



## Workplace Stress: Implications for Counselling

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**Abstract:** *Stress represents any force that impairs the stability and balance of bodily functions which also affects all ages and all works of life. The paper examined the various issues on the concept of stress, burnout and the physical signs and symptoms of stress and its effects on individual health. The paper analyzed and explained workplace stress within the transactional model and argued that external circumstances do not have any intrinsic capacity to produce stress, rather their effects are mediated by the individuals perceptions, capacities and understanding. Finally the paper highlighted possible therapeutic ways of coping with workplace stress.*

**Keyword:** *workplace stress, burnout, transactional model, counseling*

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### INTRODUCTION

Stress is a normal component of everyday life of an individual. Stress is the result of frustration, anger, or anxiousness over a particular situation. Usually, stress is caused by something one feels he can have no control over. However, what is stressful for one person may not be for another.

Burnout is a stressful condition that develops when one work too hard for too long in a high-pressured environment, he becomes physically and emotionally exhausted. Burnout can affect anyone at any age. For instance, an over conscientious individual, who is used to be on control and unlikely to ask for help when under pressure and when things go wrong.

Work place burnout is more than mere tiredness that goes beyond the ordinary stress of everyday work. Burnout is characterized by chronic exhaustion and strong feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Those suffering from burnout tend to withdraw emotionally from their work, lose motivation, and become less productive. Awake (2014) linked burnout to numerous emotional and physical health problems.

However, in Nigeria as in other places of the world, stress is a leading health problem. The stress experienced by Nigerians is felt in response as psychological threats such as job loss, difficulty finding employment, general poverty level or relationship issues, and death of a love one, all of which may occur more than once in once life.

### Conceptualization of terms:

#### **Burnout Stress**

Burnout is an experience of long term exhaustion and diminished interest, especially in ones

career. It is however caused by work overload and because of economic pressure, some employers demand that employees work longer hours, at times for less money. Technology also keeps some employees in constant contact with their jobs, blurring the lines between work and private life. Factor such as job insecurity, lack of control over their work or feelings of being treated unfairly contribute to burnout. Dealing with an unclear priorities or conflicts with co-workers also cause burnout.

However burnout can be self-inflicted. For instance, in the pursuit of career goals and greater income, one may try to fit even more into his/her life. Such ones may become committed and find him/herself on the road to burnout. Stress caused by “fight or flight” response can cause physical threat to an individual; and can also increase his blood flow and clothing, elevated heart rate, blood pressure and can also cause immediate and uncontrollable blood sugar when it happens. Severally in a day often as a result of issues from work place, bad traffic or familiar issues or security issues, can influence the human developmental conditions such as hypertension, stroke, diabetes, chronic pain and heart attacks (American institute of stress). Stress can directly cause physical symptoms such as headaches, insomnia, fatigue, and often contribute to mental conditions such as anxiety, depression and or irritability.

### **The concept of workplace stress**

Stress is defined as the body’s response to the demand of life, though it involves emotions and the mind. It is the internal condition reaction of a person to perceive external pressures, experienced as thought and feelings as well as physical processes. Stress may be considered as any physical and chemical factor that can cause stress including trauma, infections, toxins, illness and injuries of any sort (Simon, 2015). While people associate stress with physiological stress, scientists and physicians use stress to denote any force that impairs the stability and balance or bodily functions (Simon 2015). Stress comes in all forms and affects people of all ages and all walks of life. There are no external standard that can be applied to predict stress levels in individuals. One need not have a named stressful job to experience workplace stress. For instance, a parent of one child may experience more stress related to issues that are with many children. The degree of stress in one’s life is highly dependent upon the individuals physical health, quality of his interpersonal relationships, the number of commitments and responsibilities he carry, the amount of support he receives from others and the number of traumatic events that have recently occurred in his life. Workplace stress is a commonality throughout the world in every business/workplace. However, each person is different and some people like the pressure to perform better. Salary can be an important concern of employee. So salary can affect the way people work because they can aim for promotion and in result a higher salary. This can lead to chronic stress. Thus, to manage workplace stress, stress management programmes like counselling communication profession.

Many people have spill over stress from home into their working environments. But one way to alleviate and trying to figure out ways to alleviate them is through one-on-one counseling that is being done with a therapist to help cope has proven to be a very effective way to avoid stress. Thus, to manage workplace stress, stress management programmes like counseling communication programmes abound.

However, people with strong support from family, friends, religious organizations and other support groups report less stress and improved mental health compared to those without these social contacts. Also, people who are poorly nourished, those with inadequate sleep or are physically unwell have reduced capabilities to handle the pressures and stressed of everyday life and may report higher stress (Simon, 2015).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984), states that stress is an imbalance between demands and resources or as occurring when pressure exceeds ones perceived ability to cope. According to Selye (1950), stress refers only to a significantly negative consequences or distress rather than what he calls "eustress"; a stress whose consequences is helpful or otherwise positive and often can contribute to mental conditions such as anxiety, depression and or irritability. Subsequent studies of stress in humans established that stress is caused by distinct, measureable life stressors that can be ranked by the median degree of stress they produced (Wikipedia, 2015).

Simon (2015), is of the opinion that all stress is not bad. He argued that a mild degree of stress and tension can sometimes be beneficial. For example, feeling mildly stressed when carrying out a project or assignment often compels one to do a good job, focus better and work energetically. Also exercising can likewise produce a temporary stress on some body functions, but its benefits are disputable: though running or any other form of exercise is considered an acute stressor. It is only when stress is overwhelming or poorly managed that its negative effects appear. Hence, elimination of stress is unrealistic, since stress is a part of a normal life.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

The theoretical model adequate in this study is then transactional (cognitive) stress model of Lazarus 1994. Lazarus and Folkman(1984), suggested that stress can be thought of as resulting from an "imbalance between demands and resources" or as occurring when "pressures exceeds one's perceived ability to cope". Lazarus and Folkman's interpretation of stress focuses on the transaction between people and their external environment (known as the transactional model). The model contents that stress may not be a stressor if the person does not perceive the stressor as a threat rather as positive or even challenging. Also, if the person possesses or can use adequate coping skills, then stress may not actually be a result or develop because of the stressor. The transactional model proposes that people can be thought to manage their stress and cope with their stressors. They may learn to change their perspective of the stressor and provide them with the ability and confidence to improve their lives and handle all the types of stressors.

However, in order to develop an effective management programmes, it is necessary to identify the factors that are central to a person controlling his/her stress and to indentify the intervention methods that can effectively target these factors. Stress management was not developed on the idea that stress is not a direct response to stressor rather one's resources and ability to cope with mediate stress response that are amenable to change.

### **Types of stress**

There are about four kinds of stress: acute stress, chronic stress, workplace stress, and medical environment stress.

### **1) Acute stress:**

Is the most common form of stress among humans world wide. Acute stress deals with the pressures of the near future or dealing with the very recent past. Acute stress sometimes is a good thing to have in life. Running or any other form of exercise is considered an acute stressor. Some exciting or exhilarating experiences like riding a roller coaster is an acute stress but is usually very enjoyable. Acute stress is a short term stress and so does not have enough time to do the damage that long term stress causes (McGonagle, and Roland 1990).

### **2) Chronic Stress:**

Has a wearing effect on an individual and can become very serious health risk if it continues over a long period of time. Chronic stress can lead to memory loss, damage special recognition and produce a decreased drive of eating. It differs from person to person; also gender difference can be an underlying factor. Women for instance, are able to take longer duration of stress than men, without showing the same maladaptive changes. Men can deal with shorter stress duration better than women can, but once they hit a certain threshold, the changes of their developing mental issues increases drastically (Bowman, 2003).

### **3) Medical environment stress:**

Caplan (1994), in a study of 500 medical employees, reported that over 54% of workers suffered from anxiety while being in the hospital. He concluded that this trend is fairly accurate across the majority of hospitals. However, this paper is more concerned with work place stress and it's stressors.

### **Causes of stress:**

Both positive and negative experiences and life transactions can cause stress. Some of the more frequent stressors in life that are considered normal life cycle are:

- Getting divorced or going through a breakup.
- Getting married
- Being discriminated against
- Experiencing a change in financial status
- Having and training a child/children
- Moving up or down
- Beginning or ending school
- Experiencing a loss
- Being diagnosed with a serious illness such as STDs (HIV/AIDS)

Many individuals experience discrimination, loss of job, go through a breakup, and experience other affecting events, whether major or minor. Stress therefore is part of most individuals lives but may be easier to manage when experienced in smaller amount especially when other factors help mitigate the stress. A marriage for example, is considered generally as a happy event, though it may be stressful to plan and prepare for the ceremony, the excitement experienced by the couple may help reduce the physical and mental effects of the stress experienced.

### **Signs and symptoms of stress or burnout**

- Insomnia leading to tiredness;
- Irritability or out bursts of anger;
- Low mood;
- Consuming too much caffeine or alcohol;
- Low productivity accompanied by feelings of low achievement, regular absence and a higher sickness rate;
- Being accident prone;
- Being cynical and defensive;
- Finding fault;
- Headaches, backache, indigestion, weight loss or gain, shortness of breath, regular or lingering colds.
- Irritable bowel syndrome;
- High blood pressure;
- Migraines;
- Drug and alcohol abuse.

### **Effects of stress on health**

Stress can be ongoing and unbearable for many individuals. Chronic stress can contribute to a myriad of mental health and physical issues that may link to:

- Insomnia or hypersomnia;
- Reduced or increased appetite;
- Self - medication with drugs or alcohol;
- Changes in mental health;
- Decreased productivity and enjoyment at work;
- Decreased intimacy;
- Migraine headaches;
- Chronic pain;
- Anger issues;
- Depression;
- Anxiety;
- Decreased enjoyment in social activity;
- Heart attack and stroke.

When these complaints occur as a result of stress, they may clear up as the stressful situation is resolved. Though, they can become serious and management becomes necessary.

### **Counselling Communication Programmes**

Stress management refers to a wide range of techniques and psychotherapies aimed at controlling a person's level of stress especially chronic stress to improve an individuals everyday functioning. Stress management however is developed on the idea that stress is not a direct

response to a stressor but one's resources and ability to cope and mediate the stress response and which are amenable to change, thus, allowing stress to be controlled (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Workplace assistance programmes can include in-house counselling programmes such as self relaxation, (readings), diversionary activities, bio-feedback and cognitive restructuring. Studies show that these programmes can reduce the level of physiological arousal associated with high stress. Participants who master these behavioural and cognitive stress relief techniques report less tension, fewer sleep disturbances and an improved ability to cope with workplace stressors (Schult, 2010).

Notwithstanding, there are many ways stress can be eliminated especially among employees who are having trouble adapting to stress at their work places or homes. Counselling techniques among others include:

### **1. Individual intervention**

This starts by monitoring the stressors on individual, next is attacking that stressor and trying to figure out ways to alleviate them in any way. Changing behavioural patterns may help reduce some of the stress that is put on at work place as well. However, since stress affects the body, and emotions, stress reduction can occur through:

#### **a. Body**

- Deep breathing;
- Hot bath
- Exercise such as running and dancing;

#### **b. Mind**

- Reality testing negative thoughts and catastrophic thinking;
- Planning in advance;
- Focusing on positive things;
- Mediating;

#### **c. Emotions**

- Laughing or crying;
- Expressing stress through art or writing;
- Talking stressful events over with someone trusted;
- Engaging in many enjoyable relaxing activities such as looking, reading, crafting or gardening and other diversionary activities.

### **2. Management with exercise:**

Exercise can be a key or central method to eliminate stressors. Physical exercise not only promotes overall fitness, but helps to manage emotional stress and tension as well. Exercise can also help in relaxation and improve sleep. Exercise can emotionally remove one temporarily from a stressful environment or situation.

### **3. Relaxation techniques and meditation:**

Meditation and relaxation are best learned in the class. However, one can also learn to

mediate on his own to help control stress and improve his physical wellbeing. There are many types of relaxation methods ranging from compact disc (CDS) to group mental arts and fitness class. But only a few examples will be discussed in this paper.

- **Autogenic training:**

This type is developed in the early 20th century and is based upon passive concentration and awareness of body sensations. It focuses upon different sensation such as warmth or heaviness in different regions of the body. Physicians use it as a part of therapy for many conditions. However, it takes time and patience to learn.

- **Biofeedback:**

Is one method of learning to achieve relaxation, control stress responses or modify the body's reaction through the use of monitoring equipment that provides information from the body which would be normal not available. Biofeedback is used by many practitioners for a variety of psychological and physical conditions.

- **Imagery:**

Sometimes, this is referred to as guided imagery. It is the use of pleasant or relaxing images to calm the mind and body. By controlling breathing and visualizing a soothing image, a state of deep relaxation can occur.

- **Meditation:**

Is one of the most popular techniques to achieve physical and mental relaxation. A meditative state is one in which there is a deep centering and focusing upon the core of oneself being - a quieting of the mind, emotions and body. It can be achieved through structured (as in a daily practice of a routine) or unstructured (i.e. while being alone outdoors) activities.

- **Transcendental meditation:**

This type has the goal of achieving transcendental consciousness (the simplest form of awareness). It is practiced for 15 – 30 minutes.

- **Yoga:**

Means "joining or union", is called the search for the soul and the union between the individual and the "Divine". Yoga is an ancient Indian exercise based upon the premise that the body and breathing are connected with the mind. Its goal is to restore balance and harmony to the body and emotions through numerous postural and breathing exercises. Its benefits are increased flexibility and capability for relaxation.

- **Qigong:**

Is an ancient Chinese health care system that combines physical training (such as isometrics, isotonic and aerobic conditioning) with Eastern philosophy relaxation techniques. Some forms are practiced while standing, sitting or lying down, while others involve structured movements or massage. Learning this type involves time commitment, patience, determination and learning from a master.

- **Tai chi**

Is also a Chinese martial art that has been termed a kind of "meditation in motion", that is characterized by soft, flowing movements that stress precision and force. Since it involves

motion and force, one must ascertain from his/her doctor before learning Tai Chi therapy.

**4) Time management:**

This is effective in controlling stress. Learning to prioritize tasks and avoid over-commitment are critical measures to make sure that one is not over-worked. Also using a calendar or planner and checking it faithfully before committing to anything is one way to develop time management skills. One can also learn to identify time - investing tasks by keeping a diary for a few days and noticing where he is losing time. Also banishing procrastination is another time management skill that can be learned.

**5) Organizational skills:**

If ones physical surroundings such as office, desk, kitchen closet and car are well organized, one will not be faced with the stress of misplaced objects and clutter that accumulate over time.

**6) Support Systems:**

Individuals with strong social support system experience fewer physical and emotional symptoms of stress than their less - connected counterparts. Examples of social networks are loved ones, friends, business associates and neighbours.

**Recommendation**

When one is faced with unbearable stress, he cannot cope with or manage the situation the person can consider counselling. Counselling is the best talking therapy and one most likely to be easily available. Counselling is all about change: it is about people who want to change, people who don't know how to change, people who need help to change, people who resist change and people who seem unable to leave their current circumstances and accept the help of others to change. Counselling is a type of talking therapy that allows one to talk about his/her problems and feelings in a confidential and dependable environment. A counsellor is trained to listen with empathy (by putting himself in ones shoes). Counsellors can help one deal with any negative thoughts and feelings. Talking therapies can be used to help with many different mental health conditions like - depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder (BPD), obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), long-term illnesses, eating disorders, such as anorexia, bulimia and drug abuse.

The aim of counselling is to help an individual affected with stress to deal with and overcome issues that can cause emotional pain or making one feel uncomfortable. It provides a safe and regular space for one to talk and explore difficult feelings. The counsellor is there to support and respect the individuals' views and to find out insights into the person's understanding of his problems.

Counselling also helps one to cope with redundancy or workplace stress such as:

1. Deal with issues preventing him to achieve his ambition
2. Deal with feelings of depression or sadness and have a more positive outlook on his life,
3. Understand himself and his problems better,
4. Feel more confident,
5. Develop a better understanding of other peoples points of view,
6. Explore issues such as sexual identify



Counselling involves talking about difficult or painful feelings and as one begins to face them, he/she may feel worse in some ways. However, with the support and help of a counsellor, the individual will gradually become better. Though counselling takes a number of sessions before it starts to make a difference, but a regular commitment is required to make the best use of the therapy.

### CONCLUSION

The achievement of a well-designed stress management and counselling depends on the ability of the counsellor to ensure effective and appropriate coping therapy. Stress management and counselling however, is offered by various types of mental health professionals. Stress counselling and group- discussion therapy have proven benefits in reduction of stress symptoms and improvement in overall health and attitudes. Thus the very act of talking to an impartial and supportive observer, can be a great way to unleash tension and worry from an individual suffering from stress and stress related illnesses.

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