

## A Qualitative Study on Workplace Stress: Fight or Flight Response

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### ABSTRACT

In today's changing scenario stress is a profound term commonly used at job. Stress has been affecting millions of people and it is defined in different ways over a period of time. Pressure and challenges are few terms used by individuals to define work-place stress. Work-place stress is a global challenge which is impacting the employees well being significantly. The research paper defines the sources of work-related stress which leads to an emerging of fight v/s flight situation. The second part of the paper includes the primary data analysis of 50 academicians who reciprocated variedly to the stress coping strategies such as taking social support, moving away from the work and other strategies, are also explained in the paper.

**Keywords--** Stress, work-related stress, coping

muscular tension, inability to concentrate and a variety of physiological reactions such as headache and elevated heart rate. The word 'stress' is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "*a state of affair involving demand on physical or mental energy*".

The term *stress* was first employed in a biological context by the endocrinologist Hans Selye in the 1930s. He later broadened and popularized the concept to include inappropriate physiological response to any demand. In his usage *stress* refers to a condition and *stressor* to the stimulus causing it. It covers a wide range of phenomena, from mild irritation to drastic dysfunction that may cause severe health breakdown.

Selye published in 1975 a model dividing stress into eustress and distress. Where stress enhances function (physical or mental, such as through strength training or challenging work) it may be considered eustress. Persistent stress that is not resolved through coping or adaptation, deemed distress, may lead to anxiety or withdrawal (depression) behavior.

Research on coping and the methods individuals use to deal with stressful situation has a long history. Lazarus (1990) defined coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person. Therefore different coping strategies have been found to deal with different stressful situations.

### I. OBJECTIVES

The paper focuses on the emerging factors of work-related stress. It also focuses on the understanding of the individuals to various stress coping strategies.

### II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The questionnaire filled by 50 academicians is used as the primary source of data along with the secondary data from published research papers and journals.

### III. INTRODUCTION

**Stress** is a term in psychology and biology, first coined in the biological context in the 1930s, which has in more recent decades become a commonplace of popular parlance. It refers to the consequence of the failure of an organism – human or animal – to respond appropriately to emotional or physical threats, whether actual or imagined. Stress symptoms commonly include a state of alarm and adrenaline production, short-term resistance as a coping mechanism, and exhaustion, as well as irritability,

### IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hans Selye defines "stress" as: the *state characterized by a specific syndrome called "the general adaptation syndrome" (GAS)*. Selye noted that a person who is subjected to prolonged stress goes through three phases: Alarm Reaction, Stage of Resistance and Exhaustion. He termed this set of responses as the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS). This general reaction to stress is viewed as a set of reactions that mobilize the organism's resources to deal with an impending threat.

Therefore it becomes indispensable to find out ways and means of combating the harmful effects of stress. A lot of coping strategies have been found in the past to cope up with the negative consequences of stress but before a coping strategy is selected, a stressor must be appraised. This cognitive process of appraisal consists of a continuous, evaluative process of categorizing the encounter (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Two types of appraisal have been described. First, primary appraisal is an evaluation of what is at stake. In contrast, secondary appraisal is an evaluation of the stressful situation with respect to what coping resources and options are available (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized coping behaviour with two different types of strategies. Strategies may include problem-focused coping, which is employed when the individual determines that a harmful, threatening, or challenging situation is amenable to change, or emotion-focused coping, which occurs when it is judged that nothing can be done to modify a harmful, threatening or challenging situation. They also identified eight ways of coping (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988) when faced with a stressful situation, including confrontive coping, distancing, self-control, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escaping-avoidance, planful problem solving, and positive appraisal. They believed that these eight ways of coping reflected two basic styles of coping: Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

The task of identifying the mechanisms through which coping may be related to outcomes has been approached from several directions. Wheaton (1983) and Kobasa (1979), focused on the characteristics of the personality that are antecedents of coping. The underlying assumption is that personality characteristics dispose the person to cope in certain ways that either impair or facilitate the various components of adaptational status. Billings and Moos (1984), assessed the ways in which individuals cope with a recent stressful event; they found

such coping to be related to depression. A third approach is to focus on characteristics of the stressful situations that people experience. Studies in which the researchers assess how people cope with situations in which they have no control over the outcome illustrate this approach (e.g., Shanahan, De-Nour, and Garty, 1976). A fourth and more sophisticated approach, which is illustrated by the work of Pearlin and Schooler (1978), is to consider the relative contributions of personality characteristics and coping responses to psychological well-being.

## V. CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

### SOURCES OF WORK STRESS

The causes and stressors of work-related stress are different for every individual. Research findings reveal an interesting outcome of work-related stress as the mismatch of the demand and pressures of skills and knowledge. All the stress an individual faces is not bad always but the long working hours, poor communications or badly designed shifts can have a negative impact on the individual's health and growth. The work-related stress is inevitable and its effects can be seen in the below mentioned areas:

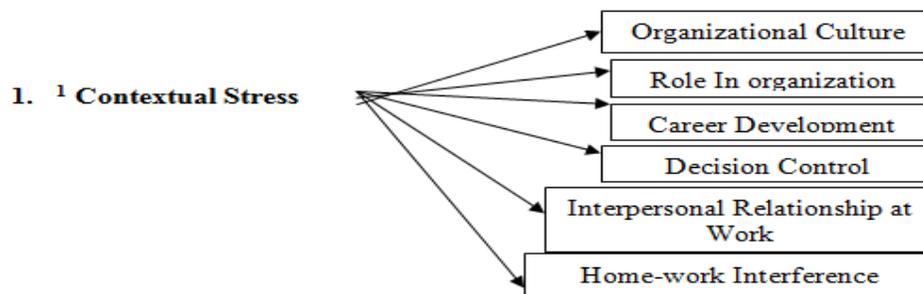
**Emotional disorders** which include aggression, lack of concentration, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, etc.

**Physiological disorders** include high/low blood pressure, Breathing issues, gastrointestinal disorders, etc.

**Behavioral disorders** cover poor performance, withdrawal, addiction to drugs, etc.

The stress can be contextual or Content Related the same is defined below.

## VI. CONTEXTUAL AND CONTENT FACTORS- SOURCES OF WORK-RELATED STRESS



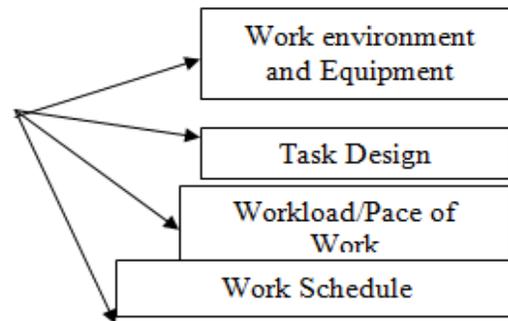
The varied contextual work related factors in an organization include poor communication, less support of problem solving, non-clarity of organizational goals. When an individual has role ambiguity and unclear goals the work-related stress aggravates as an individual feels

worthless of oneself. Each individual looks in for career opportunities and promotion in their present job along with pay security and pay, absence of these add to ones stress. Jobs add responsibility but the sense of accountability gives lot of confidence on the individuals and the decision

making power if not given one feels insecure. Work-places where an individual is not given the speech of freedom with sub-ordinate and superiors with the conflict all time adds to ones stress level. A work-life balance is a big

challenge one has to face and poor support system from the family is an icing on the cake for contextual work-related stress.

## 2. 2 Content Work-related Stress



A place where an individual spends more time than home looks for good environment and facilities as it supports the working functions. The task designing is not done appropriately as it might use fewer skills and has more uncertainty, meaning less tasks they all increase the stress level of an individual and reduces the productivity at workplace. One should always be ready for work pressures but as rightly said excess of everything is bad so is at work. If an individual is overloaded or under loaded with work, one loses interest. Poorly managed shift working, the poor work schedules, no social support at work are all related to content related work-stress which hampers the working of an individual.

## VII. FIGHT V/S FLIGHT RESPONSE

The driving force of behavior the “fight-or-flight response” also called as “stress response” or “acute stress response” was scientifically described by in 1920s by a Harvard-trained cardiologist named Herbert Benson. This response is the survival mechanism by people to react quickly to the “attack” mode or the threatening situation. Understanding the fight or flight response help to have a greater insight about our reaction when one is stressed out. The human body’s sympathetic nervous system is responsible for readying the body for either of these reactions. It stimulates the adrenal glands, which in turn trigger the release of adrenaline and nor adrenaline in the body which is responsible for such a response which in return causes the body to increase its heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. The fight or flight (run away) response is the result of an individual’s understanding about the particular situation.

## VIII. COPING STRATEGIES OF STRESS

Lazarus views coping as a dynamic process, specific not only to the presenting situation but also to the stage of the encounter. According to Folkman and Lazarus

(1988) coping is not merely a response to tension. Rather an individual’s cognitive appraisal influences an individual coping; also one’s cognitive appraisal subsequently influences emotional arousal.

Coping is defined as constantly changing behavioral and cognitive efforts to handle particular external and internal pressures that are appraised as taxing or not under the resources of the person (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.141)

Ways of Coping Mechanisms used by (Lazarus, et al. 1986) **Problem focused** coping: Confrontative Coping -Seeking Social Support -Plan full Problem-Solving - **Emotion focused coping**: Self-Control -Seeking Social Support -Distancing -Positive Appraisal -Accepting Responsibility -Escape/Avoidance

For the problem-focused coping, it involves taking steps to change the source of the stress, whereas emotion-focused coping involves efforts to change one’s emotional response to the stressor. Problem-Focused Coping uses rational approach that seeks to change the situation by changing either something in the environment or the person’s interaction with the environment (Lazarus & folkman, 1987). Therefore, it is very clear that this type of coping seeks to reduce the demands of the situation. According to psychologists, Problem-focused coping often increases feelings of control and reduces stress and its adverse consequences, understanding that the situation can be changed.

Emotion focused coping is used to manage all forms of emotional distress including feeling of depression, anxiety, frustration and anger. Research shows that people use both types of strategies to take charge of most stressful events (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). The preference of one type of coping mechanism over another is determined, in part, by personal style and also by the type of stressful event; for example, people typically employ problem focused coping to deal with potential controllable problems such as work-related and family-related problems, whereas stressors perceived as less

controllable, such as certain kinds of physical health problems, calls for more emotion-focused coping.

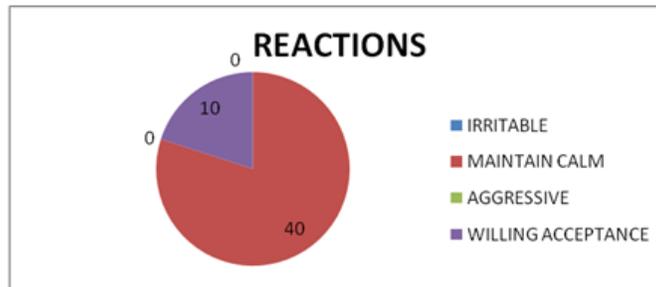
*Do you find your job stressful?*

**IX. DATA ANALYSIS**



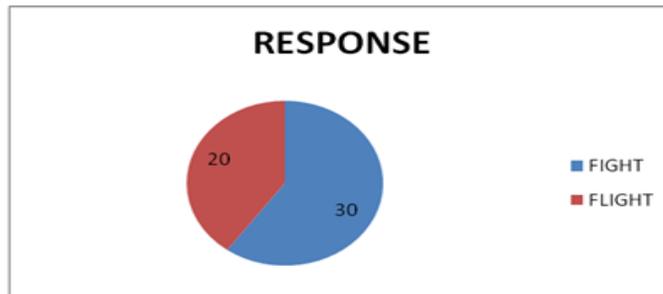
Out of 50 academicians, 30 stated that they find their job stressful where in 20 stated they do not find their job stressful.

*How you react when something unplanned comes in your work schedule?*



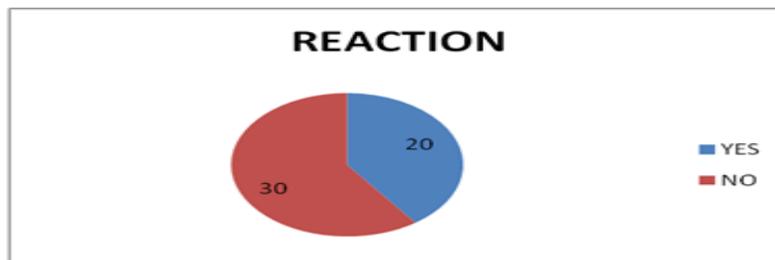
The above graph states that 40 respondents maintain calms, 10 willingly accept the work and none get irritated and aggressive at workplace.

*How do you respond to a situation that you cannot change?*



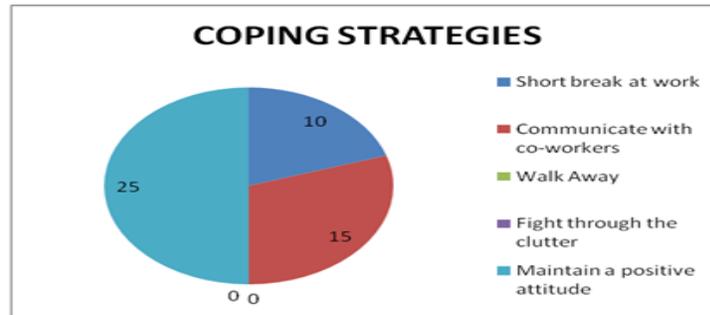
30 respondents said that they fight with the situation wherein 20 respondents get away or give up in front of that situation.

*Do you have a negative reaction in your attitude at home cause of work-related stress?*



The graph states 30 respondents do not react negatively and do not carry their workplace stress at home where in 20 respondents do carry their stress at home.

*What strategy do you imply to cope with stress?*



25 respondents believe maintaining a positive is best to handle stress at work where in 15 feel more at ease when they communicate with their co-workers and 10 respondents feel taking a short break can be a stress buster. The fighting with the clutter and walking away from work is not the solution to cope with stress.

## X. RECOMMENDATIONS

As observed from the analysis and views of people it's clearly stated stress is inevitable no matter what kind of a job one is into. Stress at workplace is found at its peak due to which the behavior is affected. It is recommended that each individual in spite of work at workplace one should be given freedom to speak with co-workers and superiors. Maintaining a positive attitude is highly recommended as there is no escape to stress and one cannot work out from work. Ensuring a work-life balance and not carrying the work at home can help an individual to reduce stress.

## XI. CONCLUSION

Traditional society has witnessed revolutionary transformations over a period. It has transformed from a subsistence society to a market-oriented commercial one. Unprecedented technological development has made the changes to occur at faster speed than ever. The commercialization of economy has converted the natural cordial social relations into a planned commercial relationship. This situation is supposed to be the underlying factor for stress in life. But there are several other factors which are directly or indirectly related to stress. In interaction with each other and with the socio-economic set-up, these factors also play a role of determinant of stress. The current paper also suggests coping strategies to minimize the detrimental effects of stress emerging out.

By discovering significant variables for stress, effective coping strategies can be designed accordingly. And in order to prevent stress becoming an undesired part of people's lives, it can be incorporated in school and

college curriculum. It will also be helpful to the sociologists, psychologists, medical therapists, planners and policy makers to formulate such policies which may be compatible with the coping strategies and help in developing a harmonious stress-free society.

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