

High levels of workplace stress can lead to loss of productivity and even illness.



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STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

3.5

Illustrate the ways in which stress can affect behavior in the workplace



Dangers of Stress

Most of us know what it feels like to be stressed. We may feel under pressure about making a deadline, taking an exam, or giving a presentation in front of a large audience. We define stress as a response that occurs when a person perceives a situation as threatening to his or her well-being when his or her resources have been taxed or exceeded.³² Stress in the workplace can affect the behavior of people working in an organization, leading to poor health and absenteeism. Statistics show that 60 percent of illnesses are caused by stress, which costs the United States \$300 billion every year on medical bills and loss of productivity.³³ Let's explore how Laura and the other members of the WTRT staff manage different types of stress.

When Laura arrives at work the next day, she is determined to sit down with Abigail and discuss the financial dilemma at WTRT, as well as request her support for the marketing initiatives she would like to implement. But by 10:00 a.m., Abigail still hasn't arrived at work.

Laura feels frustrated but is determined not to let stress get the better of her. She decides to take matters into her own hands and picks up the phone. The first call she makes is to the station manager at the local radio station to see whether she can trade on-air time for free advertising in the theatre playbill. She carefully outlines her idea, but without giving any reason the station manager politely tells her he is unable to grant her request. Before she can attempt to change his mind, he wishes her luck and hangs up. Laura is puzzled, but she's not going to give up.

She picks up the phone again and calls a local restaurant to see whether they would be interested in collaborating on a "dinner-plus-theatre" deal. The restaurant manager seems friendly enough at first, but when Laura mentions Abigail's name, his tone changes. "You tell Abigail she still has an outstanding bill to pay from the last party she had here," he says angrily and hangs up.

Taken aback but undeterred, Laura makes some more calls to local businesses around town, and every time she gets the same response. Apparently, Abigail owes money to everyone in Abilene. Laura is deeply upset. If there is no goodwill in the

community, how is she supposed to make her ideas work? Just then, she hears Abigail announce her arrival. Laura takes a moment to calm down. She needs to ensure her emotions are under control in order to handle the coming confrontation with her boss. After a few minutes, she makes her way to Abigail's office and knocks on the door. "It's show time," she thinks, frustrated and nervous at the same time.

"Oh Laura, my angel! How are you settling in?" Abigail rushes over to her and gives her an enthusiastic hug. Despite her frustration, Laura smiles. Abigail's energy is contagious. At Abigail's invitation she sits down and gives her an account of everything she has discovered over the last few days, starting with the huge amount of debt owed by WTRT.

"I told you not to listen to Cheryl," says Abigail, her smile fading quickly. "She likes to exaggerate." Laura is prepared for this response and replies, "I've seen the documents myself, Abigail. Cheryl gave me all the files. The theatre is in real trouble." Suddenly the words rush out of Abigail in a torrent. "You have no idea how much stress I am under! Do you know how we stayed afloat for the last six months? I have been personally bankrolling WTRT by mortgaging my home. I spent all day yesterday trying to persuade the bank not to take away my house. I haven't slept in months and I'm exhausted from worrying about it. The theatre means everything to me, but I don't know how much longer I can carry on. Maybe I should just let someone else deal with it, because I'm pretty much out of steam."

Laura gives the tearful Abigail some time to compose herself. She can't believe what she has heard—Abigail has been pouring her own money into keeping WTRT afloat? What about the theatre's patrons, sponsors, and donors? Abigail snickers when Laura asks her about them. "Money from them? They owe me money. They send checks whenever they feel like it, but never the full amount they originally promised. Sometimes months pass before the donations come in, if at all. Our corporate sponsor went bankrupt, so that line of financing has been cut off too."

Laura sits back, thinking about her new coworkers. Cheryl is stressed because Abigail refuses to listen to her repeated warnings about the mounting debt, and she appears to be taking her frustrations out on Joey. Tony is stressed because Abigail won't let him choose the shows for the next season, and Joey is stressed because Abigail dismisses his social networking ideas and he has more work than he can keep up with. Abigail is stressed because her beloved theatre is in trouble and she has run out of resources to save it. Laura realizes she has been stressed since she started the job, but she thinks she has figured out a way to manage it.

"The key to fixing the problem is Abigail," Laura says to herself. "Although she has great charisma and the staff seems to be loyal to her, she needs to champion other people's ideas if she wants the theatre to succeed. I need to take the stress out of the situation, beginning with her." If she can get persuade Abigail to get on board with some of her ideas, she knows she can make a difference.

STRESSORS

There are many sources of stress in the workplace. **Stressors** are environmental stimuli that place demands on individuals. There are two main types:³⁴

- *Challenge stressors* are associated with workload, job demands, job complexity, and deadlines and are positively related to motivation and performance. For example, although Laura faces a number of challenges to implementing her marketing initiatives, she still feels motivated to accomplish tasks.



Stressors

Stressors: Environmental stimuli that place demands on individuals

- *Hindrance stressors* inhibit progress toward objectives; examples are role ambiguity or conflict, hassles, red tape, and highly political environments. These stressors are negatively related to motivation and performance. For example, Joey in particular seems to lack motivation; he is often absent from work, and when he does show up, he does not perform well because of the constraints placed on him by Cheryl and Abigail.

However, stress doesn't have to always be negative, nor is it a permanent condition. In the next section we explore different aspects of stress and ways of managing it.



THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Briefly discuss the level of stress each of the narrative case's characters is working under. Do you agree with Laura's assessment that changing Abigail's management style is the best solution to the problems facing WTRT? Why or why not? **[Apply/ Evaluate]**
2. List the challenge stressors and the hindrance stressors affecting each of the narrative case characters. Is it possible for the same stressor to be a challenge stressor to one person and a hindrance stressor to another? Explain your answer. **[Analyze/ Evaluate]**

STRESS-RELATED OUTCOMES AND WELLNESS

3.6 Discuss different outcomes of stress and the benefits of wellness programs

Although high degrees of stress can be destructive to our behaviors and harmful to our health, stress isn't always negative. For example, when Laura objectively evaluates the stressful situation she is in and realizes there can be positive outcomes if she can get Abigail's support, she experiences **eustress**, a moderate level of stressors that have constructive and positive effects on effort and performance.³⁵ Conversely, Abigail is experiencing **distress**, high levels of stressors that have destructive and negative effects on effort and performance.³⁶

There are three elements to distress:³⁷

- The *physiological element* is manifested as negative physical health effects. For example, Abigail tells Laura she suffers from insomnia and exhaustion.
- The *psychological element* appears as negative attitudes and emotions that can lower job satisfaction, among other results. For example, Abigail is overwhelmed by the theatre's financial burden and seems anxious and irritable.
- *Job burnout* consists of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and loss of interest in the job that can result from ongoing exposure to high levels of stressors. For example, Abigail appears to be on the point of giving up because of the stress she is under.

Eustress: Moderate levels of stressors that have constructive and positive effects on effort and performance

Distress: High levels of stressors that have destructive and negative effects on effort and performance

Managing Stress

Yet the good thing about stress is that it can be managed. Let's explore how Laura helps Abigail manage her stress levels.



FIGURE 3.4 Managing Stress

Reacting to Stress



Now that Abigail has revealed the truth about her personal and financial stress, Laura is determined to help her eliminate some of the stressors and cope with the distress in her life. Coping is the effort to manage, reduce, or minimize stressors.³⁸ There are two types of coping:³⁹ **problem-focused coping**, which aims at reducing or eliminating stressors by attempting to understand the problem, and seeking practical ways in which to resolve it; and **emotion-focused coping**, which is an effort to try to change a person's emotional reaction to a stressor by using positive language and distracting techniques (see Figure 3.4).

Laura takes control of the meeting and uses some *problem-focused coping* strategies to try to remove the cause of Abigail's distress. A subdued Abigail listens while Laura talks her through the marketing initiatives she has in mind, all the time reassuring her they will require very little financing to implement. When she has finished, Abigail stands up and starts pacing around the room.

Then she turns to face Laura and says, "I like your ideas about creating new sponsorship programs and setting up a booth at the local crafts fair, but you won't get any help from the local businesses around here. They never support WTRT!"

Laura replies, "I contacted a couple of restaurants earlier today and each of them mentioned outstanding bills that need to be paid by the theatre."

Abigail is upset that Laura now has this information, but she catches Laura's steady gaze and sighs. "Yes, it's true I owe them money, too."

Laura changes tack and tries to distract Abigail from her money problems for a minute by telling her about the staff's willingness to help implement the initiatives. Abigail protests when Laura tells her Joey is going to handle the online publicity. "He can barely do his own job as it is, and he never shows up for work!" But Laura is insistent. After a short debate, Abigail grudgingly agrees to give Joey a month's trial to prove he can be a reliable employee as well as adept at handling social media for the theatre.

Laura also broaches the subject of Tony choosing at least one of the shows for the next season in order to attract a wider market of theatregoers, citing the university students as a prime example. Abigail initially refuses to entertain the idea, insisting that she is the only one who can choose the shows. To resolve this conflict, Laura uses *emotion-focused strategies* by telling Abigail how supportive the team has been and how passionate they are about WTRT. Abigail softens, "I guess I have nothing to lose," she says quietly. Laura also persuades her to tell the staff the truth about WTRT's financial state and agrees to organize a staff meeting for the following day.

"Let's start by building goodwill in the community. We need to improve our reputation and our profile if we're going to attract new theatregoers," Laura says. "The more customers we can attract, the higher the ticket sales, and the sooner the theatre will be able to pay off its debts."

Coping: The effort to manage, reduce, or minimize stressors

Problem-focused coping: A type of coping that aims at reducing or eliminating stressors by attempting to understand the problem and seeking practical ways in which to resolve it

Emotion-focused coping: An effort to try to change a person's emotional reaction to a stressor by using positive language and distracting techniques

EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING STRATEGIES AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



Examining the Evidence

When faced with stressors in the workplace, employees often choose problem-focused coping, tackling the problems head-on in an effort to eliminate or reduce stressors. However, recent research suggests that emotion-focused coping strategies may be very useful in helping employees to maintain their immediate task-performance levels. Researchers Janaki Gooty and Jane S. Thomas of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Mark B. Gavin of West Virginia University, and Neal M. Ashkanasy of the University of Queensland suggest that emotion-focused coping strategies such as denial, mental and behavioral disengagement, and venting could be effective short-term responses for dealing with discrete emotions such as anger, guilt, or joy. Their findings not only showed a significant positive relationship between emotion-focused coping strategies and task performance; they also indicated

that people with high levels of emotional intelligence were more likely to choose emotion-focused strategies in response to their anger, guilt, and joy than were people with low levels of emotional intelligence.

Critical-Thinking Questions

1. What are the primary implications of this research regarding employee coping strategies?
2. What specifically can managers do to ensure that employees are using the most appropriate coping strategies to deal with their emotions in the workplace?

SOURCE: Gooty, Janaki, Mark B. Gavin, Neal M. Ashkanasy, and Jane S. Thomas. "The Wisdom of Letting Go and Performance: The Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence and Discrete Emotions." *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 87, no. 2 (June 2014): 392–413.

"But how are we supposed to generate that many audience members in such a short period of time? The actors will be arriving next month to begin rehearsals for the next season. Honestly, I'm not sure we can even pay them," Abigail says, anxiously.

"To start, I think we should start chasing the outstanding monies the patrons owe the theatre," Laura says.

"I can't do that," Abigail gasps. "The patrons who owe the most money . . . some of them are board members—they're my friends! What will they think?"

"Abigail, you need to be honest with the board members about the state of the finances. They need to know you've been personally keeping the theatre afloat and that you need their help. If they truly are your friends and supporters of WTRT, they'll help us get the theatre back on track again. Cheryl will support you in the meeting—you won't be alone."

Abigail puts her head in her hands and sighs before regaining her composure. "Okay, Laura—we will do it your way for now. Let's hope it pays off!"

"So do I!" Laura thinks to herself.

When she goes home that evening, she thinks about everything that has happened and all that is to come. Although she is pleased that Abigail is supporting her ideas, she can't help but feel a bit apprehensive about the difficult conversations with the board members that lie ahead.

Wellness

We've seen that there are different degrees and types of stress and various ways of managing it. In recognition of the implications of stress, some organizations offer wellness programs as a way of helping their employees manage stress and otherwise protect



By providing their employees with health benefits and wellness programs, Johnson & Johnson not only improved the lives of their employees but also saved \$250 million in healthcare costs over 10 years.



AP Photo/Daniel Huisshizer

improve their health. A wellness program is a personal or organizational effort to promote health and well-being⁴⁰ through providing access to services like medical screenings, weight management, health advice, and exercise programs. The main aim of the wellness program is to cultivate a healthier and more productive workforce that are more satisfied with their jobs.

Another major benefit of wellness programs is that they save organizations money by reducing absenteeism and lower the cost of providing medical insurance, both of which are major motivators for companies. For example, pharmaceutical company Johnson & Johnson claim that its wellness programs have saved the company \$250 million on health care costs over a ten-year period.⁴¹ Studies have also shown that effective wellness programs increase morale and reduce employee turnover. Nelner, an education finance firm, asked employees in exit interviews what they would miss most about working at Nelner. Most of the departing employees responded that they would miss the wellness program the most.⁴²

However, to be effective, wellness programs should be carefully planned. The most successful programs engage employees by inviting feedback and getting their buy-in through meetings, suggestion boxes, or staff surveys, and by tracking the level of employee participation and its impact on absenteeism, turnover, insurance costs, morale, and overall employee well-being. Managers are essential to a program's success, because they can communicate the many benefits to employees and lead by example by showing real commitment to the wellness program. The program's activities should also be attractive to employees and be designed to promote healthy eating and raise awareness of and knowledge about health. For example, the Capital Metropolitan Transit Authority promoted overall health and wellness by providing a corporate wellness program that offered access to two 24-hour fitness centers, personal trainers, smoking cessation workshops, and tailored nutrition assessments and advice. As a result of the program, absenteeism fell by 25 percent and morale increased.⁴³

More important, wellness programs should be fun! Walking and cycling clubs, golf, onsite fitness classes such as yoga, Pilates, Zumba, and corporate challenge events such as half-marathons are popular activities run by organizations.

In this chapter we have explored the impact of emotions, attitudes, and stress on individuals and organizations. As you have seen, reducing stress and resolving conflicts requires the ability to communicate with people with different attitudes, behaviors, and personalities.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Consider what factors contribute to your own level of stress. Under what circumstances are you most likely to experience eustress? Under what circumstances are you most likely to experience distress? Do individual personalities play a role in how people experience stress? Support your answer. [Apply/Analyze]

Wellness program: A personal or organizational effort to promote health and wellbeing through providing access to services like medical screenings, weight management, health advice, and exercise programs