

“Executive Stress and Their Job Effectiveness in Benue State Nigeria”

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Abstract

Stress debility has caused both young and middle aged people to meet untimely death. Experts in stress management therefore cannot remain complacent while citizens get tormented by stress- related illnesses like heart conditions, renal problems and hypertension. The focus on executives here is predicated on the assumption that the physical and mental exertions by executives make them more vulnerable to stress than any other group of persons-phone calls, file processing, management of human and material resources in an establishment, extensive rumination over business problems, and a compulsive thriving to outwit other executives can add up to high levels of stress in executives. The Nigerian executive is not an exception. An average Nigerian overworks in order to make ends meet. There is little leisure. Unfortunately, while people strive to accumulate some life-saving materials, their tension and blood pressure build up as well. Prolonged effects of stress are totally debilitating and often culminate in zero productivity or death. This calls for serious psychological, administrative and pharmacological interventions.

Introduction

As the search for managerial effectiveness and enhanced worker productivity in organizations continue, attention is being focused not only on the factor variables that motivate workers to perform to their highest levels of productivity, but also on those other variables that act negatively against them and impede their work effectiveness. One of those impeding factors that produce negatively valued outcomes on the part of the workers and their chief executives has been identified as stress and anxiety. Until recently, little has been known about stress and its management control. But in recent times, management experts have caused tremendous attention to be focused on stress management as a cardinal factor in modern managerial technology.

In Nigeria, however awareness of stress and its effect on workers and worker productivity can be said to be very minimal. Very little has been done by our management experts to bring this awareness to bear on the present situation (Oboegbulem, 2004).

The major focus of this paper is to stimulate interest and attention in understanding stress and its management. Following the introduction, Section 2 highlights the concept of stress including the causes, symptoms and consequences of stress. Section 3 contains the treatment of stress, while Section 4 captures a survey study about the phenomenon in discourse and Section 5 concludes and offers some recommendations for the phenomena under discourse.

Keywords: Stress, Anxiety, Stress management

2.0 Conceptual Framework

2.1 Stress

Every area of life produces stress (Melgosa, 2005). When a person tries to eliminate all stress, the only thing he accomplishes is to become more stressed. This has made the concept of stress more difficult to define. Hundreds of definitions can be found in different literature. For example Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines stress as pressure, tension or worry resulting from problems in one's life.

Akinboye and Adeyemo (2002, in Udeh 2007) defined stress as an ineffective and unhealthy reaction to change. It is the body's response to any undesirable mental, physical, emotional, social or environmental demand. According to them stress describes physical trauma, strenuous exercise, metallic disturbance and anxiety which challenges the body well being. Stress describes the wear and that stressors (causes of stress) cause on the human body including the distortion of mental and behavioural patterns. The stressors include work changes, unexpected and sudden noise, terrors, panic, electric shock, uncontrollable situations, physical ailments, surgery, threats to life, daily conflicts, sleep deprivation, work over or under load, social isolation etc.

According to Nwachukwu (1994, in Udeh 2007) stress refers to any factor, mental and physical, the pressure of which can adversely affect the functioning of the body, or undue strain exerted upon mind or body which is liable to cause impairment of mental or physical functioning.

Stress, as defined by Robbin (1998) is "a dynamic condition in which an individual is confronted with an opportunity, constraint or demand related to what he/she desires and for which the outcome is perceived to be both uncertain and important". Stress results from anxiety over the unknown that is, being anxious to know the outcome of a future event. According to Robbins, though stress is often discussed in a negative context, it has a positive value, particularly when it offers a potential gain.

From the foregoing, we can say that, stress means subjected to external forces or pressures and that stress can be either positive or negative, depending upon the effect of the external force.

2.2 Anxiety and Stress

Obviously, stress and anxiety are often closely linked. For this reason, it is important to realize that anxiety can be one of the most dangerous psychological symptoms of stress. Many people who are suffering from the devastating effects of anxiety can trace the beginning of their anxious habit to a time of stress. Often, a person who is under a lot of stress shows signs of anxiety.

Apprehension, worry, nervousness and fear of the future are among such signals. While stress may be compared to a mountain (work, family problems, difficult conditions like examinations) which one must climb, anxiety is the result of analyzing the possible consequences (especially if they are painful) of failing at the task. It is normal to experience a certain amount of anxiety when faced with uncertainty. But excessive anxiety is a type of neurosis which hurt both the sufferer and his family. The problems of ethnic conflicts, religious conflicts and political affiliations create anxiety and fear which can stimulate stress.

2.3 Executive Stress and Anxiety

The word stress has been extensively defined. The term "executive" generally refers to an organizational leader at any management level. This level may range from the manger of a kiosk or supermarket to a director of a highly rated company or industry. Though the organizational challenges/headaches may differ in terms of variety and magnitude, a leader at any level needs to worry about the organizational success. Hence, there may be some basic problems which all kinds of executive face.

However, the primary focus in this paper is on the executives in the high echelon of government administrative business. This includes the top level political class engaged in management of state government and local government councils.

A typical executive in these establishments is a busy person. He/she experiences premature debility, and may meet an untimely death from stress-related illness. The executive is pre-occupied with deep thinking regarding how to outwit other executives, how to check fraud among his staff and so on. He/she is often anxious about politics that surround his appointment and tenure. The executive closes from the office but brings home some work either physically or mentally or both. He/she actively involved in telephoning and answering phone calls regarding the organization.

The full commitment of work sometimes makes the executive to relegate the family to the background to the sure chagrin of his wife/her husband who may interpret it as a lack of care for the family. Family trouble starts. One wonder whether or not executives have any leisure. Tension piles up as some of the executives refuse to go on their annual leave for years in order to maintain efficiency in their organizations. However, while their annual leaves pile up, their tension and stress build-up as well.

Social anxiety among executive has become evident in recent years. The executive is often invited as chief launcher, guest speaker, chairman and guest of honour at various social functions in these days of financial austerity.

Social interaction skills manifest at such functions. A shy executive manifest immense social anxiety as he finds social interaction skills at such a high level in public rather hard to execute. Nervousness, clumsiness and trembling tend to reduce the effectiveness of public performance by some executives.

Too much social participation evidences inefficiency, slowness in thought and drained initiative. The social burn out can set-in as executive becomes both physically and mentally depleted. In most case, the executive loses his social motivation, enthusiasm and zeal as a result of the fatigue inflicted on him by social participation.

Affectively, the executive exhibits depression. Depression refers to a feeling of sadness, low activity, self criticism, pessimism, indecisiveness and indifference. Depression affects an executive's social interaction with subordinates and reduces the amount of warmth between the executive and workers.

2.4 Stages of Stress

In the words of Selyse (1976 in Udeh 2007) avail that stress is the body's response to demand on it. He refers to these demands as stressors. Based on long series of experiments with animals, Selyse (1976) proposed that bodily stress reactions follow a three-stage Generation-Adaptation-Syndrome (GAS). The first stage is an alarm reaction which involves physiological changes generally associated with emotion, pupil dilation, increase in hear beat, etc. If the stress persists, the individual enters a second stage of resistance, during which the body recovers from the initial stress reaction and begins coping with the situation. There is a decrease in output from the adrenal cortex and the pituitary gland.

The exhaustion stage is the final stage of stress. It is characterized by fatigue, anxiety, and depression. This stage according to Cannon (1929) "stress response been a part of a unified mind-body system". This extreme cold, lack of oxygen and emotion arousing incidents triggers an out powering of the stress hormones, epinephrine and norppinephrine from the adrenal glands, it is characterized by increased heart rate and respiration, diversion of blood from digestion to the skeletal muscles dull pain and releases sugar and fat from the body's stores" These three stages occur either sequentially or simultaneously.

2.5 Causes of Stress

Stress is such a ubiquitous nuisance and looking for its sources is perhaps a tiresome exercise. However one of the notable causes of stress is;

- Lack of planning and bad time management; Planning helps to have set goal(s); concentrate on important issue for attainment of goals; reduce waste/tension and stress that might arise in order to meet up the pressures of the environment; and save time which is converted to other uses.
Planning requires definition of objectives and setting of priorities; Assignment of responsibilities; Delegation of authority to qualified staff; performance evaluation; taking of corrective actions to achieve goals;
Time is the most valuable asset; if well managed it becomes money. It is infinite and scarce commodity, it is an invaluable asset that cannot be bought or stored. Time management is being in control of ones time and using it diligently rather than allowing it to control you.
Time has to be managed to achieve set goals. The executive has to know what he wants and when to do it to achieve goals by setting up machinery for the achievement of such goals. Monitor and evaluate performance as well as take corrective action if there exist a deviation.
Benefits of Time Management includes; identification of opportunity for investment; setting priorities right; attainment of goals; effective management of personal life; reduction in waste and stress; increased productivity.
- Other causes attributed to stress includes; Lack of trust in ones employees and relations; Centralization of organizational activities; Resistance to change; High-mindedness; Over –ambition; Lack of rest and relaxation; Malnutrition.

Akinboye and Adeyemo (2002) further outlined the following factors that are stressors in the workplace to include; Low pay; Promotion problem; Threat of redundancy; Job insecurity; Change in working hours; Feeling of lack of control; Lack of job satisfaction; Office politics; Employee lack of control; Career development and achievement factors; Conflict at work; Heavy work load; New management techniques; Long hours of working;

Work shifts; Sensory factors such as noise; Sexual harassment; Factors of the job itself; Ageism; Meeting deadlines; Long hours of meetings; Burn out; Trauma; Poor social skills; Low emotional intelligence; Bullying at work; Autocratic leadership; Home-work intervals; Lack of recognition; Poor supervisory skill. The above factors could adversely affect the performance of workers.

According to Kalu (2011), all these stressors can be categorized into three namely: catastrophic events, daily hassles and major life changes. Curiously, the mere thought of a sad past or an oncoming unpleasant event can also cause stress in some persons.

2.6 Symptoms of Stress

Stress usually comes with symptoms which include; High blood pressure; Ulcer; Irritability; Difficulties in taking simple decisions relating to work; Loss of one's appetite; Easy susceptibility to mistake and accident; Anger and aggressiveness; Headache; Vomiting

2.7 Effects of Stress

The effects of stress can be categorized under physiological, psychological and behavioral.

- (a) Physiological effects: These include; Change in one's metabolism; Increase in hear beat; Obsession; Constant headache and migraine; Heart diseases/cardiac arrest
- (b) Psychological effects. These include; Emotional instability and lack of concentration; Job dissatisfaction; Tension; Anxiety; Boredom; Procrastination; Laziness; Anger
- (c) Behavioral effects. These include; Low productivity and profitability; Absenteeism; Low turnover rate; Change in eating habit; Increase smoking and consumption of alcohol; Stammering (rapid search); Fidgeting and fear of the unknown; Disorder in one's sleep; Aggression; Hot temper; Quarreling.

3.0 Stress Management

Management of stress is the ability of an individual/Executive to control stress or reduce it to the lowest level.

It has been found that a number of individuals adopt different coping methods and behaviour in managing stress. These actions range from dangerous, through anti social and strange, to absolutely normal.

- (a) The dangerous coping behaviours have been identified as; Excessive drinking of alcohol; Smoking; Over eating; Use of dangerous or narcotic drugs, such as cocaine, heroine and Marijuana.
- (b) But some other individuals, in managing stress, adopt anti-social coping behaviours such as; Withdrawal (i.e. not wanting to communicate with others): "tell every body, I do not want to see any body today"- the executive informs his secretary; Aloofness (i.e. showing unfriendliness and lack of interest in others except themselves); Aggressive behaviour.
- (c) Some identified strange coping behaviours or addictions include; Gum chewing; Biting ones fingernails; Singing (especially at odd times and in odd places); Drinking too much water; Collecting papers and tearing them simultaneously; Walking up and down in a room (perambulation).

All these stress management behaviours can be grouped into two broad areas;

- (a) Physiological activities and
- (b) Cognitive and psychological activities

The following might be helpful in reducing stress among executives:

- (i) determination of job objective and assignment of responsibility,
- (ii) improvement of the organizational communication system,
- (iii) employment of workers that are suitable for the job,
- (iv) adequate Job description,
- (v) delegation of authority,
- (vi) job re-designation to increase employees' challenges and opportunity for participation in decision making,
- (vii) socialization-i.e. cordial relationship between supervisors and subordinates,
- (viii) separation of business from one's personal life,
- (ix) seeking for counseling and guidance,
- (x) undergoing training on time, crisis and risk management,

- (xi) spiritual and physical exercise,
- (xii) resting and relaxation,
- (xiii) taking balance diet; have a big and nutritious breakfast everyday, this help the body system to start a day in earnest. Skipping breakfast can cause a body mechanism to slow down and descend, sometimes dangerously to low blood sugar levels. Saturated fats, refined carbohydrates, coffee, tea, kola, alcohol, and other drugs- ‘Watch what you eat’
- (xiv) constant medical check-up- stress can be treated medically too.

4.1 Study Population

Benue State is one of the 36 States of the Federal republic of Nigeria with an estimated population of N4.6 million people according to the 2008 population census. It is predominantly an agrarian based economy with twenty-three municipal councils which comprises of 276 councils wards. The State has a 30-member constituent Assembly and about 20-Member State Executive Council.

Using the criteria of the political class charged with governance of the State a 510 population size was determined to include 20 State Executive Members, 30 Members of the State Assembly, 23 Local Government Chairman, 161 Members of the Local Government Executive and 276 representative Members of the Local Government wards.

From the foregoing, the purposive sampling technique was used, while adopting the questionnaires and interviews as means of data collection.

4.2 Results and Analysis

A total number of 500 questionnaires, representing 98%, were returned; leaving 2 % (10) as unreturned questionnaires.

A. On the causes of stress, the study revealed that

- 16.7% is attributed to catastrophic stressors, which include trauma, Low pay, promotion problem, threat of redundancy, job insecurity, emotional breakdown and marriage problems.
- 50% is attributed to Daily Hassles stressors which include change in working hours, feeling of lack of control, conflict at work, long hours of working, work shifts, sensory factors such as noise, factors of the job itself, long hours of meeting, poor social skills, low emotional intelligence, Bullying at work, home work intervals and poor supervisory skill.
- 33.3% is attributed to major life changes stressors which include lack of recognition, Autocratic leadership, sexual harassment, Ageism, New management techniques, heavy work load, career development and achievement factors, employee lack of control, lack of job satisfaction.

B. On the effects of stress and its concomitant effect on job effectiveness the study revealed that;

- 48% of physiological effects which include change in one’s metabolism, increase in heart beat, obsession, constant headache and Migraine, Heart diseases/Cardiac arrest, causes job ineffectiveness amongst the State political class.
- 32% of Psychological effects accounts for job ineffectiveness among the state political class. These effects include emotional instability and lack of concentration, job dissatisfaction, tension, anxiety, boredom, procrastination laziness and anger.
- 20% of behavioral effects lead to job ineffectiveness among the state political class. These effects include low productivity, and probability, Absenteeism, change in eating habit, increase smoking and consumption of alcohol, stammering, fidgeting and fear of the unknown, sleep disorder, aggression, hot temper and quarrelling.

C. On the management of stress or strategies adopted towards managing stress, the study revealed that.

- 10% of the target audience adopted dangerous coping behaviours which include excessive drinking of alcohol, smoking, over eating and the use of dangerous or narcotic drugs such as cocaine and heroine and marijuana.
- 55% adopted anti-social coping behaviours in managing stress. This include, not wanting to communicate with others, aloofness and lack of interest in others except themselves, and aggressive behaviour.

- 35% adopted strange coping behaviours in the management of stress. These behaviours include gum chewing, biting ones finger nails, singing especially at odd times and in odd places, drinking too much water, collecting paper's and tearing them simultaneously, walking up an down in a room.

D. On stress avoidance strategies the study revealed that

- 52% of physiological or physical strategies are adopted to avoid stress from manifestation. This includes spiritual and physical exercise, laughing, resting and relaxation, taking balanced diet, constant medical check-up.
- 42% of psychological strategies are adopted as stress avoidance. These strategies include, determination of job objectives, description and assignment of responsibilities, improvement in work place communicating and socialization, seeking counseling and guidance.

5.1 Conclusion

The impetus to write this paper is derived from the conviction that a healthy person is more productive than an unhealthy person. Stress debility has caused the young and middle aged to meet an untimely death. Many people die innocently because of ignorance of the rape of “silent killers”. Medical, education and psychological services need to be utilized to reduce the scourge of stress and its related psychosomatism. Experts in stress management therefore, cannot remain complacent while citizens get tormented by stress-related illness like heart conditions, renal problems and hyper tension.

However, the major thrust of the paper is on the executive. This does not mean that the non-executives are immune from stress. The focus on the executive is predicated on the findings that the physical and mental exertions by the executives make them more vulnerable to stress and the performance of their jobs.

Phone calls, phone answering, the processing, the management over business problems, and a compulsive thriving to outwit other executives can add up to high levels of stress among executive.

Furthermore, Nigeria has increasingly become a psychological nation. Experiencing economic recession, business glut, fuel scarcity, power failure, poverty, epileptic food shortages and economic necessities, worrisome social problems, a choked entrepreneurial spirit, political instability, and general insecurity. People sometimes stare in emptiness and look hopelessly confused. An average Nigerian, for instance, overworks in order to make ends meet. There is little leisure. Struggling to survive is the rule.

Unfortunately, while people strive to accumulate some life-saving materials, their tension and blood pressure build up, as well. As an executive pile up annual leaves for years without going on vacation, stress also piles up in him/her. Life is hard and stressful for everybody. Admittedly, stress is not all negative, for instance, a modicum of stress is positive since a large store of energy is mobilized during an on-set of stress. This energy can be used for productive purpose for a short term. But prolonged effects of stress are totally debilitating and often culminate in zero productivity, or death.

5.2 Recommendations

Executives, who are victims of anxiety and stress are advised to adopt the following measures:

- As much as possible, avoid the source of stress, identify it and deal frontally with it.
- Adopt a positive, responsible and dutiful attitude towards your job, no matter what it entails.
- Always take an objective view of any situation in which you find your self.
- Develop an all round and a good sense of humor for dealing with all classes of people.
- Avoid undue confrontation with your colleagues or neighbors and other people you may come across.
- Try and put behind you the burden of work at the close of the day
- Confide your frustrations and troubles to a close friend
- Laugh off your problems or difficulties to ease your tension and anxiety.
- Discuss with your spouse those problems that bother you most.
- Engage yourself from time to time, in some pleasurable past time.
- Read interesting, engaging and inspirational books for relaxation.
- Above all, cultivate a free, liberal, scrupulous and accessible spirit of friendship, understanding, and accommodation with those you come across in life.

In addition, beware of the following six (6) faceless “enemies of humankind in contemporary history” which often lead to tension and stress.

1. Arguments (engaging in sterile arguments that could be confrontational)
2. Deadlines (meeting deadly deadlines)
3. Boredom (feeling persistently tired and losing interest, focus and concentration).
4. Ambition (burning, driving zeal to succeed, sometimes at all costs)
5. Lack of exercise (not involving the body and mind in some healthy effort or activity) and
6. Pressure to achieve (the notorious achievement bug that can systematically overwhelm and destroy). Note that some of the things we some times label as “good” often turn out to become life threatening.

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