Stress in the workplace

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Stress in the workplace represents an extremely important aspect for each employed person. Professional activity generally constitutes our main source of survival; it marks our personal and social life. Through all these financial, personal and social correlations, professional activity often involves an important source of stressors. In some situations, stress can be a beneficial and motivating factor in the activity conducted (eustress), but most of the times, it affects our health on the long run (distress). At the same time, stress in the workplace through burnout is the main factor incriminated for the onset of the “burnout syndrome”. Stress in the workplace may be prevented through certain recreational activities, such as lunch breaks, walks and the timely planning of professional duties. Peer assertiveness is another important aspect that mitigates stress in the workplace and it represents one of the objectives formulated in the *Communication of the European Commission* regarding the new strategy in the field of work security and health(1). Approximately forty million persons in the

European Union are affected by stress in the workplace (2).

Stress represents a psychophysical reaction of the body, set off by stressor agents acting through a mixture of neurovegetative and endocrine reactions, with a great impact on the body. But, just as *Hans Hugo Bruno Selye*, the Austro-Hungarian researcher, the one who discovered and coined the term *stress*, states that “*stress is the salt in our lives*”, thus being part of the emotional array of our lives(3). The same researcher points out that, even in our sleep, the human body is stressed by the heartbeats and by the movements of the respiratory muscles in order to breathe. The most surprising and fascinating idea is that only death is stress-free, because the absence of stress is actually the death of the body (3). The aforementioned aspects stand to show that there is no life without any stress (4).

In the 21st century, dubbed the century of speed, mental stress has become ever more insidious, thus becoming a major problem for the individuals exposed to accelerated

evolution. It manifested itself through a state of tension, stiffness and discomfort, determined by affectogenic agents with negative signification, of frustration or repression of emotions and of the difficulty or impossibility to solve problems.

Stress features two entirely opposed components, *distress* and *eustress*, respectively, each with different effects, being produced by different stimuli. *Distress* refers to the types of stress with a harmful potential, with a pathogenic potential for the body; most of the times, the source of distress is represented by a lack of consistency between the resources, abilities and capacities of an individual, and the demands or necessities imposed on the individual. On the other hand, *eustress* is still a type of stress, but it is generated by stimuli with a beneficial signification for the individual.

The category of the most stressful factors includes the professional or social status frustrations, various conflicts to deal with on a daily basis, motivational, affective or cognitive burnout, as well as the anticipation of real threats to our physical and mental integrity. Concerning mental stress, inevitable but controllable, the psychological state of the body. For this reason, both neuropsychic and somatic disorders emerge. According to Hans Selye, “stress is not what happens to you, but how you react to it” (4). Hence, we can explain why some persons feature increased mental sensibility to the action of minor and usual stressors, thus being much more prone to the onset of mental stress. This vulnerability is called “*vulnerability to stress*”, which shows increased mental receptivity to the psychogenic stressors, capable of triggering mental stress.

Mental stress actually represents a loading of the entire body, even though the stressor agent may have had initially an impact on the psyche, because it influences the activity of the entire body through the somatic annexes (5).

STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

Stress in the workplace represents the second highest problem of the professional activity after back issues, concerning health problems in the workplace, and it affects approximately 30 % of the employees in the European Union. The health issues generated by stress in the workplace are as follows: insomnia, migraines, agitation, mental and physical fatigue, irritability, permanent state of tension, focusing issues, lack of appetite, gastritis, hemorrhagic rectocolitis, gastroesophageal reflux, bronchial asthma, endocrine conditions, cardiovascular diseases, even premature death due to the *burnout syndrome*. A permanent cause of occupational stress is represented by relationship issues, such as issues between superiors, subordinates or colleagues. In this case, persons with technical jobs are more prone to stress, because they have a harder time working with other persons. Another common cause of stress encountered in Romania is workplace and job uncertainty – and income, implicitly – which reduces job satisfaction over time. If a workplace is not stable for an individual, then it may convert rapidly into stress, which will affect the entire professional activity. A more commonly affected category is the one of leadership roles; given the complexity, responsibility, fast pace, working late and unskilled subordinates, managers become targets of professional stress.

It is interesting to note that individuals react differently to stress; most of the times, the

situations are not as stressful as they imagine. It was found that 40% of the negative events we anticipate and that cause our anxiety do not even occur. Furthermore, 25% of the things we worry about concerning certain events cannot actually be avoided and we will be exposed to them either way. On the contrary, the criticism, reproaches and mean things manifested by others actually create 12% of our stress, while health-related stress accounts for 15%. The conclusion of such stress-related quantifications is that only 8 % up to 10% actually represent the limit-situations that produce real and certain stress.

Burnout-derived stress represents another important factor that has been studied since the 1960s, thus establishing a close connection between the great number of hours spent at the workplace and the excessive cigarette intake. Another important aspect is represented by the close connection between the type A personalities and cardiac diseases; thus, success-driven individuals, with a high-speed lifestyle, always under the pressure of time, are much more prone to developing cardiac diseases, compared to type B personalities, who are significantly calmer and more passive in approaching life issues. Type A personalities are encountered among those with leadership positions.

As methods to reduce stress in the workplace, we remember the following: a balance between work and family or personal life, support from the loved ones or the peers, from colleagues in the workplace, always maintaining a good relationship with those around them, thus benefiting from assistance and support. All of them must be accompanied by a relaxed and positive attitude.

The behavioural changes accompanying the increase in stress level include as follows: higher intake of tobacco, alcohol, drugs and food disorders (bulimia, anorexia). The consequences of psychological distress are represented by anxiety disorders and depression (with irritability and irascibility), cognitive (attention deficit), sleep disturbances, conjugal problems and ultimately extreme fatigue through burnout (*burnout syndrome*). Upon detailing the aforementioned consequences, a warning is issued concerning the fact that depression due to stressful events such as the loss of a job or business has led to suicide in many cases; a one-way road within the depressive spectrum. The rather common sleep disturbances encountered mainly among persons affected by stress are due to unhealthy habits, to shift-based jobs, to excess caffeine and to irregular sleeping patterns. Distress and all these mental disorders put together may also lead to sexual disorders, leading to libido inhibition, and in case of women, to menstrual cycle disorders and temporary infertility due to hormonal changes. All of these behavioural, mental and psychological effects of occupational stress are extremely serious, with devastating effects of the body. Numerous studies have confirmed the association between stressors and physical diseases such as: endocrine disorders (stress represents a complex of alterations in body homeostasis, and sanguine hormonal levels represent an integral part thereof), immunological, cardiovascular, mental, pulmonary, dermatological, rheumatologic and even oncological disorders.

Certain professions are more prone to occupational stress, such as those of physicians, aviators, air traffic controllers, managers, directors, teachers; the list can go

on with various other professions involving continual responsibility.

MENTAL STRESS PREVENTION

The prevention and fight against occupational mental stress and of its negative effects addresses first of all to the workplace environment. Methods to mitigate stress and to increase the adaptive capacity to stressful situations involve educational measures, (psycho-education courses), recommendations for a healthy diet, as well as diverse measures regarding lifestyle.

The statistics conducted over the years stand to show that sufficient sleep represents a common characteristic of the most long-living people in the world. The Romania academician Ovidiu Bujor even has a rule in this respect: “We have here the rule of the three eights: *eight hours of activity, eight hours of active rest and eight hours of sleep*” (6). We should follow the course of the sun, and the 24 hours within a day should be divided in as balanced a way as possible: the first part of the day, eight hours of work, followed by the most beautiful part in life, where we can choose exactly what we like; we should continue with the last part, eight hours of sleep, when we must restore our neurons (6). Hence, a balance in the daily schedule protects us and maintains our general tone. Furthermore, we must approach the professional activities in a more relaxed manner, regardless of the pressure imposed by the superiors, which would lead to a much nicer and more harmonious activity. The procrastination of job duties also represents a stress factor, and

it becomes even more stressful as the procrastination is prolonged. Another important aspect is related to the expectations from those around us; hence, higher expectations from the peers lead to permanent stress. Employees must learn to ask for help when they feel overwhelmed, to say “*I can’t*” and “*I don’t know*” when they need additional information and assistance from the colleagues; otherwise, the pressure exercised will convert into a stress factor.

Concerning our daily diet and hydration, they may lead to stress if neglected. We must respect breaks, especially lunch breaks, and we must hydrate properly throughout the day. When all of these prevention techniques fail to combat occupational stress, it is very important to approach the situation carefully and to ask for the help of psychological and psychiatric professionals.

THERAPEUTIC APPROACH

Various psychotherapeutic techniques of relaxation, meditation, melotherapy are known and used, but in many cases, pharmacological medication is also recommended, represented by anxiolytics, thymostabilizers and hypnotics. All of these methods aim to achieve a balance between the individual and the social environment and, at the same time, to solve the problems caused by occupational stress. Taking into account all the aforementioned information, we quote here the advice given by the stress-relief specialist Hans Selye: “It is not stress that kills us; it is our reaction to it” (7).

CONCLUSIONS

Stress in the workplace represents a major problem of the 21st century, because work has definitely become a means of survival and of constructing one's own socio-professional identity. In this troubled century, psychopathologic deviation emerges when work gradually becomes a purpose in itself, when it induces existential dependence and when it threatens the safety, security and autonomy of an employee. Economic, organizational and job instability, as well as rapid technological changes often lead to complicated mental burnouts, with a diverse palette of psychiatric disorders. The real impact on the individuals is hard to assess, especially in the early stages, but the impact on work becomes rapidly visible through mental blockages, decreased focus capacity, attention deficit and memory issues, as well as through the increase in the rates of professional errors. Furthermore, addictive manifestations emerge, such as excess intake of food, coffee, tobacco, alcohol and other psycho-stimulants. The situation gets even more complicated, given the onset of disorders related to the adaptation to the social, organizational and familial life. The prevention and fight against occupational mental stress are necessary in order to avoid all complications outlined above. Educational measures, lifestyle changes, observance of breaks and peer assertiveness represent adequate measures for avoiding occupational stress.

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