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Journal of Management Research and Analysis

Journal homepage: <https://www.jmra.in/>

## Original Research Article

## Prevention and relaxation techniques for coping stress and improving employee performance

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 07-01-2022

Accepted 18-02-2022

Available online 18-04-2022

## Keywords:

Performance

Employee

Prevention

Relaxation

Techniques

## ABSTRACT

Stress has been associated with major life events, daily life hassles, and changes in life. It is created by excessive environmental and internal demands that need constant effort and adjustment. Relaxation is only possible when there is complete control on mind. Once mind is controlled, happiness and peace come as a natural consequence.

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## 1. Introduction

Practicing relaxation technique daily for de-stressing and self introspection in terms of goals can achieve everlasting happiness, health, wealth and freedom from unfounded fears and anxieties. Stress is a particular stage in our life in which our body gives unwanted responses to any demand made upon it. It is a force created by mind that can distort, stretch, twist, compress, or deform the body in some manner.<sup>1</sup> Technically it is physical threat or challenge, under the grip of stress. Practically, it feels uneasy, restless, disturbed, agitated, tense, heavy, or strained.

Relaxation or de-stressing is one of the best scientific and spiritual methods of activating subconscious mind. It is to activate the part of mind, linked to inner self, which helps to motivate towards higher goals in life.<sup>2</sup> Many organizations and employees are experiencing the effects of stress on work performance. The effects of stress can be either positive or negative. Managers need to identify those suffering from negative stress and implement programs as a defense against

stress. These programs may reduce the impact stress has on employees' work performance.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1. Stress and need to tackle it

Stress is an adverse reaction a person has to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them. Given an excess of pressure, stress can therefore happen to anyone, and should not be seen as a weakness. Instead, an individual needs to be helped to deal with these pressures.

## 1.2. Definition of relaxation response

Relaxation is considered as the brain tonic for a tensed and stressed mind.<sup>4</sup> The relaxation response occurs when the body is no longer in perceived danger, and the autonomic nervous system functioning returns to normal. During this response, the body moves from a state of physiological arousal, including increased heart rate and blood pressure, slowed digestive functioning, decreased blood flow to the extremities, increased release of hormones, and other responses preparing the body to fight or run, to a state of physiological relaxation, where blood pressure, heart rate,

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digestive functioning and hormonal levels return to their normal state.<sup>5</sup>

1.3. Relaxation techniques

Relaxation training helps to: (i) learn to keep mind and body quiet energized with maximal efficiency, and (ii) maximize energy resources, Relaxation techniques are a great way to help for stress management, and is a process that decreases the wear and tear of life’s challenges on mind and body.<sup>6</sup> Learning basic relaxation techniques isn’t hard and this technique improves health.

1.4. Problem of stress at work: changing trends

There is a common concern on job stress among post-industrialized countries, including issues related to gender, work and family, underemployment, worker compensation and others. In United States 40 percent of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful;<sup>7</sup> and 29 percent of workers felt quite a bit or extremely stressed at work.<sup>8</sup> Job stress is one of the most common work-related health problems in the EU countries; the Second European Survey on Working Conditions (1996) showed that 28 percent of workers felt that their work causes stress. In Japan, the proportion of workers who reported strong anxieties, worries or stress concerning their job or working life has increased from 53 percent in 1982 to 63 percent in 1997.<sup>9</sup> Workplace stress has been identified as a serious cause of individual suffering and commercial loss. Stress management encompasses techniques intended to equip a person with effective coping mechanisms for dealing with psychological stress. Thus, managing of stress has become a challenging job for the modern organizations. The ability to handle stress effectively is related to one’s personal resources and resilience. Relaxation exercises are one excellent way of dealing with stress.<sup>10</sup>

1.5. Job stress and its impact

Workplace stress can be defined as the change in one’s physical or mental state in response to workplaces that pose an appraised challenge or threat to that employee. Research has shown that there are a number of factors that contribute to workplace stress. These factors include a toxic work environment, negative workload, isolation, types of hours worked, role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, career development barriers, difficult relationships with administrators and/ or coworkers, managerial bullying, harassment, and organizational climate.<sup>11</sup> One of the primary challenges to successful human life is the challenge of too much: too much to do; too much to cope with; too much distraction; too much noise; too much demanding our attention.<sup>12</sup> People have individual and characteristic ways to respond to stress. Different relaxation methods may be appropriate for each of these diverse patterns of response; Jacobson’s (1938) Progressive Muscular Relaxation, Schultz, Luthe’s (1969) Autogenic Training, and Benson’s (1975) Relaxation Response.

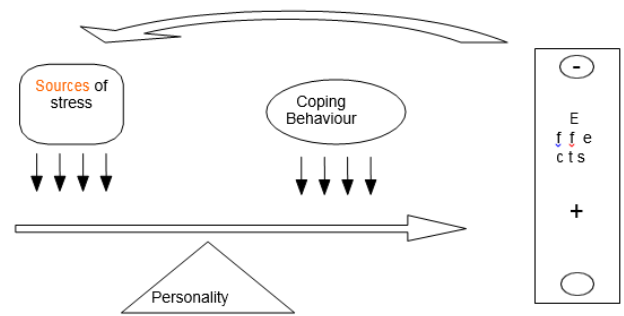


Fig. 1: Stress processes Source: Williams, S (1994) Managing pressure for peak performance

Table 1: Symptoms of stress for an individual

Backache	Cold hands/feet	Aggression
Breathlessness	Diarrhea	Anger Anxiety
Dizziness Dry mouth	Disorganization	Cynicism
Exhaustion	Forgetfulness	Depression
Fidgeting	Frequent mistakes	Guilt Insomnia
Headache	Indecisiveness Lack of concentration	
Higher vocal tone	Lack of co-ordination	Misjudging situations Mood swings
Indigestion	Loss of appetite	Nightmares
Irregular breathing	Memory problems	Paranoia
Palpitations	Misjudging people	Phobias
Restlessness	Nausea Panic Rash decision making problems	Tearfulness
Stomach ache		Withdrawal
Sweating Tension		Worrying excessively

1.6. Learning relaxation skills to minimize stress

One of the skills that are highly important to learn and implement into daily life is relaxation. Relaxation can be highly beneficial if practiced routinely in one’s everyday life. Techniques involving relaxation are widely used by people to reduce anxiety and cope with stress-related problems. In the clinical setting, relaxation procedures are active, educational forms of therapy that can decrease the occurrence of tension and anxiety disorders. In clinical intervention, the client and therapist work collaboratively to understand the source of the problem and its impact in that person’s life.<sup>13</sup> Williams (1994) represents this as a dynamic model.

1.7. Organization change and stress management

Various stressors provoked a series of non specific body responses.<sup>14</sup> Three stages were identified:

1. Alarm reaction with an increase in stress, anxiety, feelings of upset, feeling jittery, highly strung, high excitement, becoming wound up and fidgety.
2. Stage of resistance where defense mechanisms are activated responding to high levels of anxiety. Adaptation is acquired due to optimum development of most appropriate specific channel of defense.
3. Stage of exhaustion. Unable to cope, breakdown or burnout follows. Reaction spreads again due to wear and tear in the most appropriate channel. Corticoid production rises again to, or even above maximum level reached during alarm reaction.

Stress in the workplace can affect everyone at one time or another. Difficult job requirements affect everyone differently. A challenging event for one person can be highly stressful to another. Organizational change, or the threat of change, needs to be managed to ensure employees and stakeholders are consulted and informed as much as possible well before the change occurs and during the change process. Understanding the likely impact on them can help individuals cope with any natural fear they may have of change and dismiss unnecessary fear that arises from a lack of information.<sup>14</sup> Hollin (1995), Restak (1988) and Flannery (1995) observed that very stressful experiences can lead to psychological trauma, which, in turn, can lead to post traumatic stress disorder.

### 1.8. Just relax: simple strategies

#### 1.8.1. General strategies

1. Encourage employers to take stress seriously;
2. Consider and assess possible stressors in the workplace through consultation that will reduce the stressors in the workplace;
3. Encourage staff to talk about the pressures they perceive in their jobs;
4. Seek information to know and propose and prioritize intervention strategies and inform employees;
5. Consistent management approach; and
6. Encourage a non-judgmental attitude in the workplace whereby employees feel comfortable to seek professional help to aid in resolving problems.

#### 1.8.2. Simple strategies

This include Take a nap –Meditate –Exercise — Eat a healthy breakfast- Be careful of stimulants- Get in bed before 9 one night a week and a word about headaches. Relaxation techniques can improve employees physically in the following forms:

1. Fewer emotional responses, such as anger and frustration;
2. Fewer physical symptoms, such as headaches and back pain;

3. Greater ability to handle problems;
4. Improved concentration;
5. Increasing blood flow to major muscles;
6. Lowering blood pressure;
7. More efficiency in daily activities;
8. More energy;
9. Reducing muscle tension;
10. Reducing the need for oxygen;
11. Slowing breathing rate; and
12. Slowing heart rate

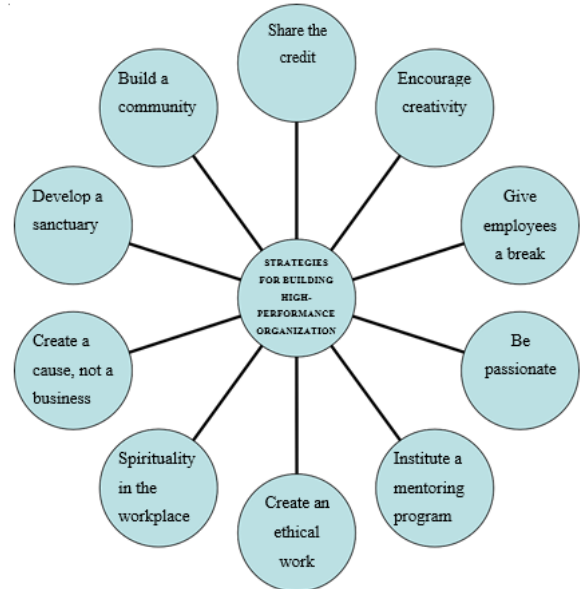


Fig. 2: Effective relaxation techniques

### 1.9. Effective relaxation techniques

It include Biofeedback, Deep Breathing Exercises, Diaphragmatic Breathing, Guided Mental Imagery, Hatha Yoga, Massage Therapy, Meditation (Centering), Muscle Relaxation, Music Therapy, Physical Exercise, Progressive Muscular Relaxation, and Tai Chi. Nothing gives one person so much advantage over another as to remain always cool and unruffled under all circumstances.<sup>15</sup>

The best stress management program addresses both the causes of stress (coping skills) and the symptoms of stress (relaxation skills) to promote optimal wellbeing. The purpose of effective coping skills is to increase awareness of the issue and work toward a peaceful resolution. The purpose of relaxation techniques is to return the body back to a sense of physiological homeostasis. In essence, a stress response occurs when there is a perception of danger, demand or threat. The body and nervous system spring into an emergency mode.<sup>16</sup> The brain releases endorphins which act as pain killers. With a major stressor, this wired-in emergency response automatically happens. Finally, it is

to learn more about organizational policies and practices towards abuse, to identify the types of responses available to targets of abuse and the effectiveness of these policies and practices in curtailing and preventing abuse,<sup>17</sup>

The behavioral and practical approaches to stress management include exercise and eating a healthy, balanced diet, which includes selections from the basic food groups. In addition, it is recommended that one avoid the excessive use of alcohol, caffeine and sugar, which contribute to fatigue and vulnerability to mood swings. It is also important to allow the body to rest and replenish to help inoculate the body against future stress. Building this stress resistance also includes scheduling time for leisure and pleasure, which provides for a more balanced, fulfilling life. Anticipating and preparing for recurrent stressors by managing time, setting priorities and limits, delegating responsibility, and not procrastinating are helpful stress reducing strategies.

The relaxation approaches to stress management include a variety of techniques designed to help effectively manage the body/mind tension. Progressive muscle relaxation is an active form of relaxation where individually contract the major muscle groups of body for about five seconds and then relaxes the individual muscle groups for a five second holds. The contrast experienced by this exercise relieves muscle tension and relaxes the body. Some of the more passive relaxation approaches include listening to music, reading and using saunas and hot tubs to relieve tension. Techniques used to relax the mind include meditation and visual imagery. Meditation teaches how to clear the mind of stressful and distracting thoughts by focusing the mental energy on positive coping thoughts. Visual imagery is designed to help the individual visualize coping effectively with a stressor that was previously experienced as overwhelming.<sup>18</sup>

The cognitive or thinking approaches are an integral part of coping effectively with stress and now the primary focus of many stress management programs. Since it has been determined that we can turn off the stress response by changing dangerous event appraisals to appraisals that helps these events as manageable challenges, have a direct link to controlling the stress response.<sup>19</sup> The behavioral, relaxation and cognitive techniques described have been determined to be effective ways to manage and cope more effectively with stress. The techniques give the control back to the individual and empower to manage the inevitable stressors that will occur in life.

## 2. Conclusion

Multitasking has become a part of everyday lives. At any given time, most have actively working on, or overseeing, a handful of projects and problems all at once, making it nearly impossible to slow down and relax. Stress is more than just unpleasant. But if the thought of the work involved

just stresses more, might have to take it slow. The ability to relax at will is an important ability that everyone should possess. Today's life in the western world is very tense, stressful, both mentally and physically. This is true for high-tech and computer workers, who sit long hours in front of the screen, creating constant tension in some muscles and joints, for many hours a day. This is also true for other workers, such as those who drive a lot, especially in dense traffic, when the mental pressure is high. Stress is a very common word these days, as people blame stress for many of their problems. There is no need to go anywhere else to find peace. Stress is an ignorant state. It's important to relax. By relaxing, can accomplish more tasks, handle stressful situations, and stay happy. Happiness is the really important point and to be happy, need to relax.

## 3. Source of Funding

None.

## 4. Conflict of Interest

None.

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**Cite this article:** Bayavanda Chinnappa T, Karunakaran N. Prevention and relaxation techniques for coping stress and improving employee performance. *J Manag Res Anal* 2022;9(1):42-46.