

Reserve Bank of India
College of Agricultural Banking, Pune

HR & Leadership Channel

Stress Management¹

1. Introduction

'Stress' is experienced by people in many walks of life. High levels of stress can have very unwelcome consequences. Today, there is an epidemic of lifestyle diseases and lack of fitness even among the young professionals. These may well be linked to 'stress'.

2. What is Stress?

Richard Lazarus, in his book "Psychological Stress and the Coping Process", stated:

"Stress is the condition/feeling experienced when a person senses that the demands and pressures of a situation exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilise."

Thus, stress is engendered by the *interaction* between the *individual* and the *situation*. Therefore, certain individuals may be more stress-prone and certain situations may more stress- inducing.

An early researcher on stress, Hans Selye, noted:

- mild levels of stress encourages people to behave in a more active way; and
- excessive levels of stress hampers their performance.

He labelled these as '*eustress*' ('good stress') and '*distress*', respectively. However, modern researchers use the terms 'pressure' and 'stress', instead. Thus, modern scholars regard 'stress' as a negative phenomenon.

¹ Compiled by Dr. Gautam Prakash, DGM & MoF, CAB, RBI, Pune. The material is for academic and information purposes only.

3. Signs of Stress

- Physical - listlessness, palpitations, nausea, headaches
- Feelings - anxiety, depression, irritability, fatigue, burnt-out
- Behaviour - withdrawn, aggressive, tearful, unmotivated
- Functional – diminished concentration, memory, planning, decision making, creativity, etc.

4. Causes of Stress

Both ongoing events (E.g. hectic daily commute) as well as one-off events (E.g. project deadlines, etc.) can induce stress. Characteristics of stress-inducing situations are:

- Unpredictability
- Less control
- Unfamiliarity
- Ambiguity; or
- Involving some kind of loss.

Resources to deal with stress include:

- personal coping skills (E.g. assertiveness, time-management, problem-solving); and
- the work/social environment (E.g. lighting/seating facilities at workplace, infrastructure, adoption of progressive management practices, etc.).

One's judgment is critical to cope with stress. In a challenging situation, people make two kinds of judgments:

- regarding the dangers involved; and
- regarding own resources to meet the challenges.

These judgments are reached based on past experience, learnings from others, reading etc.

5. Stress Management Strategies

At the individual-level

- Building greater awareness about the onset of stress
- Using the awareness to avoid the process of stress build-up
- Fresh analysis of the situation and available resources
- Acquiring skills of relaxation/meditation/mindfulness/positive thinking, etc.
- Building resilience.

At the organisational level

Nowadays, it is appreciated that some factors of stress can only be tackled by organisations (E.g. organisational culture/hierarchical structure of reporting, etc.) Individual-level strategies can only give limited respite.

Organisational-level strategies include:

- Analysis of stressful situations in the workplace (context, design and management)
- Creating a safer work environment (equipment, machinery, reporting structures, culture); and
- Regular monitoring and review.

Suggested Readings:

- Selye, H. (1956), "The Stress of Life"
- Lazarus, R.S. (1966), "Psychological Stress and the Coping Process"
- Parker-Pope, T. (2017), "How To Be Better At Stress" in The New York Times (July 24, 2017)
- Marston, A. & Marston, S. (2018), "To Handle Increased Stress, Build Your Resilience" in Harvard Business Review (Feb 19, 2018)
- "Stress Management" at www.mindtools.com