CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS

Stress can have a number of consequences. As we already noted, if the stress is positive, the result may be more energy, enthusiasm, and motivation. Of more concern, of course, are the negative consequences of stress. Referring back to Figure 2, we see that stress can produce individual consequences, organizational consequences, and burnout.27

We should first note that many of the factors listed are obviously interrelated. For example, alcohol abuse is shown as an individual consequence, but it also affects the organization the person works for. An employee who drinks on the job may perform poorly and create a hazard for others. If the category for a consequence seems somewhat arbitrary, be aware that each consequence is categorized according to the area of its primary influence.

**Individual Consequences**

The individual consequences of stress, then, are the outcomes that mainly affect the individual. The organization also may suffer, either directly or indirectly, but it is the individual who pays the real price. Stress may produce behavioral, psychological, and medical consequences.

**Behavioral Consequences** The behavioral consequences of stress may harm the person under stress or others. One such behavior is smoking. Research has clearly documented that people who smoke tend to smoke more when they experience stress. There is also evidence that alcohol and drug abuse are linked to stress, although this relationship is less well documented.²⁸ Other possible behavioral consequences are accident proneness, violence, and appetite disorders.

**Psychological Consequences** The psychological consequences of stress relate to a person’s mental health and well-being. When people experience too much stress at work, they may become depressed or find themselves sleeping too much or not enough. Stress may also lead to family problems and sexual difficulties.²⁹

**Medical Consequences** The medical consequences of stress affect a person’s physical well-being. Heart disease and stroke, among other illnesses, have been linked to stress. Other common medical problems resulting from too much stress include headaches, backaches, ulcers and related stomach and intestinal disorders, and skin conditions such as acne and hives.³⁰

**Organizational Consequences**

Clearly, any of the individual consequences just discussed can also affect the organization. Other results of stress have even more direct consequences for organizations. These include decline in performance, withdrawal, and negative changes in attitudes.

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²⁸ Quick and Quick, *Organizational Stress and Preventive Management*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.
Performance One clear organizational consequence of too much stress is a decline in performance. For operating workers, such a decline can translate into poor-quality work or a drop in productivity. For managers, it can mean faulty decision making or disruptions in working relationships as people become irritable and hard to get along with.

Withdrawal Withdrawal behaviors also can result from stress. For the organization, the two most significant forms of withdrawal behavior are absenteeism and quitting. People who are having a hard time coping with stress in their jobs are more likely to call in sick or consider leaving the organization for good. Stress can also produce other, more subtle forms of withdrawal. A manager may start missing deadlines or taking longer lunch breaks. An employee may withdraw psychologically by ceasing to care about the organization and the job.31 As noted above, employee violence is a potential individual consequence of stress. This also has obvious organizational implications as well, especially if the violence is directed at an employee or at the organization in general.32

Attitudes Another direct organizational consequence of employee stress relates to attitudes. As we just noted, job satisfaction, morale, and organizational commitment can all suffer, along with motivation to perform at high levels. As a result, people may be more prone to complain about unimportant things, do only enough work to get by, and so forth.

Burnout

Burnout, another consequence of stress, has clear implications for both people and organizations. Burnout is a general feeling of exhaustion that develops when a person simultaneously experiences too much pressure and has too few sources of satisfaction.33

Burnout generally develops in the following way.34 First, people with high aspirations and strong motivation to get things done are prime candidates for burnout under certain conditions. They are especially vulnerable when the organization suppresses or limits their initiative while constantly demanding that they serve the organization’s own ends.

31. Quick and Quick, Organizational Stress and Preventive Management. See also “Stress: The Test Americans Are Failing,” Business Week, April 18, 1988, pp. 74-76.


In such a situation, the individual is likely to put too much of himself or herself into the job. In other words, the person may well keep trying to meet his or her own agenda while simultaneously trying to fulfill the organization’s expectations. The most likely effects of this situation are prolonged stress, fatigue, frustration, and helplessness under the burden of overwhelming demands. The person literally exhausts his or her aspirations and motivation, much as a candle burns itself out. Loss of self-confidence and psychological withdrawal follow. Ultimately, burnout results. At this point, the individual may start dreading going to work in the morning, may put in longer hours but accomplish less than before, and may generally display mental and physical exhaustion.

Table 3 summarizes some interesting data about managers’ perceptions of burnout and related problems. For example, in 1982 about 40 percent of a sample of senior and middle managers felt that burnout was a serious problem. But in 1994, 68 percent indicated that it was a serious problem. The data illustrate several other interesting-and sobering-findings.

Table 3  Managers’ Perceptions of Stress in the Workplace

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of senior and middle managers agreeing with each of the following:</th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>1982</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burnout is a serious problem.</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers are working too many hours</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More and more, managers are physically exhausted by the end of the workday.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers often take too much work home with them.</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional exhaustion is common among managers.</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>—*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression is more common among managers than it used to be.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>—*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers have adequate support staff to accomplish their goals.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>—*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers are more isolated than they used to be.</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>—*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers have high job security.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These questions were not included in the earlier study.