

## Chapter 3: Determinants of Stress

Determinants  
of Stress



Some researchers see that it is **actually somewhat difficult to define stressor** because *what may be a stressor for one individual may not be a stressor for another individual*. In operational definition, stressors are situations that require major adjustments that overtax us. Both negative and positive situation can be stressful because they can both require major adjustments (Holmes, 1994, p.39).

However, stressor is an event that occasions stress in an organism; for example, loss of a loved one. (Davison & Neale, 1994, p. G. 25). As a conclusion, **the definition of stress is very difficult but it is not impossible.**

Characteristics  
of Stressful  
Events



### 3.1 Characteristics of Stressful Events

Events themselves are not inherently stressful. Rather, whether they are stressful or not, depends on how they are appraised by individual. **There are some characteristics that make them more likely to be appraised as stressful such as:**

- a) **Negative events** are more likely to produce stress than are positive events. Negative events show stronger relationship to both psychological distress and physical symptoms than do positive ones (Mc Farland et al., 1980).
- b) **Uncontrollable or unpredictable events** are more stressful than controllable or predictable ones. For example, unpredictable bursts of noise are experienced as more stressful than are predictable ones. Under some circumstances, feelings of control not only mute the subjective experience of stress but also influence biochemical reactivity to it (See : Taylor, 1999, p.177).
- c) **Ambiguous events** are often perceived as more stressful than are clear-cut events.
- d) **Overloaded people** are more stressed than are people with fewer tasks to perform (Cohen & Williamson, 1991). These last two characteristics will be illustrated when we talk about the causes of stress.
- e) **People may be more vulnerable to stress** in central life domains than in peripheral ones.
- f) **People appear to have characteristics patterns** of physiological response which called individual response activity, so some people respond stressfully to events rather than others (Alloy et al., 1996, p. 210).

- g) **Some people appear to have psychological characteristics** which help to insulate them from the effects of their life experiences

Indicators of  
Stress



### 3.2 Indicators of Stress

Researchers have used many different indicators of stress. It can be summarized in:

- a) **Self reports of perceived stress**, life changes, emotional distress, irritability, anxiety and depression.
- b) **Behavioral measures**, such as task performance under stress.
- c) **Physiological measures of arousal**, such as skin conductivity, heart rate and blood pressure.
- d) **Biochemical markers** especially blood levels and urinary levels (especially cortisol) and Catecholamines (Baum et al. 1982).

The Other Side  
of Stress



### 3.3 The Other Side of Stress

**Some people may wonder whether stress is a bless or a curse.** Many can answer that it is *curse because they relate between stress and physical illness*, emotional distress and psychological disorders. We must differentiate between stressors according to its levels and kinds. Although negative stressors, dangerous events, cataclysmic events and even minor stressful events (daily hassles) cause bad consequences, there are positive events which can cause some pleasure and satisfaction. Some researchers suggest that positive events can also be stressful. But we can say that we are in need of emotional, affective and physiological arousal to continue awareness and to gain motivation which is very important for many aspects of life, especially in our work. (Hellal, 1994, p. 13). *Thus, stress is not automatically bad for individual employees or their organizational performance.* In fact, it is generally recognized that, at least, low levels of stress can even enhance job performance. For example, focus on a time when you have been working under fairly intense pressure and performing well. How were you feeling? *One recent study found that mild stress, such as getting a new supervisor or being involuntarily transferred, may result in an increased search for information in the job.* This may lead employees to new and better ways of doing their job. Also mild stress may get employees "Juices" flowing and lead to increased activity, change, and overall better performance (Cranwell –Ward, 1987, p.84; Luthans, 1992, p. 410). We can conclude that "stress is not completely a bless and not totally curse."

Causes of  
Stress

### 3.4 Causes of Stress

Causes of stress are one issue that have been studied intensively. There are different ways for the classification of causes. **The causes can be classified according to the degree (Stressful life events, daily hassles and chronic strains) or according to the place in which it can occur (at home, at school, at work... etc), or according to the source (individual – environment or internal-external).** The problem is that, these classifications are not completely independent, they are more interdependent. They also, have integrative and complementary effects. We can use, for practical purposes, simple classification which includes most of the causes. We must note that these causes vary according to type of job, to the individual, to the situation, but the following are the most common.

Stressful life  
events

1) **Stressful life events** which range from cataclysmic events such as the death of one's spouse to more mundane and still problematic events such as moving to a new home (see for example, Yousef, 2000, a,b,c).

Daily hassles  
or minor  
stressful life  
events

2) **Daily hassles or minor stressful life events** such as being stuck in traffic jam, waiting in a line, or having difficulty making a small decision. In some studies hassles proved to be better predictor of symptoms than were major life events (Levy et al., 1997).

Chronic strains

3) **Chronic strains**, some people continue to show signs of stress in response to severe chronic strain in their lives. One type of chronic strain results from severely traumatic or stressful events whose residual effects may remain with the individual for year. Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an example of this kind of chronic stress (Baum et al., 1993).

These three major categories can be divided into other sub-categories such as:

Social and  
Economic  
Stressors

#### 1) Social and Economic Stressors

- Political climate
- National security
- Government regulation
- economic system stability
- Economic and financial problems
- Technological changes
- Cultural and value change
- Community environment
- Class and residential conditions
- Crimes and rape

Personal and Family Life Stressors



## 2) Personal and Family Life Stressors

- Conflict between home and work
- Exposure to natural and human disasters
- Problems with family members
- Problems with family members expectations
- Problems with friends and relations
- Dual career marriage
- Marital dysfunction
- Sexual problems and dysfunction
- Divorce and separation
- Step family stressors
- Abuse in childhood
- Responsibility for children
- Son's problems at school and university
- Individual life style
- Stressors in holidays and travel
- Stressors in feasts and social occasions
- The attempting to combine multiple roles simultaneously

Internal Stressors



## 3) Internal Stressors

- Self expectation
- Own aspirations and goals
- Fear of losing job
- Fear of incompetence
- Fear of being ill
- Fear of looking foolish
- Anxiety over external stressors
- A negative approach to life
- Unpleasant negative responses
- Sense of frustration
- Lack of self management
- Internal demands and needs
- Individual dispositions and personality traits (type A personality, lack of personal control, learned helplessness, lack of self efficacy and psychological hardiness).
- Feelings of uncertainty.
- Suspense and apprehension.
- Physical, mental and spiritual health problems.

Job and Occupational Stressors



Organization stressors



## 4) Job and Occupational Stressors

Job and occupational stress has more than one source. It can due to many reasons such as:

### a) Organization stressors:

- Amount of red tape (bureaucracy)
- Changes in the organization
- High technology
- Service industry
- Organization climate
- Organization policies.

The job stressors



**b) The job stressors:**

The physical conditions of work like: drab surroundings, dirty conditions, poorly serviced machinery or equipment, poor light, inadequate ventilation, too high or too low temperature, over crowding, lack of privacy, polluted atmosphere, un acceptable noise levels, and inadequate staff facilities :

- Amount of work
- The changing pattern of work
- Work overload
- Work pressures
- Responsibility of people rather than materials
- Responsibility for decision making
- Job insecurity
- Lack of control over work
- Job dissatisfaction
- Disappointments.

Career stressors



**c) Career stressors:**

- Role conflict and role ambiguity
- Perceived inadequate career development
- Lack of clear goals
- The plateaued manager
- Workaholic boss
- The impact of unemployment
- Under staffing
- Inadequate training
- Poor management
- Incompetent boss
- Comfort factor
- Competition
- Compensation.

Relationship problems stressors



**d) Relationship problems stressors:**

- Problems with supervisor.
- Problems with subordinates.
- Conflict with colleagues.
- The inability to develop satisfying social relationship at work.
- Lack of group cohesiveness.
- Lack of social support.

(For more details see: Cranwell-ward, 1987; Dore, 1990; Luthans, 1992, Baum et al., 1993; GUPCO, 1999; Taylor, 1999).