The stress factor and its impact on employees' mental and physical health

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Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one.

— Hans Selye

The purpose of this paper is to introduce established theories that provide insight on how stress, when left alone, can have a negative impact on employees' mental and physical health. It will also introduce the concept of burnout, and what action an employer can take to mitigate burnout risk. When employees experience prolonged periods of time where they are under stress, their risk for burnout increases.

The word "stress" is well ingrained into the zeitgeist of North American culture. Oxford Dictionary[1] defines stress as "a state of affairs involving demand on physical or mental energy." Renowned psychologist Richard S. Lazarus described stress as a feeling that comes from a perceived threat that is at risk of being outside the person's psychological resources.[2]

The three types of stress that impact employees

Acute stress – stress that arises from the day-to-day interaction with the world that is often due to temporary conflict;[3]

Chronic stress – the result of an acute stressor, such as a work-related issue, that goes on day in and day out (e.g. conflict with the boss) that wears on the employee and puts them at risk of suffering the negative impacts of stress, including stress-related illness;[4]

Traumatic stress – a stressor that is outside the person's normal coping skills, such as an accident, bullying or disaster.[5]

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1   *Oxford English Dictionary,* 10th ed., s.v. "stress."
2   R. S. Lazarus, *Stress and Emotion* (New York: Springer Publisher, 1999).
3   R. A. Bryant, R. A., G. Allison & A. G. Harvey, *Acute Stress Disorder: A Handbook of Theory, Assessment, and Treatment* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2000).
4   B. H. Gottlieb, *Coping with Chronic Stress* (New York: Plenum Publishers. 1997).
5   G. R. Schiraldi, *Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000).

Chronic or traumatic stress, if not resolved, can kill. In a landmark case in Prince Edward Island, a widow was awarded benefits after her husband died of a heart attack due to stress caused by chronic workplace bullying.[6]

Leaders are more likely to have empathy for employees experiencing stress when they have a deeper understanding of what stress is and how it impacts the mind and body. Stress does not need to be as intense as bullying (i.e., traumatic stress) to have a negative impact; it can accumulate gradually over time (i.e., chronic stress). The frequency, duration and intensity of stress combine to determine how potentially damaging it is on the mind and body.

What role does the environment play in stress?

On a typical day, everyone receives a vast number of external stimuli from various sources, such as meetings, calls, emails, social situations and peer interaction. How a person reacts to these experiences influences their behaviour, thoughts and emotions. Many people are unaware of how the environment can shape their view of the world and impact behaviours, thoughts and emotions.

Stimulus-response (S-R) psychologies, at the most basic level, suggest that environmental stimuli condition, shape and reinforce human behaviours. For example, if an employee has a bad experience at a meeting, they are likely to anticipate that the next meeting will also be a negative experience. This interpretation can result in increased anxiety, stress and tension before the meeting, which can negatively impact quality of life.
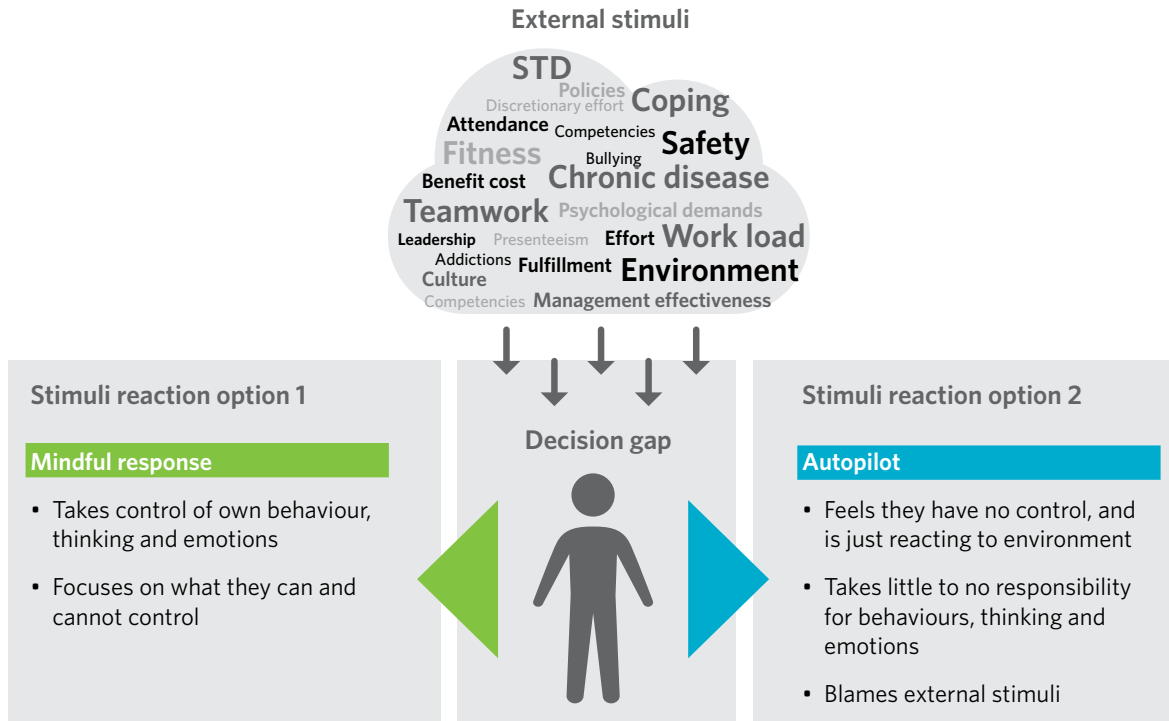
Consider the example of Jack and Jill, who were impacted by bad news they heard in a meeting. Jill responded mindfully and understood what she could and could not control. Jack, who lives his life on autopilot and does not take any responsibility for his choices, felt powerless and controlled by his environment.

Stimulus response psychology teaches that the environment shapes the human being. In the case of Jack, the bad news was the stimulus that caused his emotional and behavioural reaction. When Jill received the bad news, as hard as it was, she took a mindful approach to what she could control, namely her reaction and behaviour.

6   *CBC INVESTIGATES,* "P.E.I. widow awarded benefits after husband's death linked to workplace bullying." (CBC News, http://www.cbc.ca/
     news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-workplace-bullying-harassment-workers-compensation-board-lisa-eric-donovan-1.3959704,
     Mar. 30, 2017).

Two options for how people respond to external stimuli

External stimuli

STD
Policies
Discretionary effort **Coping**
Attendance Competencies **Safety**
Fitness Bullying
Benefit cost **Chronic disease**
Teamwork Psychological demands
Leadership Presenteeism **Effort** **Work load**
Addictions **Fulfillment** **Environment**
Culture
Competencies **Management effectiveness**

Decision gap

Stimuli reaction option 1

Mindful response

- Takes control of own behaviour, thinking and emotions
- Focuses on what they can and cannot control

Stimuli reaction option 2

Autopilot

- Feels they have no control, and is just reacting to environment
- Takes little to no responsibility for behaviours, thinking and emotions
- Blames external stimuli

How a person can be expected to respond to their environment can be influenced by culture, social networks, socioeconomic class, education, diversity and life experiences.

Individuals who operate on autopilot, unaware of the effects of their environment on their reaction, are at a greater risk for allowing their environment to shape and control their behaviour. Living in a state of continuous autopilot and failing to take responsibility for their behaviour puts a person at risk for chronically feeling as if they have no power, control or hope, and for experiencing prolonged periods of chronic stress. The longer a person experiences stress, the more risk to their overall health, both physically and mentally.

Psychologist Leonard Berkowitz[7] proposed that one potential consequence of stress is the perception of loss of control. He explained that when employees experience stress and frustration, they also feel a loss of control, resulting in a variety of behaviours, thoughts and emotions that can have a negative impact on their performance.

The difference between Jack and Jill is how each processed the information they received from a cognitive perspective. Jill had more mature cognitive appraisal skills that enabled her to better cope with the bad news. The applied research that co-author Dr. Howatt is conducting on coping skills, as found from the *Globe and Mail Your Life at Work* study, shows that coping skills (problem solving and decision making, for example) play an important role in predicting how an individual will behave, and have a direct impact on an employee's health, engagement and productivity.[8]

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7   L. Berkowitz, "On the Formation and Regulation of Anger and Aggression," *American Psychologist*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Apr. 1990), 494-503.
8   W. Howatt, "Your life at work: Are we facing a coping crisis?," *The Globe and Mail*, Sept. 29, 2015. Available: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/are-we-facing-a-coping-crisis/article26584737/

This connection does not mean that better coping skills alone will reduce employee stress. Organizations have an important role to play in curbing and reducing the degree and intensity of stimuli, such as bullying, ineffective managers, excessive workloads and toxic cultures that can negatively impact employees. One of the first steps that organizations can take to reduce stress that negatively affects employees is to acknowledge the impact of stress and increase organizational awareness of the topic. It is important for organizations to understand, however, that not all stress is negative (distress), and that positive stress (eustress) can be essential for employee engagement and productivity.

What is the difference between eustress and distress?

There is an overwhelming assumption that all stress is negative and detrimental to a person's well-being. This is not always the case: stress can be incredibly useful in people's everyday lives. It is an important evolutionary response to danger, helping one run faster, jump higher, see more clearly and think faster.

Eustress acts as a motivator and pushes employees to engage at work and become more productive. It enhances attention, focus and passion to complete the task at hand. Eustress can increase job performance, decrease errors, and foster positive emotions, all of which influence an employee's overall drive to succeed.

The inverted-U relationship between pressure and performance
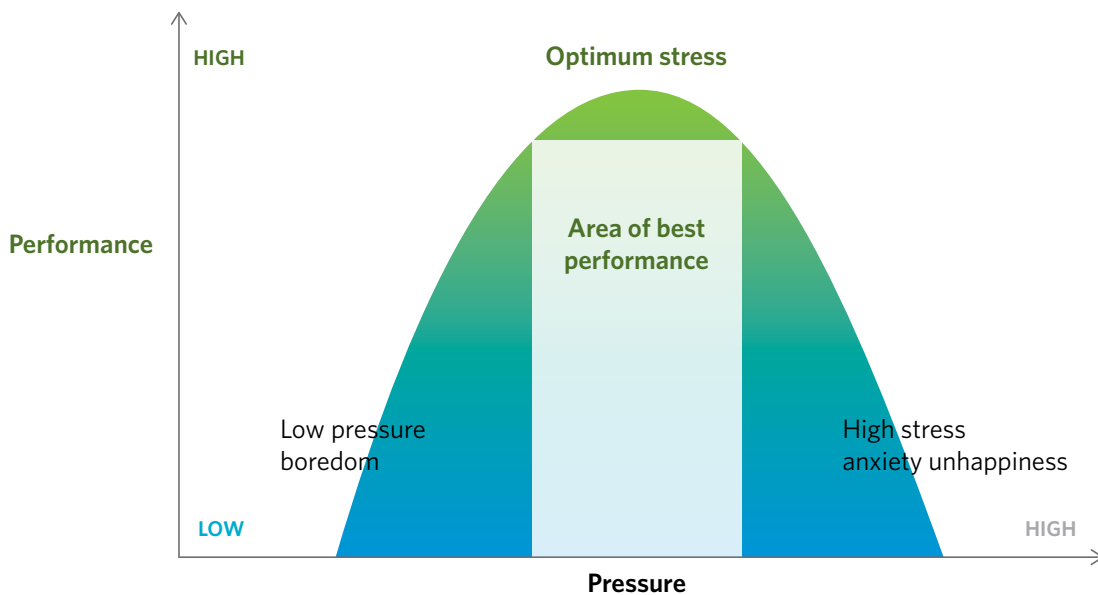
Examples

Eustress (positive stress)	Distress (negative stress)
Receiving a promotion	Excessive job demands
Getting a raise at work	Excessive hours with limited flexibility
Starting a new job	Manager-employee relationship
Job change	Job insecurity
Special project	Conflicts with peers
Moving	Role confusion
Taking a vacation	Lack of training
Performance review	Bullying
Professional development	Unproductive meetings
Retiring	Daily commute to work

Famous Canadian stress researcher, Hans Selye, explained that stress keeps people alive, helping to prepare an employee to be at their peak state of motivation, opening the door to positive achievement and success.[9] Selye further suggested that good stress can assist an employee to be more in tune with their environment, enabling them to make better decisions and be more productive.[10]

Furthermore, there are many ways in which one can use stress advantageously by changing one's perception of stress. The first is to think of stress as fuel to help get ready for a big moment. When a person starts to sweat, or their heart rate quickens, this is just their body priming for a challenging situation. Acknowledging this fact is not denial or an effort to adopt a positive perspective; it is acceptance of the evolutionary reality of one's body.

A person can also change their thinking about stress by releasing themselves from the stress, i.e., switching verbiage from "*I feel stress*" to "*I am stressed.*" The latter translates to "*I am in a situation that may be challenging or in a big moment, so my body is responding accordingly.*" This small step back can help one gain perspective and move forward.

Lastly, personal awareness is key to changing one's thinking about stress. Considering why one is stressed (e.g. the situation, people), what one feels physically and emotionally, how one acts when stressed, and what to tell oneself can all help in gaining a new perspective.

Without context and clarity, however, negative stress (distress) can occur. **Distress** can decrease performance, overwhelm employees and negatively affect productivity and engagement. Prolonged periods of distress can result in burnout and additional mental and physical health challenges.

9   H. Selye, H. *Stress and Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).
10   H. Selye, *Selye's Guide to Stress Research*, Volume 1 (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980).

Eustress to distress continuum

High eustress	Jenna has just been offered a promotion, with a significant pay raise. With this news, she decides to buy a new apartment closer to work. The promotion and additional work responsibilities have Jenna excited and nervous, and the idea of moving adds to her nerves and excitement.
Low eustress	Jane excels at her job and is challenged by the work she is doing. She leads a small team and maintains strong relationships with her supervisor and other colleagues. In the coming weeks, Jane will be going on a 10-day vacation with her husband and two children. She is nervous and experiencing stress about being away from work for this long, but has faith that her team will be able to handle her absence.
Neutral stress	John has just begun a new job, a position that he is excited about with work that is interesting and challenging for him. His new office, however, is an hour away from where he currently lives. While he enjoys his new job and the work he is doing, he is finding the new travel and commuting schedule difficult on himself and his family. He is experiencing periods of both positive stress (from the new position) and negative stress (from the commute).
Low distress	Over the past few days, Jill has been included on a variety of different meetings and business calls. She is also dealing with an extensive workload, with many time-sensitive projects and deadlines approaching. The meetings she has been included in have felt unproductive and overly time-consuming, leaving her frustrated and irritated by her colleagues.
High distress	Jack has recently been experiencing conflict with his supervisor and the other members of his team. The conflict stems from an increase in his workload and his inability to complete the additional tasks due to a lack of training and poor communication from the entire team. This situation has left Jack worrying about his future within the organization, resulting in negative feelings toward his supervisor and other team members, and an overall feeling of dread when coming in to work.

The major source of negative workplace stress for employees, as reported by researcher C. Williams, is too many hours and too many demands. These concerns were reported by workers of every age, gender and sector.[11] Additionally, the stress being experienced in one's personal life was not thought of in relation to the employee's work experience.[12] The most common sources of stimuli that can facilitate employee stress levels are environmental (e.g. noise and air pollution), social (e.g. peer pressure and negative workplace), psychological (anxiety disorder, etc.), emotional (e.g. anger management), physical (health state, weight, and so on), and financial (e.g. debt).

Whether an employee is experiencing eustress or distress, it is important to be aware that how they react is far more important than the stress itself. Stress itself is not good or bad. Ensuring that employees are taking a mindful approach to addressing stress can have positive effects on mental and physical health, resulting in increased engagement and productivity.

11   C. Williams, "Sources of Workplace Stress," *Perspectives on Labour and Income*, Vol. IV, No. 6, June 2003.
      Available: http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/00603/6533-eng.html
12   Williams, *ibid.*

How is stress impacting employees' workplace experience?

The *Your Life at Work*[13] study, conducted through *The Globe and Mail,* found that 60 per cent of employees in Canada reported that they go to work each day feeling stressed. According to a survey conducted by *The Globe and Mail*, 60 per cent of employees experience stress that is taxing overall health, engagement and productivity.[14] Within Canadian workplaces, stress is becoming a health issue of increasing concern. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, stress and mental health issues are estimated to cost the Canadian economy $33 billion a year in lost productivity.[15]

In 2010, more than one in four Canadian workers described their everyday lives as highly stressful, meaning that nearly 3.7 million working adults went through a normal day feeling a high level of stress, and an additional 6.3 million identified as being 'a bit' stressed.[16] The rates of stress have continued to increase since 2010. A recent study done by *Benefits Canada* magazine found that 58 per cent of respondents reported feeling job-related stress on a daily basis.[17] The cause of stress among employees is wide-ranging. Workers report being stressed for personal reasons (e.g. time, financial) just as much as they are stressed for work-related reasons (e.g. work demand).[18]

Reacting to stress: What is the fight or flight response?

The "fight or flight" response evolved to assist human beings in the move from hunted to hunter, eventually enabling them to rise to the top of the food chain. The response is intrinsically designed to protect one from danger or perceived danger. Today, fight or flight may be overkill, in some cases. For example, science teaches that the fight or flight response is either completely turned on or completely turned off; there is no halfway. Fight or flight is not designed to recognize the difference or process the discrepancy between a bear and a baby.

When an employee is exposed to a perceived threat, the fight or flight response can be triggered. Harvard physiologist Walter Cannon taught that this response is hard-wired into the human brain, where its sole function is to protect the body.[19] Fight or flight can be observed and monitored by evaluating how external stressors can trigger and stimulate a person's physiological state.[20] In the workplace, for the most part, threats are overwhelmingly mental, as opposed to physical. The fight or flight response can result in an employee acting out aggressively (e.g. yelling), which can be counter-productive and create a new set of problems.

Once the body perceives a threat through one of its five senses, it activates the fight or flight response, and this continues until the brain stops sending a

13   G. Livingston, "Your Life at Work. Survey says: We're stressed (and not loving it)," *The Globe and Mail*, Feb. 2, 2015.
      Available: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/survey-says-were-stressed-and-not-loving-it/article22722102/

14   We're stressed (and not loving it) https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/survey-says-were-stressed-and-not-loving-it/article22722102/.

15   The Canadian Encyclopedia, "Workplace Stress Costs the Economy Billions," May 27, 2014.
      Available: http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/workplace-stress-costs-the-economy-billions/.

16   Susan Crompton, "What's stressing the stressed? Main sources of stress among workers," *Canadian Social Trends*,
      (Statistics Canada, 11-008-X, No. 92, Oct. 13, 2011). Available: http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2011002/article/11562-eng.htm

17   "58% of Canadian Workers are Stressed on a Daily Basis," Benefits Canada, Feb. 6, 2017.
      Available: http://www.benefitscanada.com/news/58-of-canadian-workers-are-stressed-on-a-daily-basis-survey-93454

18   Crompton, *supra*.

19   E. L. Wolfe, A. C. Bargerand S. Benison, *Walter B. Cannon, Science and Society* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2000).

20   J. M. White and C. M. Porth, "Evolution of a Model of Stress, Coping and Discrete Emotions", Cited in V. R. Rice (Ed). *Handbook of Stress, Coping, Health* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

danger signal. (The danger is a threat that may be real or perceived.)

As soon as the brain detects a threat, various physiological protection systems become activated, including the hypothalamus, amygdala and pituitary gland, all communicating to each other that a threat is evident. Together, these structures start to inform the entire body via hormones and nerve impulses to stand and fight or quickly flee (flight).

The pituitary gland releases a chemical called adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH). This stimulates activation of the adrenal cortex (which monitors levels of minerals and glucose) and sympathetic nervous system.

The release of ACTH starts the chain reaction that upsets the balance between two branches of the autonomic nervous system.

Fight or flight impact on nervous system

When the sympathetic nervous system alerts the adrenal glands, its first reaction is to send epinephrine (adrenaline) into the bloodstream that directly impacts the body (e.g. speeds up heart rate). As well, the adrenal gland puts out more cortisol and other kinds of glucocorticoids that turn sugar in the body into energy. In addition, epinephrine and norepinephrine provide the body with increased levels of energy through increasing heart rate and blood pressure.

Sympathetic nervous system

Supports the fight or flight response system and becomes the dominant force stimulating response. This system will "turn on" many processes in the body (e.g. increase heart rate) to prepare for action.

Parasympathetic nervous system

The non-emergency system takes a passive role and waits for its opportunity to start to return the body to homeostatic balance (resting state). This system is most active and does most of its work in the rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep.

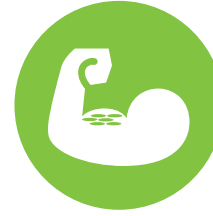## A snapshot of how the fight or flight response prepares the body
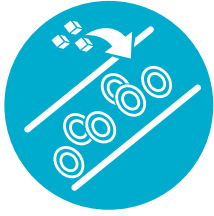
Stored sugars and fats are released into the bloodstream to provide quick energy

Breathing quickens to provide more oxygen to the blood

Hair stands up (piloerection) in preparation to regulate skin temperature

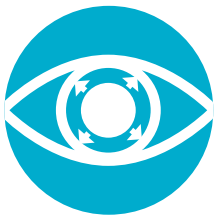Muscles tense in preparation for action

Digestion ceases so that more blood is available to the brain and muscles

Blood-clotting mechanisms are activated to protect against possible injury
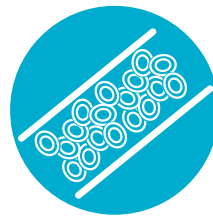
Perspiration increases to help reduce body temperature

Pupils dilate and senses of smell and hearing become more acute

Increased heart rate, blood pressure and respiration, pumping more blood to the muscles, supplying more oxygen to the muscles and heart-lung system

Blood thickens to increase oxygen supply (red cells), enabling better defence from infections (white cells), and to stop bleeding quickly (platelets)

Prioritizing – increased blood supply to peripheral muscles and heart, to motor- and basic-function regions in the brain; decreased blood supply to digestive system and irrelevant brain regions (such as speech areas)

Secretion of adrenaline and other stress hormones to further increase the response and to strengthen relevant systems

Secretion of endorphins – natural painkillers, providing an instant defence against pain

Stress response hormones cause several biochemical and physiological changes

If a fight or flight response is turned on for a prolonged period (weeks to months) an employee can be in significant danger. The continual release of cortisol results in a severe risk of developing stress-related illnesses (e.g. more susceptible to colds and influenza due to distressed immune function). author D. Coon suggested that cortisol can suppress the inflammation immune response, and the release of more cortisol while under stress can put a person at greater risk for infection.[21]

A weakened immune system can result in medication not being as effective in treating employees who are experiencing chronic stress as it is for those coping effectively with daily stimuli and stress.[22]

Reacting to stress: What is general adaptation syndrome (GAS)?

As mentioned, when the fight or flight response is turned on for an extended period, it can have a negative impact on the immune system that protects the body. The model below provides context as to how stress can accumulate throughout a typical workday.

Selye promoted the concept that a healthy and happy life is the result of doing things that are enjoyable and of value to one's quality of life.[23] He created the general adaptation syndrome (GAS), a model that explains how stress impacts the mind and body throughout a typical work day.[24] There are three stages of GAS:
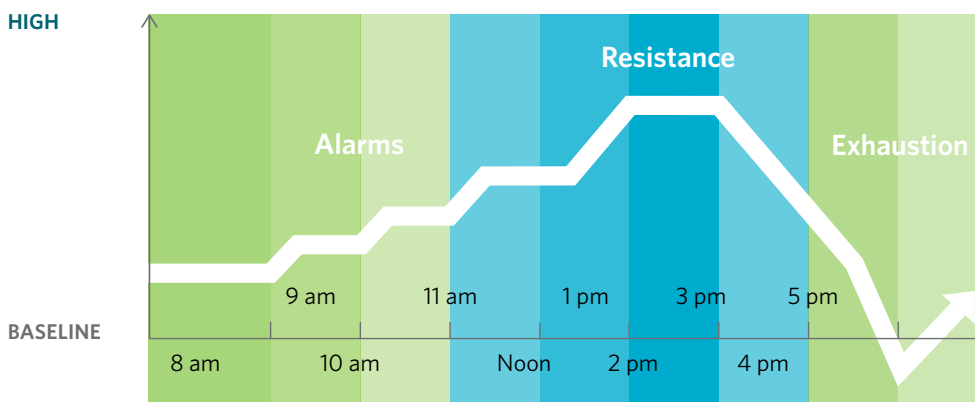
Stage 1: Alarm phase

This first phase occurs when the body begins to evolve from a neutral to a stressed state. For example, when someone takes the parking spot you have been patiently waiting for, a new stimulus is added. Seemingly meaningless and unconnected events such as these can accumulate throughout the day, and each perceived negative stimulus impacts the body as an alarm. The alarm phase prepares the body to protect and defend itself. Once the initial stressor has occurred, the body becomes more aroused and activates the fight or flight response. In the alarm phase, the body's chemistry changes due to stimuli that increase the person's stress load, such as increased heart rate, tunnel vision, sweating, sensitive hearing, and tense muscles.

21   D. Coon, *Psychology; A Journey*, (Pacific Grove, CA: Thomson Learning, 2002).
22   S. Cohen, W. J. Doyle, R. B. Turner, C. M. Alper& D. P. Skoner "Emotional Style and Susceptibility to the Common Cold," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 65 (2002),652-657.
23   R. S. Lazarus, "From Psychology Stress to the Emotions: A History of Changing Outlooks," inn L. W. Porter and M. R. Rosenzweig (Eds.). *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44 (1993)1-21.
24   H. Selye, *Stress and Life, supra*

Stage 2: Resistance phase

The alarm phase was designed to remove us from extreme harm and danger (e.g. being chased by a sabre tooth tiger). Most stimuli experienced in the workplace, however are not severe enough to cause death. As a result, instead of fighting or fleeing, the person moves into the resistance phase. The body tries to compensate and adapt to the stimuli being perceived as stressors. The body's physiology adapts to cope with the maximum level of stress it can endure, while still being organically alive and functioning. Though the body is still functioning, cognitive abilities may be decreased, potentially impacting decision-making abilities.

To cope, the pituitary gland releases hormones and stimulates the adrenal cortex. Hormones work to increase the body's resistance to stress. As resistance to specific stressors increases, many of the physiological processes begin to return to normal. While things may appear to be returning to normal, they are not. To survive this phase, the body is forced to use a large amount of stored energy (e.g. minerals, sugars and hormones). This creates an environment that is like a low-grade fight or flight response. Being chronically in this state can put an employee at risk for stress-related illnesses (e.g. psychosomatic disorders).[25]

Stage 3: Exhaustion phase

Continued exposure to chronic stress weakens the body's ability to resist stress, causing an employee to hit the point of a physiological collapse (e.g. physical illness). This triggers the exhaustion phase. The pituitary gland and adrenal cortex are no longer able to continue secreting hormones, and the employee is unable to keep their energy levels high enough to fight the stress. Additionally, the body is no longer able to produce adrenaline, due to declining blood sugar levels. As the exhaustion phase kicks in, the ability to tolerate stress decreases, and the employee begins to report mental and physical exhaustion. At this point, the employee may disengage from their work physically and/or mentally.

In this phase, the body continues to produce chemicals it does not need, even after the employee disengages from the workplace. One core issue early in this phase is that the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis (the critical component of the human endocrine system) is locked on, much like a stuck gas pedal. This overactive HPA produces more chemicals than the body needs and, if not turned off, will eventually lead to a decrease in production of interleukin-6, an important messenger within the immune system that helps fight infection. When this occurs, the immune system's function is greatly compromised, leaving an individual at greater risk of stress illness, including being more susceptible to influenza and the common cold. If the person does not get a break or is not able to cope better with their daily demands, their risk for chronic disease and prolonged illness increases.

Recent advancements within the field of health psychology report the importance of employees' psychological makeup and core coping skills in managing daily demands and helping reduce risk for strain.[26] The skills employees possess in processing and evaluating external stimuli and stressors has an impact on how they process and react to the stimuli (e.g. mindful vs. autopilot).[27] Additionally, how employees think plays a role in how they cope, which is why perhaps it is common for two people facing the same pressure to address and deal with stress in completely different ways.

25 *Ibid.*
26 S. E. Taylor, R. Repetti & T. Seeman,"Health Psychology: What is an Unhealthy Environment and How Does it Get Under the Skin?" *Annual Review of Psychology*, Vol 48, 1997.
27 Basic Behaviour Science Task Force of the National Advisory Mental Health Council, "Basic Behavioural Science Research for Mental Health: Vulnerability and Resilience, "*American Psychologist*, Vol.51, 22.

Reacting to stress: How does stress impact how we think?

It is not the amount of stress that determines a person's stress level, it is how they are able to process and cope with stress from a cognitive perspective.[28] Every employee maintains a unique threshold when it comes to stress. Different stressors affect people in different ways, with some people having more developed coping skills than others, allowing them to deal with higher levels of stress. The better an employee can manage their psychological state of mind, the more likely they will be able to deal with the stress they are facing.[29]

No two people evaluate an external stressor in the same way; what might be stressful to one employee may not cause stress to another. A person's cognitive appraisal skills influence thinking and action:[30]

- **Primary appraisal**: Recognition of the stressor and its potential threat.

- **Secondary appraisal**: Identification of the stress and determination of how to cope.

Primary appraisal refers to our initial, subjective evaluation of a situation when we balance the demands of a potentially stressful situation against our ability to meet these demands.[31] There are three categories of primary appraisals:

- **Harm/loss**: Impact or damage has occurred to an employee (e.g. fired from a job);

- **Threat**: There is a potential for harm or loss (for example, possible cutbacks);

- **Challenge**: There is an opportunity for personal and emotional gain, but the employee must focus all their physical and psychological energy to succeed in this challenge.

Lazarus warned that in any stressful situation it may be difficult for an employee to clearly determine which of the three appraisals mentioned above is impacting them psychologically.[32] When an employee is overwhelmed and cannot get a psychological bearing on the degree of threat or the necessary response, it is normal for the body to drive physiological change (e.g. fight or flight response takes over) with the goal of protecting itself.

After an employee has assessed the perceived stress, they automatically move into what Lazarus referred to as the secondary appraisal. This occurs when one starts to mentally collect the internal resources they have at their disposal, to assist in coping with the current situation.[33] This may include psychological, social and physical resources. Once this internal inventory has been completed, the person is then faced with determining what action they can take to avoid the situation, or stop to address the external stressor.[34]

28 R. S. Lazarus and S. Folkman, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. (*New York: Springer, 1984).
29 E. Chen, E. B. Fisher, L. B. Bacharier & R. C. Strunk "Socioeconomic Status, Stress, and Immune Markers in Adolescents with Asthma," *Psychosomatic Medicine* 65, 2003, 984-992.
30 R. S. Lazarus, "From Psychology Stress to the Emotions: A History of Changing Outlooks, in L. W. Porter and M. R. Rosenzweig (Eds.). *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44, 1-21.
31 Plotnik, *Introduction to Psychology* (6th ed)(Pacific Grove, CA: Thomson Learning, 2002), 482.
32 R. S. Lazarus, "Evolution of a Model of Stress, Coping and Discrete Emotion," in *Handbook of Stress, Coping and Health*, supra, 21.
33 *Ibid.*.
34 Coon, *supra*, 22.

How effectively an employee copes with stress is often dependent on their cognitive resources and learned coping strategies.[35] Lazarus maintained that stress is dealt with via two kinds of action:[36]

- Problem-focused coping: controlling the stressful situation directly

- Emotion-focused coping: controlling one's emotions in response to the stressful situation

When employees believe that they can deal with a situation, they attempt to solve the problem.[37] However, when they feel overwhelmed and perceive the stress as outside their control, it is common to shift their focus to controlling their emotions. They may engage in behaviours that help them to feel better but may not be beneficial to their long-term health (e.g. alcohol or drug use).

When a person acts to control their emotions, the goal is to feel better. The challenge arises when actions are short-lived and do not help to break the cycle of stress. Getting caught in stress and not having the positive habits and coping mechanisms to break the cycle of stress can put employees at risk for burnout.

What is employee burnout?

Burnout is a condition that happens over time. It can be defined as "a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. Burnout can also be a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization of others and a feeling of reduced personal accomplishment."[38]

Burnout occurs as a direct result of prolonged and intense stress. It is not the result of a single event. Burnout can be difficult to detect until it is too late.[39]

Employees experiencing burnout typically report emotional exhaustion, a negative view of their job, seeing their work as frustrating, and a decline in job performance.[40]

Typical symptoms associated with burnout include:

- a decrease in the quality of work

- a decline in personal relationships in the workplace

- chronic fatigue

- increased absenteeism

- a pessimistic view of the workplace

- an increased incidence of forgetfulness

- a decrease in ability to concentrate and solve problems

- a decreased interest in doing quality work

- an increase in emotional symptoms such as being short-tempered, impatient, frustrated, moody

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35 S. Covey, *The seven habits of highly effective people*, (London: Simon and Schuster, 1992).
36 Lazarus, *supra*, 24.
37 *Ibid*.
38 B. K. Williams and S. M. Knight, *Health for Life: Wellness and the Art of Living*, (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1994), 215.
39 R. K. James and B. E. Gilliland, *Crisis intervention strategies* (4th ed), (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 2001).
40 W. Howatt, "Your Life at Work: Are you suffering from burnout?" *The Globe and Mail,* Sept. 3, 2014. Available: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/careers/career-advice/life-at-work/are-you-suffering-from-burnout/article20334988/

- an increase in physical symptoms such as shortness of breath, dizziness, headaches, chest pain, loss of appetite, insomnia and gastrointestinal pain

- an increase in psychological symptoms such as anxiety, addiction, depression and anger

There are four factors relevant for detecting when an employee is at risk for burnout:

- Behaviourally – there is a marked departure from the individual's normal daily habits

- Physically – the individual presents as being worn out and drained day in and day out

- Interpersonally – relationships both inside and outside the workplace are impacted negatively

- Attitudinally – the individual experiences a sense of loss and moral purpose for work[41]

These factors can present in various forms of intensity and can be a combination of all four or occur separately. Ultimately, how burnout is displayed is dependent on the individual.

Burnout is challenging for employers, as it saps employees' productivity, results in increased incidents of presenteeism (coming to work feeling unwell and accomplishing little), which can lead to higher employee turnover, more accidents and higher insurance and benefits costs. Burnout falls on a continuum that has four clear steps from low to high risk:[42]

41   C. Maslach, *Burnout: The Cost of Caring,* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall,1982).
42   J. Edelwich and A. Brodsky, "Training Guidelines: Linking the Workshop Experience to Needs on and off the Job," in W. S. Paine (Ed.), *Job Stress and Burnout* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1982).

Burnout risk continuum

Stage 1: Enthusiasm

Often occurs when an individual first enters their job. At times, they may have high hopes and/or unrealistic expectations.

Stage 2: Stagnation

Often occurs when a worker starts to feel that their personal, financial and career needs are not being met. This typically occurs from a misalignment between the perceived expectations of the individual and the actual capabilities of the organization. For example, a worker may express or feel that less-qualified or less-skilled colleagues are moving up the career ladder faster. In this case, it can be important to provide intrinsic and extrinsic reinforcement. If this does not occur, the worker will often move to the next stage of burnout.

Stage 3: Frustration

Often occurs when workers begin to question whether the effort being put forth is aligned to the perceived effectiveness, value and impact of a given task. Often the worker may feel there are ever-mounting obstacles that cannot be overcome. This type of negative thinking can be contagious if not properly addressed. To prevent the spread of this negative thinking, it is necessary to directly confront the feeling.

Stage 4: Apathy

A chronic indifference to one's current work situation. In this stage, the employee is in a state of disequilibrium (inability to control emotions or cognitions) and immobility (inability to behave up to their potential due to being in a state of stress). Workers in this stage often are in a state of denial and have little objective understanding of what is occurring. Apathy is a condition that is situational and specific to the employee's workplace. At this point, professional help and intervention are needed or the employee will go on disability and may not return to the workplace. The confusion for the employer is that the employee may be able to function well outside the workplace.

Leaders play an active role in supporting workers to prevent burnout through early detection and intervention.[43] The **Morneau Shepell Total Health Index (THI)** has a burnout detection scale to help employees learn their risk level for burnout and what they can do about it. As well, employers are provided with the percentage of employees who are at risk, by function, location and division, and the potential factors causing burnout.

Leaders can focus on the following areas in order to learn what their employees are thinking, in an effort to reduce risk for burnout.

- Workers scoring high on the burnout index often feel they have little impact *on policies and procedures of the organization*
- Workers are *unclear of job descriptions*
- Workers are *unclear of their department's purpose or objectives*
- Workers have *large work demands with little input on how to implement and manage daily workloads*
- Workers *feel restricted* regarding communication both inside and outside the organization
- Workers have a sense that *communications within the corporation overall are ineffective*

When an organization fails to address burnout risk, it can be infectious and negatively impact other workers.[44] To be proactive, organizations should reduce environmental stress (bullying, harassment, etc.) within their culture.

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43   James and Gilliland, *supra*, 40..
44   *Ibid.*

Key takeaways

	Employer	Employee
Awareness	Our environment constantly sends stimuli; how employees perceive and address these stimuli determines what is stressful to them. No employee perceives stress in the same way; therefore, it is important to never assume that all individuals cope with stress in the same manner. Maintaining an understanding of basic stress theory (including "fight or flight" and general adaption syndrome) allows leaders to have a better appreciation for how stress impacts the mind and body. This allows for an empathetic approach to addressing how employees deal with stress and the real negative impacts stress can have on an employee's workplace experience, productivity and engagement.	As an individual, you have a unique approach to handling stress. Every person deals differently with the everyday stimuli presented to us day-in and day-out. It is important to identify how you currently approach and cope with negative and positive stress in your everyday life. Understanding how you address stress and your reaction to stressful situations can be difficult. Being aware of the basic stress theories, including fight or flight, may help you to comprehend your current reactions and how to improve them. As well, it is important to be aware of other coping mechanisms and strategies for addressing stress, including mindfulness and creating a strong support system.
Accountability	Attempting to curb stress in the workplace is the responsibility of both the employee and the employer. Organizations must take ownership over creating a positive workplace environment, allowing employees to seek help and advice on how to cope with stress, without fear of stigma or judgment. Creating an environment that promotes positive coping strategies and mindful reactions to stress can help employees to move past negative stress and prevent prolonged periods of distress from occurring.	Addressing stress within the workplace is the responsibility of both your employer and yourself. You and your employer play important roles in how effectively stress is addressed and coped with. Taking ownership over how you handle stress is an important step in maintaining a positive and healthy workplace environment, for yourself and others.
Action now	Chronic stress can kill, or result in serious mental and/or physical health issues. It can also result in burnout. Taking proactive action that engages employees in conversations that promote awareness, accountability and action is integral to creating a positive and healthy workplace environment.	Review how you are currently approaching stress, ensure that you are taking steps to maintain or improve your mental and physical health.
Action tomorrow	Consider your current workplace programs, challenges and courses in place to educate, promote and support employees with regard to stress. Speak with your workforce about their needs and wants within their environments; consider their opinions and ensure that your current offerings address their areas of concern.	Keep a journal, tracking your daily stressors and your reactions to difficult situations, can help you to understand your own triggers and allow you to build coping skills that prevent stress from becoming prolonged.
Action in the future	Promote pathways to coping, encourage employees to take advantage of the resources you offer, and work to ensure that your workplace environment is free of stigma and judgment.	Work with your employer to improve your workplace experience. Take advantage of the resources available to you, including coping skills workshops and courses, and make sure to reach out for help if you need it.

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Morneau Shepell is the only human resources consulting and technology company that takes an integrative approach to employee assistance, health, benefits, and retirement needs. The Company is the leading provider of employee and family assistance programs, the largest administrator of retirement and benefits plans and the largest provider of integrated absence management solutions in Canada. Through health and productivity, administrative, and retirement solutions, Morneau Shepell helps clients reduce costs, increase employee productivity and improve their competitive position. Established in 1966, Morneau Shepell serves approximately 20,000 clients, ranging from small businesses to some of the largest corporations and associations in North America. With almost 4,000 employees, Morneau Shepell provides services to organizations across Canada, in the United States, and around the globe. Morneau Shepell is a publicly traded company on the Toronto Stock Exchange (TSX: MSI).

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