Chapter 02 - Stress

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. Is stress a stimulus or a response?

The response argument has been strengthened by work done by Hans Selye. Selye observed an identical series of biochemical changes in a number of organisms adapting to a variety of environmental conditions. He termed this series of changes the general adaptation syndrome (Selye, 1936). Selye’s discovery of the biochemical and physiological pathways of the stress response has been of immense significance. His concern to find the psychological mediators of the response to stress has, for example, created the field of psychoneuroimmunology, an interdisciplinary area of research exploring the varied and complex way the immune system reacts to stressors. A critique of Selye’s approach has been that it is too simplistic. It cannot, for example explain the stress associated, with difficult relationships in the workplace.

A number of psychologists also believe that there are sources of stress which impact fairly uniformly on individuals, for example in the workplace. The criticism of this approach is essentially the same as of Selye’s response approach – it is too simplistic. It does not take into account enormous individual differences in our ability to handle stressful circumstances.

2. Is there a ‘stress prone’ personality?

Another attractive facet of the appraisal concept is it broadens the notion of stress to include psychological factors, particularly personality variables. There is the notion of the hardy personality (e.g. Kobosa, 1979). There is a ‘Hardiness Institute’ and measures for the construct are vigorously marketed to psychologists and therapists. Hardiness incorporates the appraisal concept of stress by suggesting the specific cognitive mechanisms attenuating responses to stressors. ‘High hardy’ individuals see life as meaningful, controllable, and challenging. Seeing life as meaningful enables high hardy individuals to retain a basic sense of purpose. They believe in themselves and what they are doing. Their sense of control means they feel they make things happen rather than things happen to them. Their interest in challenge means, for example, seeing change as opportunity rather than threat.

3. Is too much or too little stimulation at work inherently stressful?

In the UK, the Health and Safety Executive, is developing standards of ‘good practice’ in the management of work related stress. These standards are designed to help organizations understand more about stress in the workplace and ways of reducing its prevalence (Mackay 2003). The government initiative in the UK is focussed on nine sources of workplace stress (Daniels et al., 2003):

- Poorly designed/managed workload;
- Poorly designed/managed work scheduling;
• Poorly designed/managed work design;
• Poorly designed/managed physical environment;
• Poorly designed/managed other sources of demand;
• Lack of skill discretion;
• Lack of decision authority or other forms of control;
• Lack of support;
• Poorly designed/managed procedures for eliminating conflict (e.g., bullying/harassment).

According to the above, having too little or too much stimulation at work could be considered stressful. This is because it can be seen to fit within each of the categories which are seen as sources of workplace stress.

Cox (1980) has provided one explanation of this. He suggested the effect of repetitive understimulating work on health occurs through what he termed an emergency stress response. This occurs when someone performing a repetitive task has to readjust his or her attention suddenly because it had drifted away from the task. He argued the impact on health of repetitive work occurs because of the physiological 'wear and tear' caused by these sudden and more frequent 'attentional shifts' experienced by those doing repetitive jobs. More specifically this 'wear and tear' seems to come from elevations in heart rate and noradrenaline levels—a hormone associated with hardening of the arteries. Many people at work face the opposite problem—having to cope with too much stimulation. Overstimulation can be as stressful, if not more so, than understimulation. Perhaps the classic example of a job in which large amounts of variable information have to be coped with is air-traffic control. The health costs in terms of ulcers, skin disorders, hypertension, and respiratory complaints have been well documented over many years (e.g. Martindale, 1977; Rose et al., 1978).

4. Is stress largely a white collar/managerial problem?

Even in non-supervisory job grades, role conflict can exist. In a well conducted study of the impact of organizational climate and other occupational stressors on ‘withdrawal behaviours’ (absenteeism, leaving intentions and injuries) in 252 nurses Hemingway and Smith (1999) found role conflict was the best single predictor of turnover intentions, higher even than having to deal with death and dying of patients.

5. How can roles become stressful?

One significant workplace stressor which, because of its transient nature, has until fairly recently been overlooked, is the impact of daily recurring demands, or in more everyday English - ‘workplace hassles’. In a study with parachute trainers, Zohar (1997) found the severity of hassles, defined and measured, over five consecutive days, was the best predictor (compared with other possibilities such as sleep loss) of end of the day mood, fatigue and the perception of workload. These factors included, for example, equipment being missing or malfunctioning, and having to deal with unscheduled changes. Another source of stressor in the workplace, and as potent as the more obvious sources of stress such as work pace and intensity stems from the
quality of the relationships we experience with colleagues, supervisors and individuals outside of the organization we have to interact with. In line with this view, two strands of research exist that explore the relationship between the quality of relationships and stress outcomes - social support and social stressors.

6. Could stress largely be designed out of most jobs?

Stress could be designed out of jobs by taking into consideration the many factors that make jobs stressful. These factors include the idea of workplace hassles, social support, social stressors and individual differences.

7. What makes worksite stress-management programmes more likely to be effective?

Worksite stress management interventions are likely to be most effective when the context and environment they are to be transferred to is taken into consideration. This would mean taking into consideration the specific situation of individuals, such as the factors contributing to their levels of stress and to what extent it was an external or behavioural factor. What has also recently emerged from stress-management research is using multi-method approaches in which two or more techniques are combined appears to be superior in producing more consistent and positive effects than single technique approaches (Murphy, 1996). This is particularly the case in the methods employing contrasting techniques, for example by combining arousal reduction and personal skills training through role-play techniques. These results suggest that the effects of combining techniques are multiplicative rather than additive.