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Beat Stress with Positive Attitude

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Abstract

Stress is the term which is often causing stress to everyone. Its significance is attributed to its costlier consequences to both individuals and organizations. Individual costs include ill-health and decreased performance and organizational costs include decline in productivity and profits. The stress vulnerability of an individual depends on his personality characteristics, the basic disposition of an individual whether he/she is type-A or type-B or either he is internal or external etc. Hence knowing the personality type helps the individual to manage stress. The approach of an individual to overcome stress with positive attitude forms the main focus of the paper. The concept of positive psychology has been explained in support of the positive attitude. This paper further tries to narrate the implications of positive attitude and negative attitude. Tips to overcome the negative attitude forms the highlight the end.

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Introduction

Stress is the major buzzword heard in the conversations of the people, in news papers, televisions and magazines etc. and is an unavoidable feature of today's world. Hence, present century has been called the "Age of Anxiety and Stress". It is the concept which is of importance to researchers in Psychology and Management as well. Its significance can be attributed to its cost to both individuals and organizations. Due to the globalization and privatization individuals as well as organizations are under pressure. Every individual need to face the challenges in order to remain effective. Individual is forced to accelerate his/her association with changes in the environment within and outside the organization. This results in difficulty finding a harmony and balance between the individual and environment leading disequilibrium in the body and mind of individual's which is referred to as *Stress*. If the environmental demands are not met individual has to face stress and negative consequences namely *distress*. If the individual is able to face the challenges successfully and effectively and performs well, such stress is termed as *eustress*. Stress is thus the phenomenon which need to be understood by the world today to manage it positively.

Stress Costs to Organization

Organizations are becoming increasingly interested in managing stress because of its cost to the firm. Organizations are considering the employees as assets and hence giving emphasis to Human Resource Development and Management. Human potentialities, capabilities and abilities are to be identified, maintained and managed for the well-being of the organization which forms the key role of the Human Resources Management and Development. And, hence the conditions creating toll on the individuals and causing stress need to be identified and managed for effective performance of individual as well for organizational effectiveness.

The organizational problems like absenteeism, turnover, poor performance, low job satisfaction, low commitment are the consequences of the workplace stress. Surveys estimated that a single unscheduled absence costs an average organization over \$650 a day and absenteeism rates across US economy increased by close to 15% between 1992 and 1995. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) reported that 11% of all occupational diseases claims involve Gradual Mental Stress. Stress costs industrial economies around 10% of GNP, through sickness, absence, ill-health and labor turnover (Gulati, 2005). In a survey by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) studied the employees' attitudes towards work and found that stress is the second biggest problems after poor pay. A survey conducted in Great Britain in 1992 concluded that in 20% of organizations, up to half of all absenteeism was related to stress. Tangri (2002) found that Total Stress related cost to US business is estimated as \$200 to \$300 billion annually and 10% of the U.K's GNP is lost each year because of Job-Generated Stress.

Stress effects individual performance and at large organizational performance which may lead to decline in financial terms and productivity. Besides the cost organization is

paying, individual has to pay personal cost in terms of physical health, psychological and emotional well-being. In this context, understanding the phenomena of stress and knowing how our body reacts to stress can help us managing stress which is the need of the day.

Body's Reaction to Stress

When an individual experience stress, the brain dumps variety of chemicals into his blood stream, which helps in responding to the environmental demands. If this condition is left unchecked can lead to physical disorientation like heart attack or stroke. Many of them start drinking alcohol and start smoking. Anxiousness, depression, frustration, difficulty to sleep, experience chest pain, ulcers etc will be the result. Body runs out of the immunity to fight diseases and may even lead to death. Stress will never be identified as the cause of the death because the cause of the disease is psychological. Hence, stress can be called the *proxy killer* because some other disease always takes the blame for it.

Selye (1976), Father of Modern Stress Research, tried to define *Stress* as ‘the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it’. He proposed the General Adaptation Model (GAS) model to explain the stress process. When a person is confronted to the stressor the general physiological response occurs in three stages:

The first stage of GAS called **alarm reaction**, in response to the stressor, the body releases chemicals like adrenaline into the blood and body will be battling with stress in order to stay in equilibrium. This is called *fight or flight response*. The body responses would be muscles become tense, heart beat increases, breathing and perspiration increases, eyes dilate, stomach may compress etc. This is done by the body physiology to protect the individual in case something bad happens. Once the cause of the stress is removed, the body will go back to normal condition.

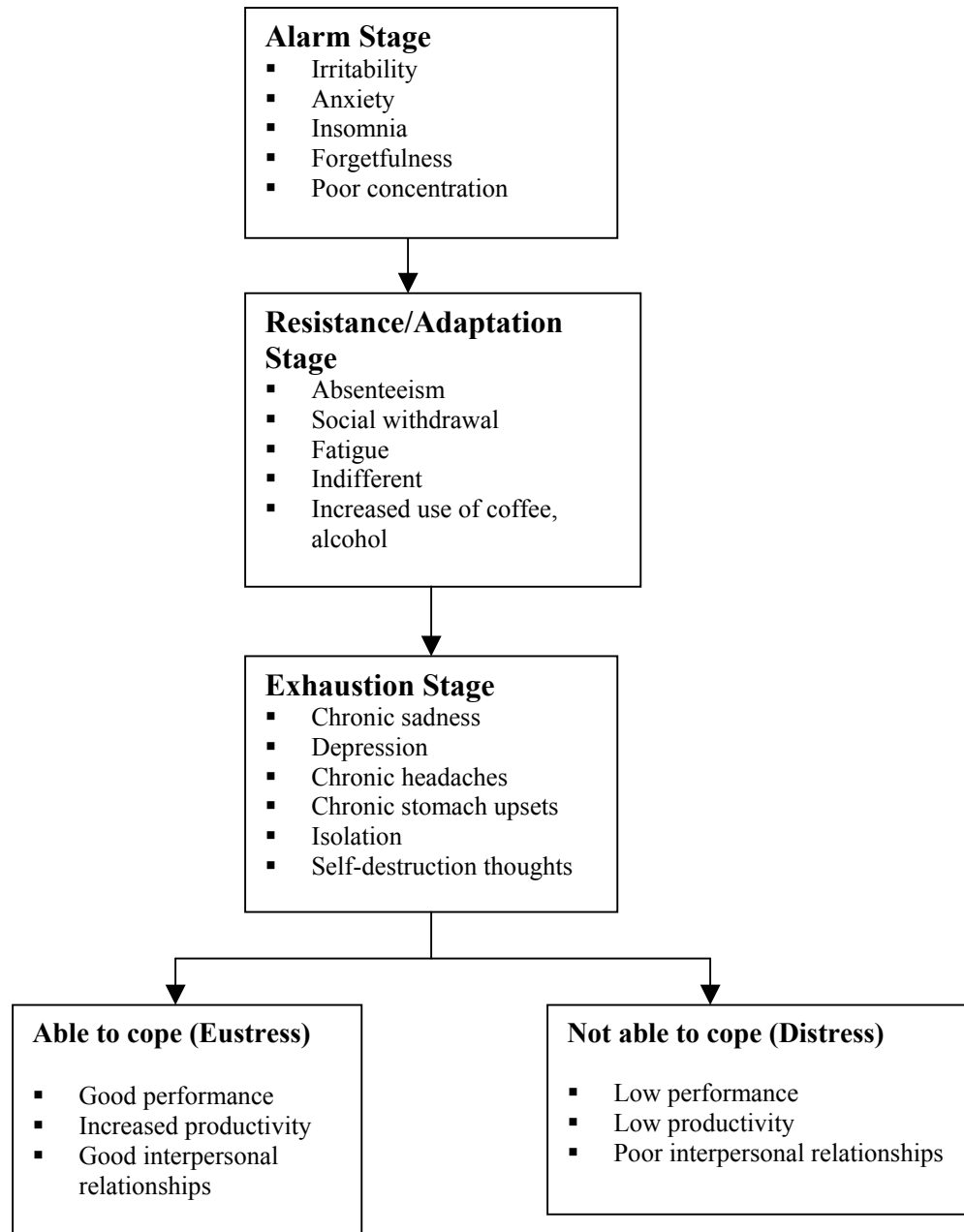
If the stressor is not removed, GAS goes to its second stage called **resistance or adaptation**. This is the body's response to long term protection. It secretes further hormones that increase blood sugar levels to sustain energy and raise blood pressure. If this adaptation phase continues for a prolonged period of time without periods of relaxation and rest to counterbalance the stress response, sufferers become prone to fatigue, irritability and lethargy leading to distress or negative stress.

The third stage of GAS is called **exhaustion**. In this stage, the body has run out of reserve of body energy and immunity. Mental, physical and emotional resources suffer heavily. Body experiences depletion of resources, leading to decreased stress tolerance, progressive mental and physical exhaustion, illness and finally collapses.

Reduced immunity makes the body more susceptible to illness like cold, flu and cancer etc. For example, the incidence of serious illness, including cancer, is significantly higher among people who have suffered the death of a spouse in the previous year. Thus, very often, those under severe, prolonged stress may be affected by diseases related to immune deficiency and may even die of these diseases. The death does not come from stress

itself. Body loses all its resistance in its effort to overcome the stress. People start taking alcohol to combat stress. Stress can also manifest itself into a number of diseases – depression, headaches, insomnia, ulcers, asthma, and more. So, it is very important that we recognize the cause for stresses and remove the causes to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Different stages of the GAS are shown below in figure no 1. Knowing the signals of stress and further knowing the phenomena will help one to manage it better.

Figure no.1 showing the stages of GAS model and subsequent signals at each stage



Signs of stress in the workplace

According to General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), first stage of stress experience is called **alarm stage** in which individual's exhibit signs like irritability, anxiety, insomnia, forgetfulness, inability to concentrate etc. Signs of the second stage, **resistance** or **adaptation stage** include absenteeism, fatigue, social withdrawal, being indifferent and increased use of alcohol and high intake of coffee etc. Signs of the third stage, **exhaustion stage** include chronic sadness, depression, chronic mental and physical fatigue, chronic headaches, stomach problems, isolation and self-destructive thoughts etc. If stress at one stage is not managed it proceeds to the next stage as explained in the model. Hence, knowing the signs of stress may help us to handle the stress and stop proceeding to the next stages.

Individual differences in stress experience

Individuals differ in their basic dispositions, personal characteristics and perceptions and hence in their response to stress. An individual reacts to the same stressor differently at different times. For instance, traffic may be a stressor for an individual on a particular day and may not be a stressor on the other day. And, two individuals differ in their response to the same stressor. For example, two individual doing the same job might be experiencing stress differently. One might be feeling stress while the other may not. Individuals are more likely to experience stress if they lack material resources (for example, financial security etc.) and psychological resources (for example, coping skills, self esteem), and more likely to be harmed by stress if they tend to react emotionally to situations and are highly competitive and pressured (Michie, 2002).

Individual personalities and characteristics play a key role in the perception of the stressor. Researchers have reasoned that, it is the personal characteristics or the personality that has a significant effect upon the organizational stress. Personality traits such as authoritarianism, rigidity, masculinity/femininity, extroversion, supportiveness, spontaneity, emotionality, tolerance for ambiguity, anxiety and the need for achievement have been discovered by researchers as being particularly relevant to individual stress (Gulati, 2005).

Rotter (1966) categorized people on the basis of Locus of control into *Internals and Externals*. People with much personal control called Internals who believe that they control every thing and are responsible for the things happening to them are more prone to stress than Externals. Externals are the individuals having less personal control and feel that their behavior is controlled by some supernatural power or fate which is responsible for their behavior and hence experience comparatively low stress.

Personality dimension *Extroversion – Introversion* says that a person who is dynamic, outgoing and gregarious is called extrovert, in contrast with the introvert, who is aloof and keeps himself away from the social gatherings. Another personality dimension, *Flexibility – Rigidity* talks about the flexibility of a person, either the person is outer-directed and participative rather than self-oriented, close-minded and indecisive. Kobasa

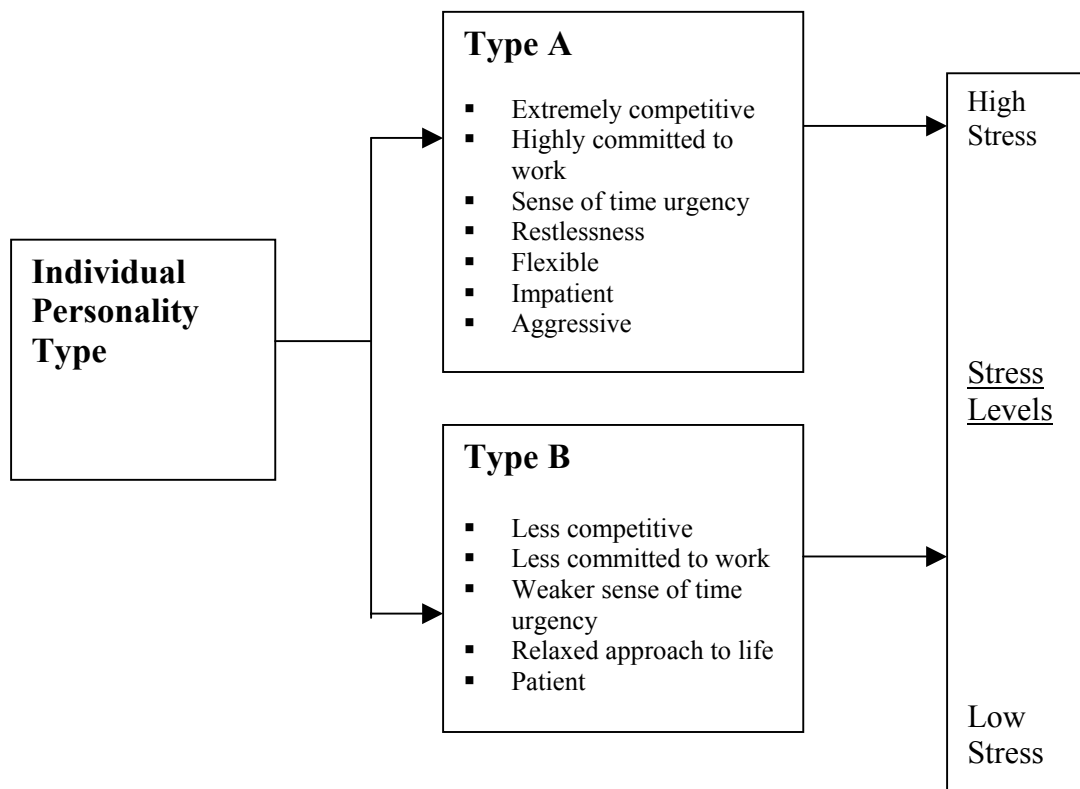
(1979) proposed the concept of *hardy personality* and identified three general characteristics

- believe that they can control and influence the events in their lives
- committed to activities in their lives
- enjoy anticipating challenges in life

People with hardy personalities approach life's events with a strong commitment to reach their goals and believe that they have at least some control over their life's events as a source of challenge for personal growth and they respond constructively by trying to find a solution. Low hardiness personalities assess stressors pessimistically, view life as stressful and as unchangeable disruptions to the normal course of behavior and hence try to escape from stressors.

Basing on individual behavior at work, they can be classified into two i.e., *Type-A* and *Type-B*. Type-A people are more prone to stress, restless, highly motivated, extremely competitive, highly committed, aggressive, impatient and highly work-oriented. Type-B people are rather relaxed, less motivated, less competitive, less committed to work, able to work at constant place and less work-oriented. Figure no. 2 shows the personality types Type-A and Type-B and corresponding stress experienced by the individuals.

Figure no. 2 showing the Type-A and Type-B personality characteristics and corresponding levels of stress



Managing stress with positive attitude

As stated by William James “Human beings can change their lives by changing their attitudes”. A person with positive attitude can definitely achieve his goals in life. Liking to live and living comfortably, peacefully, without any worry, is the trait of positive attitude where as the contrary is the negative attitude. If a person thinks that he can do the job and he feels that he likes the job, his approach is positive and his stress levels are comparatively less severe. Developing the capacity and capability to enjoy any activity one is doing and deriving pleasure in doing so helps the person to achieve success in doing the things. An optimist, always think that the all the people are nice and good and all the things will go well. This develops enthusiasm in him. Such people are least bothered about the negative things. Optimists have greater advantages than pessimists in doing things. Pessimist is one who leads life with passivity, failure, social estrangement, and, in its extreme, depression and mortality. According to Goleman (1995) optimism is also often used in relation to other positive constructs such as emotional intelligence. He devotes considerable attention to the role of optimism in his discussions of emotional intelligence and even at one point refers to optimism as an emotionally intelligent attitude.

Concept of Positive Psychology

Martin Seligman proposed the concept of *positive psychology*, which talks about the positive aspects of the human functioning and behaving. Main focus is on the positive features of people that make life worth living by thinking about the best things in life and ignoring the worst things of the life. The aim of the positive psychology is to use the scientific methodology to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals, groups, organizations and communities to thrive. It is concerned with optimal human functioning instead of pathological human functioning (Luthans, 2002). According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2002) there are three levels of positive psychology:

- i. Valued subjective experiences.* Well-being, contentment and satisfaction, (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present).
- ii. Positive individual traits.* The capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent, and wisdom.
- iii. Civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship:* Responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic keep an individual in a better place to live.

OB expert Fred Luthans proposed the concept of Positive Organizational Behavior (POB). This states the application of positively-oriented human strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today’s workplace. He further identified five major components of POB called CHOSE. Confidence (self-efficacy), hope, optimism, subjective well-being (happiness) and emotional intelligence (Pandey, 2005).

Pandey (2005) had proposed PMH model, positive mental health model, which tries to integrate concepts and basic premises of “positive psychology” and “preventive stress management” into a single model. This model states that the internal psychological state of an individual that indicates the individual’s positive orientation towards different domains of life namely physical, psychological and spiritual.

Advantages of positive attitude

Individual’s perception of a situation is responsible for either a positive or negative impact on him. If he perceives the situation with a positive sense, it has a good impact and vice versa. Positive attitude keeps person alert and always leads him in the direction of success in his/her activities. The consequences of such activities definitely lead the person to success. Such people bubbling with enthusiasm and with positive attitude would always make the things victorious. Below are some of the advantages of positive attitude.

a) Increased commitment, motivation and enthusiasm: The tendency of the individual to approach the tasks positively develops commitment in the individual. The positive attitude in the individual that he ‘can do it’ develops motivation and works with enthusiasm.

b) Increased productivity: With increased commitment, motivation and enthusiasm a person is of sure to perform well leading to increased productivity.

c) Enhanced team performance: People with positive attitude when work in the teams not only helps in increasing in their individual performance but also motivates other people in the team to perform well leading to better team performance.

d) Enhanced problem-solving ability: Negative attitudes leads to problems because a person will be in dilemma whether he can do it or not. In such dilemmas there is a possibility of taking wrong decisions leading to problems. Whereas, the optimist, on the other hand approach the things positively taking the decision rightly leading to a condition of elimination of problems.

e) Improved quality: If people in the organization approach the task positively and if the management supports the acts of the employees and gives the freedom of doing so, it will definitely help in increase in quality of work life and also in the quality of the products.

f) Hygienic work environment: The positive attitudes creates congenial and healthy climate in the organization. The capabilities, talents and the potencies of the individuals are encouraged with positive attitude which helps in motivating the employees.

g) Building employee morale: As the organizations believe that people are the main assets to the organizations. If the climate is very healthy and employees feel that his/her

efforts are encouraged by the management positively they develop the belongingness to the organization which helps in improving the morale and reduces attrition also.

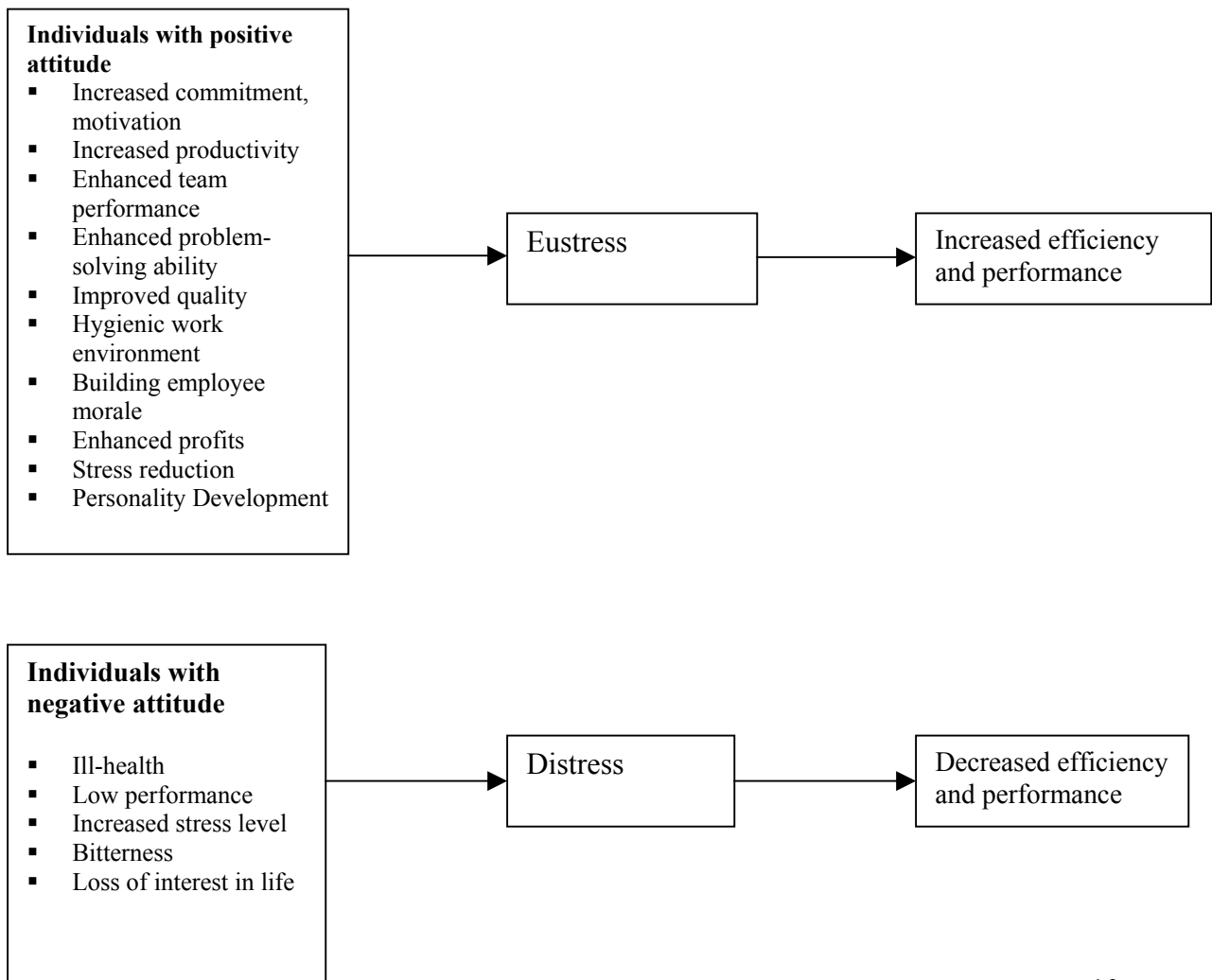
h) Enhanced profits: When the employees' mind-set is positive it leads to result-orientation bringing profits to the individual, group and the organization.

i) Stress reduction: The healthy environment in the organization result employee to experience less stress and work effectively.

j) Personality development: The approach of an individual towards things positively helps in building good interpersonal relationships and also helps him/her to be good human being with good personality.

With positive attitude, individual will be on his toes, having optimal stress and does things successfully. Optimal stress can also be called as “essential hypertension” or “eustress”. Conceptualization of which is shown below in figure no. 3.

Figure no. 3 showing the consequences of the positive and negative attitudes of individuals



Disadvantages of negative attitude

The consequences of negative attitude are contrary to that of positive attitude. Some of the consequences are ill-health, aggressiveness, low performance, low morale, increased stress levels, loss of interest in life and bitterness. Below are some of the disadvantages listed.

a) *Ill-health*: The healthy attitude towards the work and the tasks is in turn healthy to the individual leading to good health. Negative attitude on the contrary spoils health. The notion that “sound mind in the sound body” suits best to explain this.

b) *Low performance*: Approaching the activities negatively leading to failure in the endeavors leads to lowering of performance of the individual.

c) *Increased stress level*: When the environment in the organization is not healthy due to the negative approach to things place an individual in stressful condition.

d) *Bitterness*: The negative approach ends in bitterness of oneself in people’s eyes. When one talks about everything negatively either in the work or in the family it leads to bitterness in the people around the person.

e) *Loss of interest in life*: Most of the suicides are due to the loss of interest in ones life and feeling that nothing is good for oneself. The feeling when it arises in an individual there is no other thought than ending oneself.

How to develop positive attitude?

Knowing that having positive attitudes is healthy to an individual and helps in managing stress positively, it is essential to know how to develop the positive attitude. Both at the individual level and organizational level stress can be managed positively. An employee can be proactive in managing stress by having positive approach to life. At the same time organizations can also help for the well-being of the employees leading to the betterment of both the employees and the organization.

What individual can do to develop positive attitude?

a) *Changing the perception*: The way one looks at life and perceives people changes one’s world. Being conscious of being good to people, making good interpersonal relationships and developing healthy habits are some of the ways to achieve this.

b) *Reframing*: Reframing is a way of changing the way you look at life in order to feels better about them. Like focusing more time on thinking about the positive things in life, thinking less about the negative aspects and enjoying each and every moment in life. Learning to think about the things which result in stress.

c) Developing spirituality: Believing in spirituality that what ever happens in life is for our good and there is a purpose of what ever happens in one's life.

d) Analyzing the situations: All the possible situations we face may be of two kind: one, situation where you can take over and do something to correct the situations and second, where there is no control of yourself on the situation. Hence knowing about the situation and behaving accordingly.

e) Good decision-making: If a person is able to take effective decisions leading to enhanced performance this success brings positive thinking and helps him/her to do well in future.

f) Learning: Developing knowledge about the circumstances, undergoing training, updates the mindset. Knowing about the philosophy, yoga, spiritualism helps in developing knowledge about the optimism.

g) Starting day with positive thoughts: It is said that if you start your day with positive thoughts all the confrontations will be positive and everything will be good. Having this in mind will help the individual to approach things positively.

h) Developing self-esteem: Every individual needs to be respected, loved, recognized, applauded and rewarded. By developing the positive self-esteem will lead to the success in all the endeavors in life.

What organizations can do to develop positive attitude in individual?

a) Developing positive mental health: Organizations can help the employees in providing and maintaining work-life balance and well-being which also helps in development of healthy personalities. This helps the employees to have job satisfaction, commitment and enhances the relationships between the customers, suppliers and other stakeholders. This helps the organization in reduction in employee turnover, absenteeism, accidents and reduce costs also. The job satisfaction and well-being of the employee leads to growth and development of the organization.

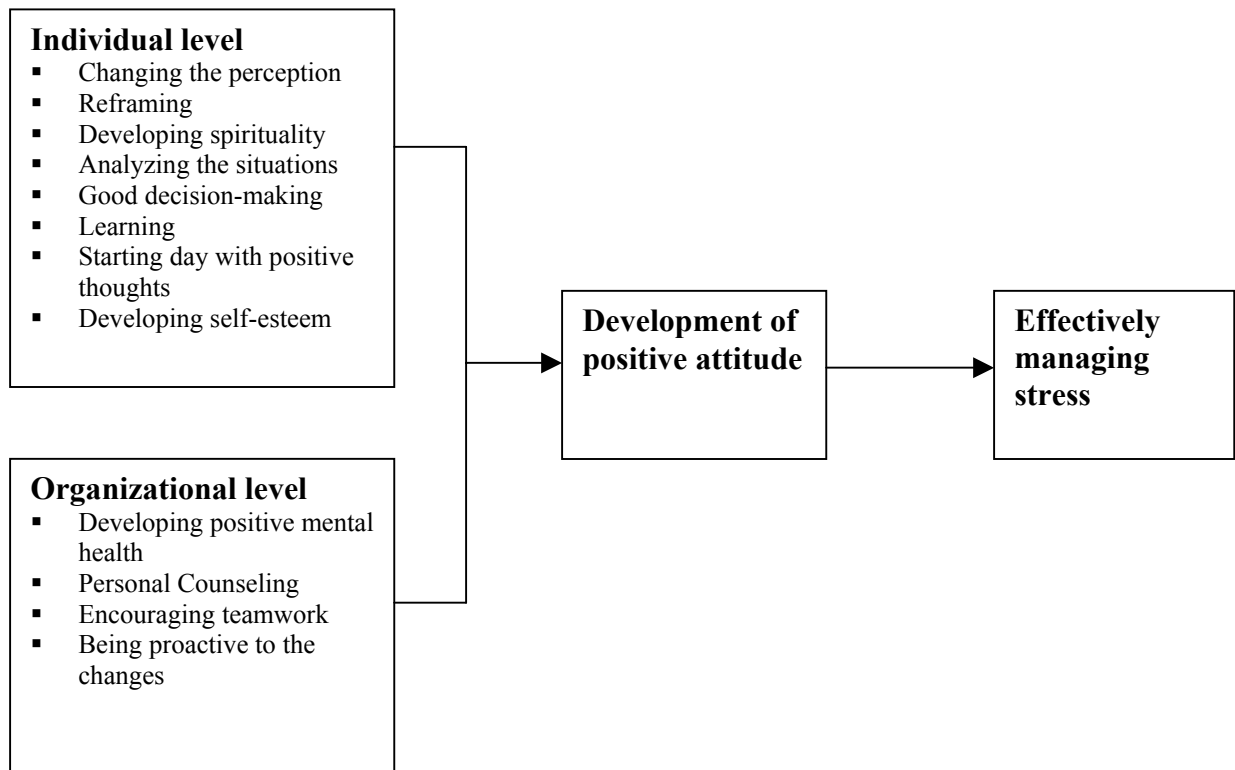
b) Personal Counseling: Personal counseling can be provided to the employees and knowing their stress vulnerability and tolerance and accordingly helping them to have positive approach to life.

c) Encouraging team work: Organizations should develop a culture of making employees to work in teams in order to develop cohesiveness, groupthink, conflict resolution and team effectiveness etc. This will develop positive attitude in the employees inculcating confidence and optimism.

d) Being proactive to the changes: Organizations are open systems, which means organizations are susceptible to the environmental changes like sudden crisis, structural or policy changes, change in the leadership and Mergers and acquisitions etc. in which

people are prone to stressful situations. Hence the organizations should practice the interventions like reengineering and restructuring etc. Probable initiatives which individual and organizations can take to develop positive attitude are shown below in figure no. 4.

Figure no. 4 showing the ways to develop positive attitude at the individual and organizational level



Conclusion:

There are no absolute solutions to overcome stress. The stress experience is individualistic and methods of dealing with it are also unique. Knowing about the stress, the stress process and understanding the signals of stress may help a person to manage stress better than ignoring it. At the individual level, a person can definitely beat the stress with positive attitude and face the demands optimistically which will help him to achieve success and overcome the negative consequences of stress. Hence thinking positively and looking at life positively can help in overcoming stress and helps in enhancing his performance and organization's performance. For organizations, positive attitude of employees will help in achieving its objectives and goals leading to profits and productivity on one side and excellence on the other hand.

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