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John D. Curtis
University of Wisconsin La Crosse

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INCORPORATING STRESS MANAGEMENT INTO THE CORPORATE WELLNESS PROGRAM

BY

DR. JOHN D. CURTIS, PROFESSOR and DIRECTOR

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION
THE LA CROSSE STRESS MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE
MITCHELL HALL
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - LA CROSSE
LA CROSSE, WISCONSIN 54601

ABSTRACT

Stress management was examined as a component of corporate wellness programs. It is a common trend that brings the program parts together. When program integrations occurs, it increases the total programs impact significantly.

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INTRODUCTION

Employee services is a vast area and it includes a wide variety of topics that relate to employee relations, including the topic of employee wellness. Corporations are discovering that employee wellness programs not only illustrate concern for the health of their employees, but also make sound fiscal sense in the form of dollar savings resulting from reduced accidents, reduced illness, reduced absenteeism, and improved work efficiency.

Employee wellness programs vary greatly depending on the corporations' size, financial commitment, and "viewpoint" of health upon which the programs are based. Most programs, especially beginning programs, include physical fitness as well as nutritional components. Stress management, a component of many programs, is often seen in a controversial light in the corporate setting. Many corporation leaders still view stress management and relaxation as programs that promote "laziness." Others, more in tune with the results of recent research, recognize that learning to control stress can actually lead to happier, healthier, and more productive workers.

If stress management programs are to gain support and flourish in the corporate setting, the programs must be well presented to corporate officials to gain their support. They must also be organized and taught by competent, trained individuals. Individuals with sound backgrounds

in stress management view stress management as an important component of a holistic employee wellness program in the corporate setting. A program that focuses "only" on relaxation techniques tends to be inefficient. However, a program based on the holistic viewpoint, includes various skills important to stress management that are also needed for an efficient employee, thus enhancing corporate support.

A HOLISTIC VIEWPOINT OF STRESS MANAGEMENT

In today's society stress management is looked at in a much wider perspective than it was in the past. The term stress management can be defined as "a means of controlling stress either through reducing elicitation of the stress response itself or by reducing the physiological stress response after it has been set off."

When most people think of stress management, they think of learning and practicing relaxation skills that may solve stress problems. Although this commonly-held belief can be beneficial, it is a very narrow approach to stress management based upon the above definition.

COMPONENTS OF A STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Obviously, the goal of the program, the make-up of the participants, and the amount of time available will greatly determine what can be and should be included in a stress management course at the corporate setting. A course based upon a holistic approach should include: 1) relaxation techniques and 2) management techniques. Both include components that control stress by reducing elicitation of the stress response and also by reducing the physiological stress response after it has been set off.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Relaxation techniques are a variety of skills that control the body's arousal level. These include basic relaxation skills, practical relaxation skills and exercise.

Basic Relaxation Skills

Basic relaxation skills have one common denominator--they all involve the physiological elicitation of the relaxation response in the body. This response includes an overall decreased body metabolism, decreased heart rate, decreased breathing rate, decreased muscular tension, increased salivation, decreased blood pressure, and increased blood clotting time. Each of these physiological changes is the converse of those that take place when the body is under stress.

Examples of basic relaxation skills are the exhalation exercise, progressive relaxation, autogenic training, yoga, transcendental meditation, and the relaxation response (Benson's Method). When developing a program for the corporate setting, selection of techniques should be based on the philosophy espoused by those supporting the program. For example, basic skills such as the exhalation exercise, the relaxation response, and progressive relaxation tend to be accepted better by Western culture than yoga or transcendental meditation. The reverse may hold true in other cultures and thus the programs should reflect these various philosophies.

Practical Relaxation Skills

Practical relaxation skills are exercises designed to be practical in circumstances not normally used for relaxation. Practical relaxation skills are not necessarily total body relaxation skills and do not usually produce the typical physiological benefits of deep total body relaxation. However, practical relaxation skills are useful in managing and controlling the stress level or stress response. The skills can help manage reaction or overreaction to stressors prior to or after the stress response is elicited.

Examples of practical relaxation skills include supporting environment exercises; sitting or speaking while relaxed and mentally alert; differential relaxation while studying, walking or engaged in sports, instant relaxation techniques; and sleep-inducing techniques.

Practical relaxation skills are more advanced and should be included in a program only after basic relaxation has been mastered. In the corporate setting the most widely accepted and relevant practical relaxation skills are those entitled instant relaxation, i.e., stress control techniques that can be done in 5 to 20 seconds. These techniques can be done anywhere. One need not close one's eyes, have quiet surroundings, or mentally withdraw from the environment to do them successfully. In addition, instant relaxation techniques complement the basic relaxation skills by raising one's consciousness of tension levels throughout the body and, when practiced regularly (which is easy to do since they require little time commitment), reduce fatigue which is helpful to both blue collar workers and white collar workers in the corporate setting.

Exercise

Physical exercise is one of the most effective means of dealing with the stress response. Physical exercise helps reduce the aroused state of the body by reducing the adrenal hormones in the blood system and, thus, the triggering effect of the stress response on the various target organs. Once the stress response of the body is initiated, exercise often deals with the arousal level more effectively than other means, including basic relaxation skills. In fact, exercise is nature's built-in mechanism to control stress. The stress response (often called

the fight-or-flight response) demanded immediate exercise via staying to fight or taking flight. This "built-in" exercise was a major means of controlling stress for our ancestors.

MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES

Management techniques are designed to prevent setting off the stress response inappropriately. The components included under this all have one common denominator--they require that individuals control their own environments and/or thinking processes to help prevent inappropriate stress. These components include: time management, communication skills, mind management, and nutrition.

Time Management

In pursuit of a more effective twenty-four-hour day, the amount of time devoted to the various aspects of one's life and work, and the quality of that time can make a difference in how much stress one encounters. If the way one is using time is different than the way one would like to be using time, the discrepancy is likely to cause stress.

Time management skills which include goal setting, daily planning, prioritizing, time saving techniques, and crisis prevention help save time, reduce stress, and make a person more productive. This component is likely to be well received in the corporate setting and can be the catalyst for the inclusion of an entire stress management program if presented properly to the appropriate people.

Communication Skills

The word communicate means "to make common." In other words, one individual (person #1) must convey a message to another individual (person #2) so that person #2 interprets the message the way it was intended to be interpreted. Whenever there is a breakdown in communication, the breakdown is likely to create stress.

In order to be efficient the work place requires effective communication. The inclusion of communication techniques, such as examination of the basic communication cycle, proper use of symbols (words, voice, non-verbal), understanding the feedback message, and assertiveness, is important in a stress management program. More efficient communication both in and outside of the worksetting can be a great step in improving one's stress level as well as work efficiency.

Mind Management Skills

The mind and body interact continually. Both are active

participants in the stress response and the relaxation response. Too many programs in stress management focus on the physical dimension only and they neglect the mental/emotional facets of the participants.

The influence of the psyche on the body can be seen in various health problems such as ulcers, tension headaches, and high blood pressure. If an individual constantly elicits thoughts of fear, guilt, worry or other negative impulses, from the subconscious mind, the body responds as if this tension-produced-state really exists. In other words, the mind can and indeed does elicit the stress response. In fact, it is estimated that between 50 percent and 90 percent of the occupied hospital beds in the United States at any given time are being used by people suffering from symptoms caused by or aggravated by mental stress. Obviously the mind/body relationship is powerful and cannot be ignored in a stress management program. If used properly the mind can elicit the relaxation response as readily as the stress response.

In the corporate setting mind management skills may include body breathing techniques; visualization for improved performance, self-concept, better health; positive affirmation statements; and visualization of relaxed scenes.

Nutrition

Food, such as caffeine, can elicit the stress response within the body. In addition, some nutrients are needed in large quantities when one is under stress while others are important to the stress response itself. Nutrition also plays a role on work efficiency of employees. Improper eating habits relate to elevated and depressed blood sugar levels, the latter often resulting in tired, inefficient workers prone to mistakes and accidents. Therefore, if time permits, nutrition should be included as a basic component in a stress management program.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article stress management was examined from a "holistic viewpoint" to illustrate how it can be incorporated and why it can be justified as a viable component of a corporate wellness program. Stress management fits closely with other portions of wellness programs (i.e. physical fitness and nutrition) and can be used as a common thread to tie various components together.

When the stress management program is viewed from this "holistic approach," not only can the participants health be improved, but performance levels of employees can be improved as well, thus providing improved work efficiency, and reduced illness, reduced accidents and reduced absenteeism.

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