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A SYSTEMATIC STRESS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM FOR THE BUSINESS SETTING

BY

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ABSTRACT

Stress is a factor that is dysfunctional to an organization. In people related businesses, it is an important element that must be controlled.

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INTRODUCTION

Stress is an area of popular study in the 1980's. It is not a new area of study, just a reemerging one. Selye (7) in his pioneering work The Stress of Life defines stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand placed upon it." In its medical sense, stress is essentially the rate of wear and tear in the body. Like an automobile, stress occurs on the structure of the engine (the human body) and with time will wear it out. Selye's concept that stressors occur throughout our entire life in both good (eustress) and bad (distress) forms is of paramount importance to understand and accept in today's corporate setting. In an interesting article on occupational stress of teachers Needle, Griffith and Svendsen (6) found that most stress comes from the perception of discrepancies between importance and availability of different working conditions. The most stress producing condition was not having enough time to get the job done, followed in order by: (a) salary discrepancies, (b) job security and (c) fringe benefits. Many of these discrepancies have collary importance in the business world. The manifestation of stress or rather the effect of stress can be seen in pathological physiology, behavioral deviation, as well as emotional instability. While visiting a local high school recently it was reported to this author that a very high percentage of teachers in the school had diagnosed essential hypertension.

Recent publications have referred to the extent of the problem of

stress in modern day living. Some physicians believe that 80% of the office visits by patients are directly or indirectly stress-related disorders. Essential hypertension, kidney or bladder problems, insomnia, gastritis, ulcers, colitis and cardiovascular disorders are all at least somewhat related to the stress of life. It is no coincidence that the three leading prescriptions sold in the United States are a tranquilizer (Valium), a cardiovascular stabilizer (Inderal), and an ulcer medication (Tagamet). The incidence of anxiety, panic attacks, phobic reactions and other psychological disorders is well documented as one of the emerging diseases of the 1980's.(8) The growing recognition of the part played by stress in the etiology of many physical and psychological disorders has led to efforts to prevent or treat those ailments. Woolfolk and Lehrer (11) reported that "within the marketplace of applied behavioral science, stress management technology qualifies as a growth industry. Sales of biofeedback equipment are up; courses on how to cope with stress are being offered widely within industry; there is great interest in Eastern traditions such as yoga and meditation; the media abound with programs and articles on how to avoid the hazards of stress." The purpose of this article then is not to suggest that all stress can be avoided and that a solution can be definitively presented that will work for all people. The purpose of this article is to suggest some positive steps that can be taken to combat an illness that is afflicting millions in the workplace of the 1980's. If one is to gain anything from this article then it might be an understanding that we do not need to sit by and allow stress to control our lives. One needs to at least formulate a plan of action!

ASSESSMENT

One of the first aspects of a good plan for stress management is to properly assess the extent that the employee or manager is experiencing stress. Many good forms are currently on the market to assess stress levels. Rather than reprint these forms in this paper the author would rather address the areas of concern for assessment and then offer appropriate sources for procuring the assessment instruments. Obviously not all assessment should or can be accomplished without the aid of a trained and certified health-care professional. However, there are some rather easily obtained and understandable paper-and-pencil tests available that do a good job of recognizing stress. Research has found that people who have anxious personalities (i.e., high trait anxiety) tend to react with more anxiety to more situations. Spielberger's (9) seminal work that produced the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) has really been helpful in assessing anxious personalities. This test takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. The book Managing Stress Before it Manages You by Steinmetz, Blankenship, Brown, Hall, and Miller (10) is an excellent reference for assessing stress-related symptoms. This book allows you to make assessments concerning stress symptoms (i.e., physiological, behavioral, emotional) as well as identifying stressful conditions that affect daily lives. Another area of assessment is propensity for coronary prone behavior. Some assessment of Type "A" behavior and anger response is also appropriate. Often the best type of assessment however, is to simply listen and ask questions of the individual. It will give you time to get to know your employees and

co-workers better as well as afford you the opportunity to decide whether the person might benefit from stress management training. One last method that can be helpful in documenting and recognizing significant stressors in life is to keep a diary of daily events.

INTERVENTION

The next step in stress management is to set up a plan of action. Stress and its many manifestations fortunately can be attacked on many fronts. To name a few to be explored in this paper; physical methods and psychological methods.

PHYSICAL METHODS

The physical methods are often overlooked in the literature as a way to cope with stress. By physical methods the author is referring to strenuous or mild physical exercise, diet control, and muscle-tension relaxation techniques. An important and exciting area of stress management for corporate populations is that of psychological well-being and vigorous physical exercise. By vigorous physical activity the author refers to activity on a moderate to intense level (60-80% of the maximal heart rate reserve) and engaged in long enough to allow for aerobic benefits (15-60 minutes). The activities most often referred to as aerobic include: walking, jogging, cycling, swimming, and cross-country skiing. While some other activities might have some impact on psychological states (i.e., basketball, tennis, and racquetball), they are considered less optimal than aerobic activities for stress management. Of course, it is very important to start gradually in any exercise program and if over the age of 35 to obtain a complete physical examination including an exercise stress test prior to engaging in this type of vigorous program. Why is this type of exercise potentially beneficial to a good stress management program? Greist, Klein, Eischens, Fairs, Gurman and Morgan (3) have identified several plausible explanations. These factors include mastery, patience, capacity for change generalization, distraction, positive addiction and biochemical change. Regardless of the reason for the positive effects of this type of exercise program on the relief of anxiety and tension and some forms of mild depression the positive health gains cardiovascularly should be reason enough for its inclusion in your overall plan. Many corporations today are including regular exercise breaks into the work day and have seen good results on productivity gains, decreases in absenteeism and the overall reduction of insurance claims do to illness.

Diet is another area that compliments your exercise program. Many companies would be wise to include seminars and regular instruction in a sound approach to dietary nutrition. Such instruction should include a section on basic nutritional needs assessment, a section on debunking popular myths that surround dietary practice and instruction in a definite plan to diet wisely and safely.

Some form of instruction in how to reduce basic bodily tension levels is also a must. Any model can be utilized but one of the best is progressive muscular relaxation.(4) This form of relaxation technique was developed on the premise that if we can recognize tension in our muscles then we can also learn to recognize relaxation. The idea is to classically condition the relaxation response rather than the tension response. The muscle group cannot be relaxed and tense at the same time. Individuals with a history of any medical condition that contraindicates participation in relaxation training (high or low blood pressure, heart condition, diabetes, ulcers, or asthma) should receive medical clearance from a physician prior to initiation of the program. One method of progressive relaxation developed by Bernstein and Borevec (2) is a shortened version developed for more rapid learning of this technique. The basic rationale for learning entails that after the client has understood the underlying principles of progressive relaxation, the actual relaxation training can begin. The Bernstein and Borkevic method only entails the alternating tensing and relaxing of 16 muscle groups. The muscle groups include in order: the dominant hand and forearm, dominant biceps, nondominant hand and forearm, nondominant biceps, forehead, upper cheeks and nose, lower cheeks and jaw, neck and throat, chest, shoulders and upper back, abdominal region, dominant thigh, dominant calf, dominant foot, nondominant thigh, nondominant calf, and nondominant foot. In teaching relaxation to a client, there is a succession of events which must occur with respect to each muscle group. The sequence is as follows:

1. The client's attention should be focused on the muscle group.
2. At a predetermined signal from the therapist, the muscle group is tensed.
3. Tension is maintained for a period of 5-7 seconds.
4. At a predetermined cue, the muscle group is released.
5. The client's attention is maintained upon the muscle group as it relaxes.(2)

This simple relaxation procedure could be given to an employee or colleague as one method to teach him to relax.

PSYCHOLOGICAL METHODS

The psychological methods of a stress management program can take the form of several methods. Some of the more common methods include: some form of mental relaxation, assertiveness training, and listening skills.

Mental Relaxation

Some form of mental relaxation is a must for most people. One of the best and most systematic forms of mental relaxation is Modified Autogenic Training (MAT).⁽⁵⁾ This method of training is a combination of Schultz's Standard Autogenic Training (SAT) and Jencks' Breathing Exercises. Autogenic Training was developed in Germany in the 1930's and concentrated on six standard exercises that elicited the relaxation response. This method is actually a form of self-hypnosis. The standard formulae include heaviness of limbs, warmth of limbs, heartbeat, breathing, warmth of the body and coolness of the forehead. These formulae when coupled with normal exhalations produce the relaxation response in most people. Krenz ⁽⁵⁾ has systematically developed a modified autogenic training program for athletes and other performers which is also applicable to other populations. This is an excellent reference for anyone interested in a relaxation technique. Another useful program is Benson's Relaxation Response.⁽¹⁾ This would also be an excellent reference for anyone in the business world.

Assertiveness Training

Behaving assertively is more difficult for some than others, but hints in this section should allow everyone to begin moving in an assertive direction. Assertiveness is not only a matter of what you say, but also a function of how you say it. Those who express themselves assertively:

1. Stand straight and steady and directly face the persons to whom they are addressing while maintaining eye contact.
2. Speak in a clear, steady voice, loud enough to be heard.
3. Speak fluently, without hesitation, and with assurance and confidence.

In direct contrast, nonassertive body language consists of lack of eye contact, swaying and shifting and whining and hesitation in speech patterns. Often the aggressive individual will lean forward, point a finger, shout or clench his fists. A good way to start on your way to assertiveness is to recognize some basic rights you possess. For example, you have a right to put yourself first sometimes. You have a right to change your mind and to protest unfair treatment. You have a right to feel and express pain. Assertiveness can not be developed over-night. However, with some behavioral change and modification anyone can learn to appropriately become more assertive. Assertive behavior is that type of interpersonal behavior in which we stand up for our legitimate rights in such a way that the rights of another are not violated. Assertive behavior allows us to act in our own best interests, to stand up for ourselves without undue anxiety and without denying the

rights of others. Assertive behavior is direct, honest and appropriate expression of one's feelings, opinions or beliefs. When one is assertive one shows consideration not deference for another. When you act assertively you feel confident.

Listening Skills

The ability to listen and listen effectively is a skill that most people need to improve. Poor listening habits is often a sign of poor communication patterns. There are a number of listening exercises that are available but one that is relatively simple to instruct people in is called active listening. This skill is developed by giving accurate feedback to the sender of a message. One person in an interaction serves as the sender and the other the receiver. The sender talks while the receiver listens actively. The receiver must then accurately convey the content of the message to the sender and receive an affirmation of the correct interpretation. Once three consecutive positive affirmations are given then roles are reversed. In order to succeed in this drill you must listen and not try to figure out what you are going to say in return. By the way, this drill is a great stress reducer.

SUMMARY

Your job is to help your employees perform well. It is this authors belief that systematic stress management program can be helpful in accomplishing this goal. It is time to include this type of training in your workplace.

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