

stress survival

By Arva Shikari



Stress is an inevitable reality and everyone needs to find their own ways of beating it.

Stress is an inevitable part of work life. A recent ASSOCHAM survey lists construction, shipping, banks, trading houses, electronic and print media, courier companies, SSI, retail, card franchise companies, and even government hospitals as high stress prone zones... akin to chart toppers like BPOs, call centres and IT companies. The pressure is truly spreading everywhere!

There is ample evidence of the fact that stress impacts employee health and productivity. And of late, hundreds of articles have been written on how financial stress due to the current economic recession is having a dangerous impact on health and productivity. Results from the AARP survey, "Impact of Economy on Health Behaviors" reveal that 20 per cent of people 45 and older reported health problems due to financial stress; 22 per cent have delayed seeing a doctor due to cost; 16 per cent had to use retirement savings or other savings to pay for medical care; 21 per cent have cut back on other expenses to afford their medical care; and 16 per cent are not confident they will be able to afford health care in 2009. Bob Gallo, AARP Illinois Senior State Director is reported to have quoted that right now "people are increasingly concerned about their jobs, retirement savings and simply

being able to provide for their families and it's taking a major toll on their health".

India Inc. has woken up to the menace of stress and companies are taking to novel ideas like teaching employees dancing and music, trekking, etc. to reduce stress at the workplace. For instance, Tata Consultancy Services Ltd. Has a variety of clubs... Theatre Club, Bibliophile Club, Adventure & Trekking Club, Fitness Club, Sanctuary Club, Music Club and Community Services Club, etc. to provide employees that much-needed break. Infosys Technologies Ltd. focuses on increasing self-awareness and providing employees with guidance on how to cope with stress through a series of workshops by experts. Several organizations conduct off-site picnics, games, and inter-departmental competitions. Some companies use mentorship programs or promote open communication to improve interactions and camaraderie at the workplace. Some employ nutritionists to provide healthy food in office cafeterias and counsel employees

STRESS DENIAL MODE

Some people deny the fact that they are not stressed and ultimately become a victim of it. They remain in the state of denial and forget its potential impact on themselves, their work and family.

Many top executives would like to believe that they can indeed "do it all" and that they are strong enough to withstand whatever life tosses their way. Change, conflict, and pressure are the most common causes of stress in the present time. But in situations like this, one needs to take a step back and truly listen to one's heart and body. Trouble in sleeping, stiffness of back and neck, constant tiredness and irritability...are all warning signs. Stress cannot be avoided. First one needs to be aware that one feels stress and acknowledge it. Awareness of this is half the battle won.

(Source: www.strengthforcaring.com)

on healthy eating habits and lifestyle. Others are offering employees in-house counseling services or considering employing psychologists to counsel employees. Some organizations like Emami uproot employee stress through spiritual discourses and gyms for regular exercises to unwind and keep fit.

An article, "Recession stress soars" published on www.mirror.co.uk last year reports that firms are reporting growing numbers of staff going off sick and some doctors blame it on a condition called 'recession stress'. Workers affected said that constantly hearing about economic turmoil has caused so much stress they cannot do their jobs. Explains occupational health expert Meena Nanavati: "There is a growing opinion the non-stop grim news may be the cause. Some are more prone to pessimism and if it gets into a workforce it has a negative impact on health."

Business environment

The demands of the current business environment are increasing stress on HR professionals of today... and this is impacting their work, personal life, physical health and emotional well being. Expectations of better people management, coupled with deadlines and competition, is taking a toll on top HR executives. The constant changes in industry, ups and downs in employment markets, challenges of hiring and retaining best talent, aligning HR functions with business objectives in current environments are increasingly posing threats to their stress levels. What's more, the economic downturn has increasingly put pressure on HR heads to manage and stretch themselves to the hilt as far as talent management goes... innovating continuously with a view to optimizing productivity with lesser resources. Amidst the challenges of cost cutting, which invariably result in downsizing and layoffs, many top HR executives find themselves at the forefront of the action wielding the 'infamous axe' and taking on yet more stress as they take on the role all others in the organization fight shy of... the one who delivers the pink slips.

The current business environment is full of uncertainty and HR is not removed from its impact. In fact, HR has to take the lead to steer through the compelling situations that the business environment is causing with regard to the workforce.

"The last time anyone faced a situation like this was in the 1930s, so if there is anyone who is 98 (assuming they should have been at least 20 then) and is coherent... the rest of us are figuring out and learning on the fly," reasons Elango R, chief human resources officer, Mphasis.

According to Elango, "Managing the unknown, visualizing into the uncertain future, constantly calibrating and tuning the variables... and hoping to high heaven that you are on the right path... are responsible for increasing stress levels." He believes that the challenge is to take long term decisions without missing the short term. This requires skills, knowledge and thinking that are not called on in a growth environment. "In a growth environment, one's pre-occupations are different, and

having seen growth for years most of us are skilled at this. The current business environment entails a delicate tightrope walk balancing both the business interests and employee interests."

Taking a global perspective, Raj Raghavan, general manager human resources, GE John F Welch Technology Centre states, "This is one of the toughest times in any of our careers. However, it is getting us to think differently, challenge status quo and unlearn the old and learn new practices and processes. In such a situation, where one has to deal with many unknown variables, getting stressed is evident."

A major stressor for HR today, besides business and job risks, feels Ankush Mendiratta, director, human resources (South Asia), UTStarcom, is the issue of dealing with employee sensitization to news reports of other troubled company situations, which often gets magnified through grapevine. "With so many companies announcing zero merit-increases and continuing to downsize, employees get insecure about the future. HR departments have to work overtime to meet these challenges and yet ensure higher levels of employee engagement" he remarks.

Beena Handa, mentor, organization building, Claris Lifesciences Ltd., feels that the process of downsizing is painful for everyone, but more so for HR people as they are deeply involved in its implementation. "All of us are experiencing the fear of unknown and it is bothering us."

HUMOR AS A STRESS REMEDY

Humor is a wonderful stress-reducer. Experts say a good laugh relaxes tense muscles, speeds more oxygen into your system and lowers your blood pressure. Tune into your favorite program or comedy shows on television. Read a funny book. Attend comedy shows. Call a friend and chuckle for a few minutes. Share funny episodes with your spouse that can relieve stress as well improve communication. It even helps to force a laugh once in a while. You'll find your stress melting away almost instantly.

Dr. Lee Berk and fellow researcher Dr. Stanley Tan at Loma Linda University School of Medicine has produced carefully controlled studies showing that the experience of laughter stimulates the immune system, offsetting the immunosuppressive effects of stress (as said in the article 'Humor Therapy' published on www.holisticonline.com).

Humor is used to facilitate communication and avoid conflict. It gives us a different perspective on our problems. If we can make the situation lighter, it no longer feels threatening to us. With such an attitude of detachment, we feel a sense of self-protection and control in our environment. Bill Cosby says, "If you can laugh at it, you can survive it." It's sometimes difficult to force a laugh in tense situations. But that's precisely when you need it most. One trick for finding humor in the worst of situations is to blow things absolutely, ridiculously out of proportion. When your scenario reaches the point of absurdity, you begin to smile. The situation is put in perspective and you can calm down.

Remember humor about sex or gender, ethnicity, politics, humor or joking about tragedy or disease-related symptoms are considered humor exclusion zones.

(Source: www.holisticonline.com)

Work stressors

Studies indicate that the work stressors that currently bother top HR executives include narrow perceptions of department heads and employees on achieving organizational goals, unrealistic expectations, waste of resources, employee engagement, ability to remain detached and be objective while dealing with management and employees and being a robust problem-solving force in the organization.

Elango shares that he feels the impact of stress at work when managers and team members don't think through the entire cycle chain and only look to fix their little worlds, oblivious to the fact that they live in a connected organization and every problem has upstream and downstream implications. For him, stress is at its highest when "they start taking short term cost decisions without considering the humanistic angle."

Handa experiences stress when people work mechanically... like cut, paste, repeat without using commonsense, discretion and knowledge. She also finds it extremely draining when "team members resort to solving issues through a 'series' of e-mails rather than using a discussion-through walking across or on telephone."

Dealing with ambiguity takes up most of the time for top HR executives, because this comes as a task over and above regular activities. A considerable amount of time is spent on day-to-day employee engagement and communication activities, more than ever before. Mendiratta infers, "Amidst such situations, employees have an urge to connect with HR more frequently in a bid to get a sense on what the company leadership team is thinking on way ahead. As a result, the HR needs to constantly engage with the management and the employees on a day-to-day basis to prevent any miscommunication and alleviate misplaced fears. Amongst all this uncertainty, the challenge for HR is to come out with a convincing story for all." Recalling more peaceful times, he shares, "In easier times, one would get back home in happier moods. The cut-off from office to home used to be seamless and simple. But now the work days wear you out. With increasing pressures one actually gets back home with a mind still actively engaged in trying to solve situations."

For Raghavan, one stressor at work "is about what the various alternatives that I need to work on to engage employees and myself these days so that we are more productive and effective while at the same time being lean and efficient."

Research points that industry in which a person works also plays an important role in elevating stress levels. Handa confirms, "Claris is a pharma company doing business in more than 76 countries. For us, getting

approvals of regulatory agencies from all over the world is a basic requirement. Our blood pressure does go higher initially on the first day whenever we have regulatory inspections for the first time. At such times, anxiety levels are of the type when you get the question paper in your hand for a competitive examination."

The fallout of stress

As caretakers, HR executives are accustomed to recognize signs of stress in employees, but very few can recognize these signs in themselves. In balancing work schedules and family needs they may not realize that they are stressed. Or, they may realize there is a certain amount of stress associated with their daily routine, and may feel that they are dealing with it and coping appropriately.

However, stress can have a debilitating effect on health and relationships, and if not checked on time can push a person to a vicious cycle. The challenge is most people speed towards this or don't think it right to acknowledge and take a step back. Says Handa, "When I am stressed out my speed of thinking reduces and I take more time to reach a level of clarity. I also 'lose' things and become unorganized. Occasionally, it affects my sleep and there is depletion in energy level. I do not feel like keeping up my schedule of physical exercises."

Describing the negative impacts of stress, Elango adds, "You start to miss deadlines, tend to work harder, longer, your work quality suffers, you are not at home when your family needs you, your boss is angry, your family is angry, you are unhappy, you feel lousy, cheated, bitter... All this reflects in your work and slowly you enter the vortex of stress that can only pull you one way... down, if you don't quickly extricate yourself from it." The bottom line is you can manage your stress effectively, or it can manage you.

De-stressing @ work

Practicing regular stress management is good for long run. But, practicing preventive stress management helps in improving quality of life.

"Everybody reacts to stress in different ways and even deals with it differently," says Dr. Fatema Saeed, a practising physiotherapist. Describing how exercises can help de-stress, she says, "Moderate to intense aerobic exercise for longer durations and resistance training protocols of longer duration, lighter resistance and longer inter-set rest intervals, cause the greatest release of endogenous opioids (stress-busting or "feel good hormones") in the bloodstream and hence, help in relieving stress. This secretion increases pain tolerance, improves appetite control and reduces anxiety, tension, anger and confusion. Also, with regular exercise, the individual becomes more sensitive to the opioid effects so that it takes less of the hormone to induce a specific effect." Therefore, apart from improving physical fitness and overall health, regular physical exercise also has psychological benefits.

There can be no one solution. Everyone needs to find their own ways of beating stress. "I find that discussing

issues that bother me and arriving at some plan of action is the fastest and the best way to overcome stress at work" shares Handa. "Also, we have a practice of circulating humorous and interesting experiences or stories amongst senior persons under our 'Keep up your spirit' initiative, which certainly helps" she adds emphatically. It is true that humor and laughter can reduce stress and Professor Christopher LeGrow from Marshall University confirms it in an article on www.about.com.

For many people, colleagues help de-stress. "My internal communications head walking in to talk about her daughter, or ribbing a member of her specs, or being teased by the boss for my long hair, all of us pitching into get an impossible project going... everything helps" says Elango. "Even an impromptu gossip session with colleagues aids in de-stressing. We have a fun environment where work pressure is high but pressure is positive" he

avers. Motivational humorist, Scott Friedman also believes, "humor doesn't have to always be about silliness and laughter. Let it evolve naturally from an atmosphere of delight and this will automatically create a space for humor".

At work, Raghavan thinks teamwork is a great stress reliever as "it is a great opportunity to get together with colleagues, germinate ideas to turf tough times and execute solutions. This is what makes my day!"

Keeping a work life balance

Elango's stress indicator is his weight and tests. He says, "I have dropped 10 kgs (with a lot of effort) and my cholesterol levels are stable! Yoga, reading, uninterrupted Sundays, playing with my son... are my ways of relaxing." In addition, meditation helps him in a big way, and strangely, driving in traffic helps de-stress... "since I am singularly focused in steering my way to wherever and forget everything else".

Families play a major role in de-stressing for most. For Elango, it is important to have strong relationships at work, home and socially. He believes this brings relief and also ideas to do better. "Talking to my wife, watching TV with my son or reading to him, going home and finding his son awake only to wish him good night... this is what makes my day and all the stress appears worth it" he emphasizes.

Handa prefers to de-stress by getting into lighter moments. "Reading humor or exchanging jokes with my family, listening to instrumental music, walking, pranayam, arranging my belongings or swinging alone on a 'Gujarati jhoola'... work as mood elevators for me. I normally do some of these at the end of the day. Also, I am a people and family oriented person and hence being with them, having fun, exploring new things or helping other people is my sure cure from stress."

Mendiratta, on entering home, finds his 16-month old son at the door, eagerly waiting to pounce into his arms, and this, for him, is the best stress buster. For brief periods of time, Mendriatta switches off his iphone emails. "Sometimes, I just strap on my music and run a few miles to unwind. I also sometimes manage to find time to play a few games of squash." Also, 'coffee out' sessions with his wife work as terrific stress-buster for him. Evidently, the good old-fashioned coffee break is a very popular stress-buster. As a recent survey by CareerBuilder.com indicates, 49 per cent of us take at least one per day; 32 per cent take two or more. Pausing for a cup of joy sounds simple but truly does has its effects on reducing stress.

HC

STRESS BUSTING

Understanding what triggers your stress and how to deal with it helps in staying healthier. Here are a few tips:

- Develop a capacity for detached involvement. Be sensitive to personnel issues and individual employee concerns but resist the rescuer role.
- In times of processing downsizing of staff or upgrading technology get experts help. Even while dealing with seriously disgruntled or dysfunctional employees, collaborate with an Employee Assistance Program counselor. And, for widespread department tension use a corporate change/critical intervention consultant.
- Walk around the organization. Swap stories with employees on the work floor, become a bridge between management and employees. This rotation of different hats helps fireproof life with variety.
- Juggle various roles and responsibilities to promote autonomy by setting boundaries. Delegate work wherever possible. Train employees and supervisors on HR-related procedures. Allow vital interdependence between HR and employees; for instance, install a dartboard on a back wall for fun and competition.
- Organize productive team meetings for sharing a logistically and emotionally demanding workload. Build a fifteen-minute wavelength segment for group brainstorming and venting emotionally tough personnel issues - dealing with pink slips, reorganization uncertainty, battles with other departments, and cultural diversity tensions. Let team members acknowledge sources of work pressure as a group, assess the strengths and roadblocks affecting solid team coordination and cooperation.
- Listen to your family and friends as they know you best, and are often the first to tell you that you are stressed. Their insight may reveal situations or incidents that you weren't aware of-such as consistently being short-tempered with one or other family members. Seek their support to help ease workload, which in turn will help reduce your "stress load."
- Avoid being an over-achiever. Doing everything for everybody all the time can be rewarding, but it can also be mentally and physically draining. Seems the more you do, there's always more that has to be done-often without support from others.
- Learn to say no. If you find that you're being asked to do more than you can manage-whether physically, emotionally or financially-learn to set boundaries and remember that "no" is a complete sentence.

(Source: *A stress survival guide for HR professionals*, by Mark Gorkin, www.stressdoc.com)