intention to block further confrontation with a similar situation. It may be a positive way of coping if there is no other way of blocking stress on the basis of regulatory possibilities of an individual, but it can also be a negative way if it only means avoiding burden.

The lowest values were reached by the strategy of Acquiescence. This strategy belongs to negative strategies. It expresses a subjective lack of possibilities to manage burdening situations.

It includes feelings of helplessness and despair in relation to a certain burdening situation and own possibilities to manage them, which leads an individual to give up on further efforts to overcome the situation. As it can be seen, men were less prone to Acquiescence than women. In Hypothesis 2 we assumed statistically significantly higher values in the separate strategies of stress management of women than of men. *This hypothesis was confirmed* because eight strategies were in accordance with the t-test statistically significant in favor of women.

4. Discussion

In our research we concentrated on the stress management strategies which are used in stress situations. The objective of this research was on the basis of a selected sample of respondents to detect and evaluate how managing and efficient workers cope with stress. We also wanted to compare differences in the strategies of stress management between men and women. Their responses offered us an image of how these respondents manage stress in the social work environment. The results of the t-test comparing differences in the strategies of stress management according to the job title of the respondents demonstrated most significant differences in the strategies of Avoidance, Diversion, and Denial of guilt. Higher average values were reached by the efficient workers. Both the managing and efficient workers are usually able to control their stress and burdening situations they frequently find themselves in during the working process. In accordance with the results of the t-test comparing the differences in stress management strategies of men and women, the most significant strategies were Avoidance, Need for social support, and the strategy of Diversion.

The results of our research illustrated that the respondents do not have serious problems with stress management and they know how to cope with it. They realize how necessary it is to deal with stress situations with calmness and composure but there were still some who have many difficulties with coping with burdening situations and who should learn to manage stress in order for them to preserve their quality work performance. Droppa (2008) emphasises the need for responsible care for human resources connected with stress management. As it was demonstrated in the research, there are significant differences between men and women in the negative strategies of Escape tendency, Perseverance, Acquiescence, and Self-blame, where women reached higher values. We suggested that the respondents should not avoid problems from the long-term point of view because it is necessary to face stress in life. As the respondents had problems also with Perseverance, or inability to avert thoughts from the experienced burdens, we suggest that they should find themselves some activities, hobbies, or work which would avert their concentration to other things. It is necessary to know how to be distracted from the work stress by means of various sports activities which contribute not only to one's physical but also mental health and at the same time create new, diverse interpersonal relations from different areas.

The respondents also had tendency towards Self-blame. If something goes wrong, it is appropriate to accept it as a fact, learn from own mistakes, and continue with the activity. According to Holková, Gyurak Babel'ová, and Vaňová (2008) it is important to have an ability to make right decisions and express confidence in the success of future activities. We suggest that those who were prone to Acquiescence should not overload themselves and focus always on one thing only. If a person faces a big problem not knowing how to deal with it, he/she should think about it thoroughly and decide whether it would be possible to divide it into smaller separate problems and deal with each one individually. Busy people should decide what needs to be done right away and what can wait. In order for the managers to plan a safe workplace without stress and chaos, we suggest that they should delegate their tasks, learn how to divide them into parts which would be interlocked, so that individuals in the workplace would know without hesitation how to orientate themselves in the assigned job tasks and work individually. Plans must be divided and each element must be clearly delegated. After finishing the tasks, their parts must be connected to one meaningful whole.

5 Conclusion

Every manager should feel the need to assign tasks. They should be acquainted with the conditions which guarantee that their performance is motivated by the effort to maintain personal efficiency in activities leading to the given objectives. They should also understand the circumstances which decrease their performance. Although managers differ in the need to give performance, the pressure from social environment increases and forces them to give an above-average performance. However, every organism has its limits which can be overstepped only occasionally and under special circumstances.

The only way how to increase resistance to stress is to positively influence own lifestyle and by means of the right lifestyle to maintain good physical and mental health. Following the suggested recommendations provides an opportunity to take another step towards healthier future in own life. It is prosperous to all people regardless of age, gender, or occupation because in the contemporary busy world there are still those who pay very little attention to these problems.

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