



Dr. Shakuntala Dawesar

Practising Family Physician & Counselor, Delhi
shakuntaladawesar@yahoo.co.in

Workplace related stress is experienced by almost everyone at some period or other. It may vary from one individual to another, in terms of duration, and intensity. It is equally noted both in employer and employee, and workers of every level from the top to the lowest rung.

In order to be able to cope with it, the cause of stress has to be identified and the remedial measures undertaken. Some of the common causes are:

- Inability to deliver the expected results. This could be due to inadequate training or orientation to the expected performance. The senior person needs to recognize this short coming and point it out and guide the worker. The worker, in turn needs to work harder to acquire the speed and skill required for the discharge of his/her duties and not take amiss the instruction given.
- Unrealistic expectations and deadlines to be met. When any project is assigned, a worker must be able to assess his/her capability and commit to a realistic deadline. The person assigning the task also must be mindful of the efficiency and competence of the person being given the assignment. A small window of flexibility is a must if disappointments are to be avoided. In case the task is not completed in time or to the satisfaction of the assigner, then, both must sit down and analyze the reasons and find solutions.
- Transfer, especially to another city/state which necessitates relocation is a matter of stress, both for the person and the entire family. One has to consider the wisdom of disrupting the education of the children and the situation of the spouse in case he/she is also employed. In such cases, especially if there is no extended family within the premises or nearby, the spouse being transferred may have to relocate alone. Relocation to a new place often poses some challenges of renting a place, house-keeping and a sense of loneliness. Transfers and relocations are common and expected in certain jobs like the Armed Forces and Foreign Service. Recognizing the stress of moving, these organizations provide assistance for housing, school admissions and settling down. The assistance is modest and every organization that has provisions for transferring employees could put into place a system to provide such assistance. It would go a long way in helping the employee to adjust to the



WORKPLACE RELATED STRESS

new environment and be at ease. It would definitely create the condition for being more productive at work. Transfers provide an opportunity for exposure to another city/state, its culture, cuisine and people. This is a learning experience and beneficial to the growth of the individual. Living alone gives one more time to pursue hobbies and opt for games and physical activities which help one to stay fit. One must view the relocation through this lens rather than consider it a punishment posting which only causes depression. The management, in turn must consider carefully the need to transfer an individual depending on the vulnerabilities and personal situation of the employee. A sympathetic attitude of the employer rewards the organization with greater loyalty and work efficiency of the employee.

- Health issues prevent optimum efficiency of the employee and should be addressed. Many organizations provide medical facilities. Sometimes, the medical issue is due to faulty diet and meal times. Due to long hours of travel to reach the workplace, some employees are not able to eat properly before leaving home and may depend on some street food for their meals. Over a period of time, this adversely affects the health. In some offices, a local small scale agency has been identified for regular supply of lunch boxes with homemade meals. This greatly reduces stress in many ways. Car-pooling is also done by many to provide company during the long travel time and supplement cost. In many schools, children are given admission only if they reside within a certain radius. This is to make sure children do not have to commute long distances and get too tired to give their best in studies and games. Perhaps offices which have several branches could also consider this in cases where the job description fits the post. A high ranking officer in the forces told me that the convention was to post husband and wife in far off places if both were serving officers. This often made one of the two resign or bear the turbulence of separation of partners and children from one or the other. She said that she was lucky as soon after she joined the forces and married a colleague, the Armed Forces collectively decided that if both partners were in service, every effort should be made to post them in the same city or nearby depending on the vacancy for

the appropriate post. It was found that there was a huge difference in the amount of casual and medical leave taken by such personnel and the work output greatly improved. This aspect of providing the best environment for employees in order to elicit optimum work efficiency should be seriously considered by the management.

- Uncertainty or conflict in role assignment is a genuine cause for concern and stress in every employee. Every good establishment has a protocol for providing orientation to each employee with a detailed work description and expectations. The definite demarcation of responsibility is essential for work commitment of employees. This ensures accountability and prevents blame games being indulged in.
- Outdated or poor management practices produce all round stress in the workplace. A top management professional of a Public Sector Undertaking once shared an experience with me. They had well qualified staff but somehow there were constant delays in delivery of results. They engaged a professional to help them identify the reasons for this lack of expected efficiency.

His observations were that most travelled 3 to 4 hours to get to work. They were tired by the time they got to the workplace. Many started out so early that they barely had time to take a bite before leaving home. Many just carried some snacks and fruits for their meals. They reached home late in the evenings and hardly spent any quality time with the wife and children. They felt a lack of any meaningful activity with the children and often felt frustrated as growing children need parental presence, not just logistical support. Children are vulnerable and can be steered into wrong directions by peers if parents do not find the time to remain well connected to the children on a daily basis. Some employees felt there was a lack of appreciation and recognition of work well done. This too caused some discontent. Lack of exercise due to lack of time made the overall health to decline slowly. Many felt guilty not being able to run errands or contribute in activities of running the household.

Suggestions were sought by the employees who were apprised of the above observations. These were reviewed by a panel consisting of employee and key management ranking officials.

- a) A standard procedure was outlined for work assignment and assessment which would be evaluated monthly and recognition given where due.
- b) A gym would be set up with time limits for people to do short work outs while taking a break from the long hours of sitting at the monitor.
- c) A negotiation would be carried out with a general store owner in the vicinity so that a purchase list could be handed over at the Reception Desk on entry. The Receptionist would coordinate with the store and have the items delivered in separate packets for the employee to take home at the end of the day without having to make time/ excuse for the errands.
- d) A homemade meal service was identified for providing simple hot meals for those who could not manage that due to time constraints or single status.

The suggestions were implemented. The change in work culture, hugely improved the efficiency of the employee. The addition of exercise and hot meals provided by a home-made meal service, improved the sense of wellbeing of the employees and the general atmosphere of cordiality.

Women employees shared their concerns for safety at the workplace and the guilt they felt for not being able to spend more time attending the children's needs and chores at home. The decision to work in the case of a woman depends largely on the family structure, support and financial situation. If children are school going then it is important that a family member or trustworthy adult is present to attend them when they return from school. Without daily supervision and parental control children can, and do, tend to stray from the right path. A young lady shared with me the story of her achievements and promising career. After marriage and starting a family, she found herself struggling to be a hands on mother while working full time. When the children started school, she realized that if she continued to work, the children would have to be largely left to hired help for their daily needs. She realized the challenges and demands of her professional life would not allow her to fully experience the joy of bringing up her own children and molding their character so she resigned from her job. I asked her if she regretted her choice. She said that she was very happy being with her children and giving them time and a stable family life. They both were doing very well in studies and other activities. She too, meanwhile was doing some online and some classroom courses to acquire further skills and qualifications which would enable her to work full time once the children completed school and left the home. So the call to pursue a career or not is the call of the woman to take and once she makes a decision, she alone lives with the consequences. Balancing the responsibilities at home with the demands at the workplace is in itself a feat. Women are also natural care givers. Luckily, most of them appear to seamlessly manage the multiple tasks assigned to them in a matter of fact manner. They form an important part of our work force and work as efficiently as men. However, if and when they face sexual overtures/harassment, it creates in them a sense of fear and extreme stress. Many need their jobs to supplement the family income so they do not want to lose their position and this makes them react as silent sufferers instead of reporting the incident. This is especially the case when the person harassing them is a senior in position. Women must take courage and report such incidents without fear to a senior woman colleague or to the senior most person in the office who commands the respect of the others and has the power to take action. Women need to remember that the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) is there and every woman has protection under this Policy. Timely action may be sufficient to prevent such behavior in the future from this specific person or others. Remaining silent gives the signal of willingness and leads to further uneasy situations. Workplace romance is not uncommon and needs to be strictly guarded against as it interferes with work competence and complicates life in many ways. It is best nipped in the bud.

Whatever be the cause of stress in the workplace, the best option is to discuss the issue in an objective and dispassionate manner with the seniors in the organization or a team constituted for this purpose, and seek their advice. A direct approach is the most effective and creates the most empathy.