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Working Paper

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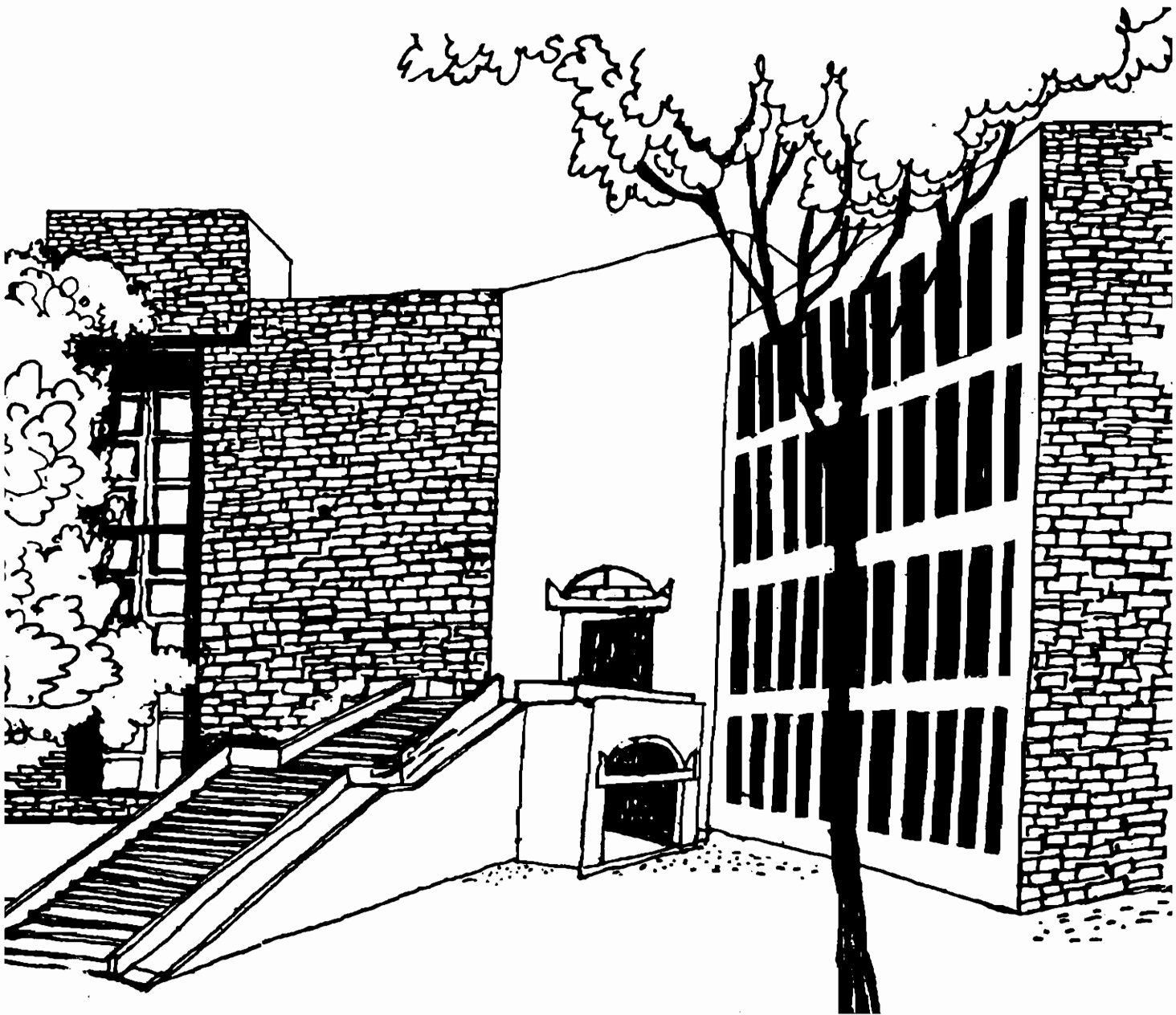
STRESS AUDIT: AN HRD/OD INTERVENTION

By

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&

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The main objective of the working paper series
of the IIMA is to help faculty members to test
out their research findings at the pre-publi-
cation stage.

Stress Audit: An HRD/OD Intervention

The seventeenth century has been called the 'Age of Enlightenment'; the Eighteenth, the 'Age of Reason'; the Nineteenth, the 'Age of Progress' and the Twentieth, the 'Age of Anxiety and Stress' (Coleman, 1976). Thus, it is not surprising that interest in 'stress' has been rising with advancement of present century.

Right from the time of birth till the last day of life, an individual is invariably exposed to various stressful situations for one reason or another. In all economies of the world, it has been found that people specially business executives die of disorders created by stress. Stress is therefore considered a major killer and the consequent loss to organisations is often great (Pestonjee, 1984).
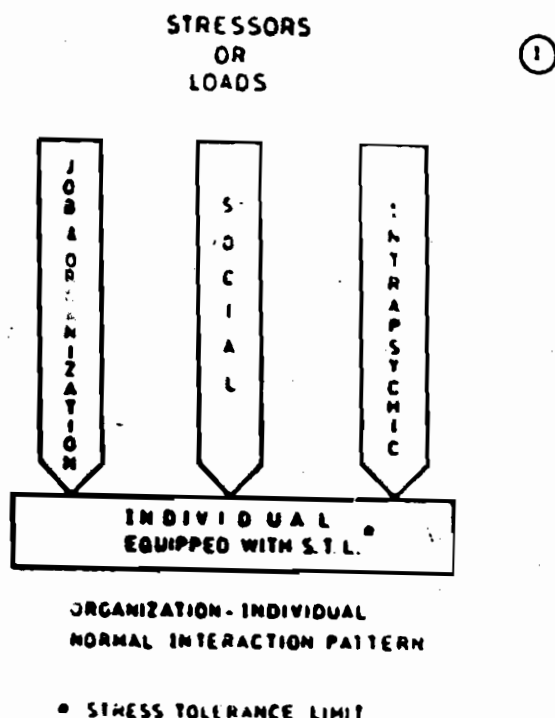
Organisational stress refers to a situation wherein job related factors interact in such a way that the worker experiences a disruption in his or her psychological and/or physiological conditions such that the person is forced to deviate from normal functioning.

Pestonjee (1984b) attempted to diagramatically present the nature and consequences of the stress phenomenon. He identified three important sectors of life in which stress originated. These are (i) Job and Organisation, (ii) Social Sector, and

(iii) Intrapsychic Sector. The first, namely job and organisation refers to the totality of the work environment (task, atmosphere, colleagues, compensations, policies etc.). The social sector refers to the social/cultural context of ones life. It might include religion, caste, language, dress, food habits and such other factors. The intrapsychic sector encompasses those things which are intimate, personal, and specific to the individual like, temperament, values, abilities and health. It is contended that stresses can originate in any of these three sectors or in combinations thereof.

In a balanced state, the magnitude of stress emanating from the three sectors of life are in consonance with the stress tolerance limit of the individual.

Diagram: Stressors and Loads

STRESSORS OR LOADS ①

JOB & ORGANIZATION

SOCIAL

INTRAPSYCHIC

INDIVIDUAL EQUIPPED WITH S.T.L.

ORGANIZATION-INDIVIDUAL
NORMAL INTERACTION PATTERN

● STRESS TOLERANCE LIMIT

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Research evidences indicate that besides the health related problems job stress also affects the smooth operation of the organisation. It has been found to be associated with absenteeism (Gupta and Beehr, 1979); with job dissatisfaction (Sharma and Sharma, 1984; Pestonjee and Singh, 1982) with absenteeism, low productivity and turnover (House and Rizzo, 1972).

Parker and Decottis (1983) have developed a model of job stress. Stressors are grouped into six categories: (1) characteristics and conditions of the job itself; (2) conditions associated with the organisational structure, climate and information flow; (3) role-related factors; (4) relationships at work; (5) perceived career development, and (6) external commitments and responsibilities.

The model posits two levels of outcomes: first and second-level. Only the first level outcome is referred to as stress. Second-level outcomes are viewed as individual and organisational consequences which are affected by stress, and quite likely by other variables as well. These second-level outcomes might include decrements in organisational commitment, satisfaction, motivation and job performance and avoidance behaviour.

This model indicates that experienced job stress will sometimes but not always, lead to organisational and individually relevant second-level outcomes such as reduced job performance and voluntary turnover. This model suggests that

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relationship between stress and second-level outcomes will depend
upon the intensity of the stress, its duration, the number of
operative stressors and alternatives the individual sees as being
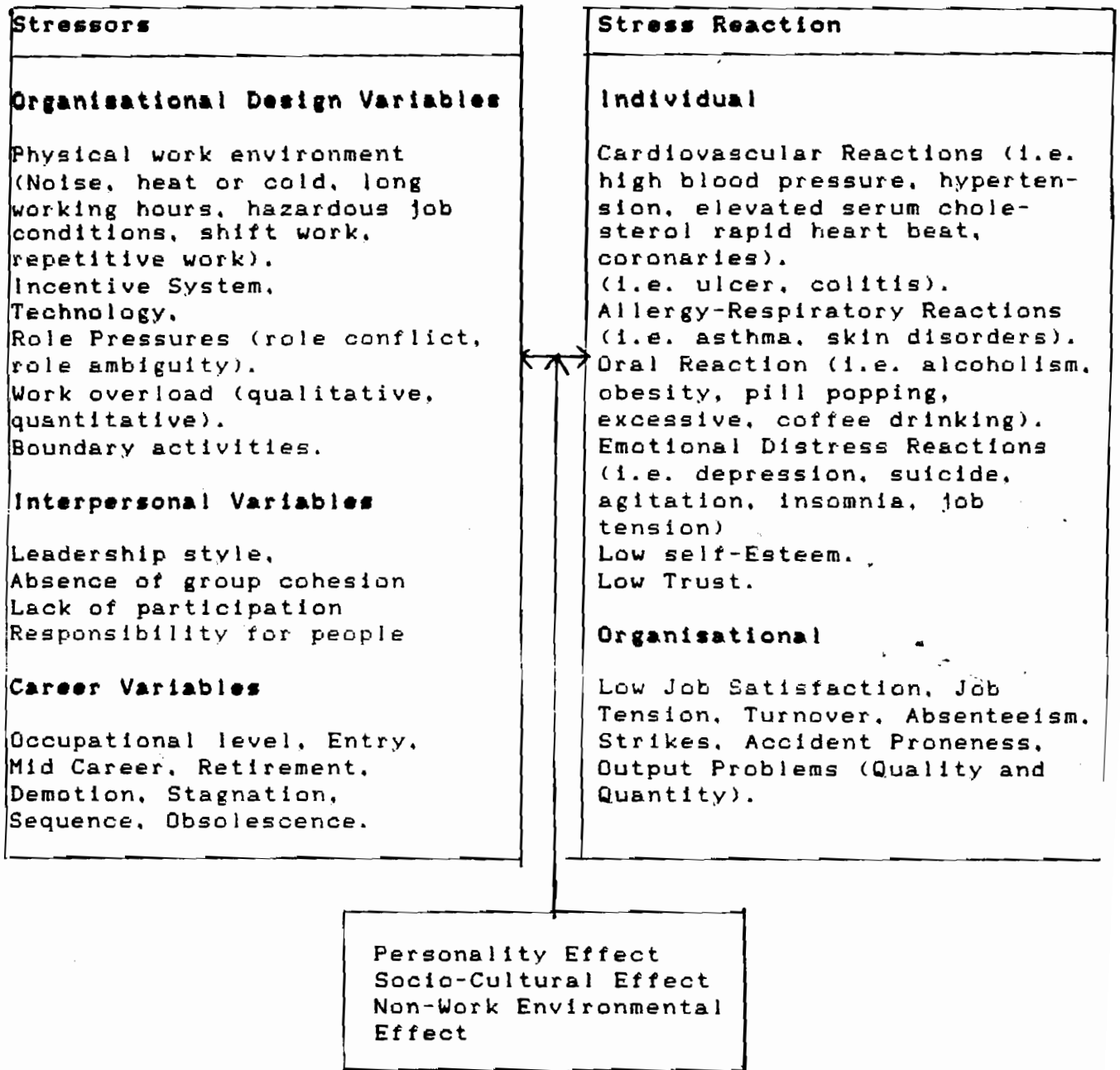available to him or her.

Stress Audit:

When an organisation decides to have a scientific peep into
the mental-cum-physical health status of its backbone group
(executives) we call it a 'Stress Audit'. Stress Audit refers to
the attempt organisations make to study, explore, and control the
various types of stresses which the individual executives
experience by virtue of their organisational membership.

In setting up a stress audit in an organisation, a
distinction can be made among three categories of variables:
causal stress variables (the stressors), mediating variables (the
effect of personality, culture and contemporary non-work
environment) and end result variables (the stress reactions).
The data needed for the stress audit can be collected with the
aid of questionnaires, clinical diagnostic interviews and if
possible, physical examination. Figure 1, below, gives an
overview of stressors, mediating variables and stress reaction
patterns) (Kets de Vries; 1979).

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Fig. 1

ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STRESS

Stressors	Stress Reaction
Organisational Design Variables Physical work environment (Noise, heat or cold, long working hours, hazardous job conditions, shift work, repetitive work). Incentive System, Technology, Role Pressures (role conflict, role ambiguity). Work overload (qualitative, quantitative). Boundary activities. **Interpersonal Variables** Leadership style, Absence of group cohesion Lack of participation Responsibility for people **Career Variables** Occupational level, Entry, Mid Career, Retirement. Demotion, Stagnation, Sequence, Obsolescence.	**Individual** Cardiovascular Reactions (i.e. high blood pressure, hypertension, elevated serum cholesterol rapid heart beat, coronaries). (i.e. ulcer, colitis). Allergy-Respiratory Reactions (i.e. asthma, skin disorders). Oral Reaction (i.e. alcoholism, obesity, pill popping, excessive, coffee drinking). Emotional Distress Reactions (i.e. depression, suicide, agitation, insomnia, job tension) Low self-Esteem. Low Trust. **Organisational** Low Job Satisfaction, Job Tension, Turnover, Absenteeism, Strikes, Accident Proneness, Output Problems (Quality and Quantity).

Personality Effect
Socio-Cultural Effect
Non-Work Environmental
Effect

Source: Kets de Vries (1979)

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Organisational Stressors:

Organisational membership is a dominant source of stress. The concept of organisational stress first evolved in the classic work of Kahn et al (1964). They were the earliest to draw attention to organisational stress in general and role stress in particular.

Pareek (1983) pioneered work on role stress by identifying as many as ten different types of organisational role stresses. They are described briefly here:

1. Inter-role Distance Stress (IRD) is experienced when there is a conflict between organisational and non-organisational roles. For example, the role of an executive versus the role of a husband.

2. Role Stagnation (RS): This kind of stress is the result of gap between demand to outgrow his previous role and to occupy the new role effectively. It is the feeling of being stuck in the same role. Such a type of stress results into perception that there is no opportunity for one's career progression.

3. Role Expectation Conflict (REC): This type of stress is generated by different expectations by different significant persons about the same role; and the role occupant is ambivalent as to whom to please.

4. Role Erosion (RE): This type of role stress is the function of the role occupants feeling that some functions which

should properly be belonging to his role are transferred to/or performed by some other role. This can also happen when the functions are performed by the role occupant but the credit for them goes to some one else.

5. Role Overload (RO): When the role occupant feels that there are too many expectations from the significant roles in this role set, he experiences role overload. There are two aspects of this stress, quantitative and qualitative. The former refers to having too much to do, while latter refers to too difficult.

6. Role Isolation (RI): This type of role stress refers to psychological distance between the occupant's role and other roles in the same role set. It is also defined as role distance which is different from inter-role distance, in the sense that IRD refers to the distance among various roles occupied by the same individual, role isolation is characterised by the feelings that others do not reach out easily, indicative of the absence of strong linkages of one's role with other roles.

7. Personal Inadequacy (PI): This type of stress arises when the role occupant feels that he does not have the necessary skills and training for affectively performing the functions expected from his role. This is found to happen when the organisations do not impart periodic training to enable the employees to cope with the fast changes both within and outside the organisation.

8. Self-role Distance (SRD): When the role person occupies goes against his self-concept, then he feels self-role distance type of stress. This is essentially a conflict arising out of mismatch between the person and his job.

9. Role Ambiguity (RA): It refers to the lack of clarity about the expectations of role which may arise out of lack of information or understanding. It may exist in relation to activities, responsibilities, personal styles, and norms and may operate at three stages.

    a) When the role sender holds his expectations about the role

    b) When he sends it, and

    c) When the occupant receives those expectations.

10. Resource Inadequacy (RIn): This type of stress is evident when the role occupant feels that he is not provided with adequate resources for performing the functions expected from his role.

Fig 2: Coping Strategies for Role Stresses

Role Stresses	Dysfunctional Strategies	Functional Strategies
1. Self-role distance	Role rejection, self rejection	Role integration
2. Interrole distance	Role partition, role elimination	Role negotiation
3. Role stagnation	Role fixation	Role transition
4. Role isolation	Role boundness	Role linkage
5. Role ambiguity	Role prescription	Role clarification
6. Role expectation conflict	Role taking	Role making
7. Role overload	Role reduction	Role slimming
8. Role erosion	Role visibility	Role development/ enrichment
9. Resource inadequacy	Role atrophy	Resource generation
10. Personal inadequacy	Role shrinkage	Role linkage

Source: Pestonjee (1989).

Organisations have for almost a century now paid due attention to maintenance, creation and updating of technology. We are only gradually emerging from the stage where machines are better cared for than men. A stage has now been reached when the significance of human resource has been recognised for productive and healthy functioning of the organisation. The care for health of the individual executive is certainly one of the basic self-imposed requirements of all progressive and forward looking organisations.

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Interpersonal variables such as leadership styles, group cohesion and participation can be measured by various methods such as interviews, questionnaires etc. but only if the data gathered from the management group under study shows that it is relevant.

Similarly stresses experienced by an individual at entry level in an organisation, mid-career and retirement can be discovered by stress audit and steps taken accordingly to eliminate the stress or reduce it. Employees under stress should be provided with psychological support by their superiors to cope with stress and improve upon their job performance. Employees could be rotated out of potentially stressing positions and not allowed to overwork even on critical issues. The employees should be encouraged to express their views freely and attempt should be made of letting them know that their contributions are significant. Training programmes should be organised for awareness of ways and modes of overcoming stress and also for updating knowledge and skills of the employees to face the challenges brought about by the fast changing technological milieu (Dhar, 1991).

Stress Audit as a Special Manifestation of HRD

Human Resource Development (HRD), a phrase that has come into greater currency during this past decade, represents a new world-view which takes a positive view of people and their potential and tries to foster a climate conducive to growth and development.

HRD is one of the several organisational processes evolved to cope with the changing environment and to maintain the organisation at its effective best. The focus is on 'development' rather than on 'control'. HRD is a process by which the employees of an organisation are helped in a continuous and planned way: (1) to acquire or sharpen capabilities required to perform various functions associated with their present or expected future roles (2) to develop their general capabilities as individuals and discover and exploit their own inner potential for their own and/or organisational development purposes; (3) to develop an organisational culture in which superior-subordinate relationships, team work, and collaboration among sub-units are strong and contribute to the professional well-being, motivation and pride of employees (Rao, 1987).

Contemporary writings on HRD and HRM focus mainly on the role of individuals in organisations while the individual employee at a more intensely personal level has generally been overlooked. The realisation is slowly emerging that care and concern for the health of the individual executive is one of the basic requirements. It has been seen that many ailments from which executives suffer are not purely physiological but could also be psychological or psychosomatic in nature. Their roots may be in mental anxieties and stresses generated by the happenings in organisations (Pestonjee and Muncherji, 1991).

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Ironically, some of the HRD Processes themselves may be contributing to health related problems. Today's executive is often subjected to mental tensions, anxieties, stress, depression, frustrations and so on.

A mention must be made of certain key organisational issues which relate to health and how the HRD systems can help in redeeming the same.

Performance Appraisal: is one of the most important sources of stress in organisations. Being evaluated by superiors is a highly stressful experience for many persons.

Career Paths: is another HRD variable which is linked to stress. As individuals move through various stages of their careers, they are also moving from one stage of life to another. The sequence of occupations and jobs that individuals hold during their working life constitutes their careers.

Crucial points in career planning occur at key times during the individual's life for example at about age thirty, during the early forties, and again in the late fifties. Each career stage is characterised by different issues and problems.

The twenties are a time of getting started and choosing a career. by the thirties one gets a fairly clear idea about talents and abilities. These self-perceptions come to guide and stablise a person's career, as they attempt to choose jobs and goals that are consistent with their basic characteristics.

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As one nears forty, one discovers that he has reached a career plateau, besides there is also competition from the horde of ambitious, energetic and better trained (technically) younger lot.

Again in the late fifties new sets of problems arise. This is the stage when individual has to come to terms with the fact that his power and influence within the organisation is beginning to wane. The most important issue is coming to terms with his own retirement.

HRD systems and processes should help reduce these stresses. HRD departments should establish 'career management programmes' to help employees cope with such problems and plan effectively for the development of their careers.

These programmes vary greatly in scope and content, but most of them involve efforts to (1) help employees assess their own career strengths (2) set priorities and specific career goals, (3) provide information on various career paths and alternatives within the organisation, and (4) offer employees yearly reviews of their progress towards these goals by managers. In addition, special workshops and technical training opportunities are often part of such programmes.

Certain OD interventions such as job enrichment, job design, role efficacy workshops/labs etc. could also be used to reduce stresses experienced by individuals in organisations.

Pareek has suggested the use of role efficacy lab, in addition to role efficacy instruments to gather initial diagnostic data; this is followed by concept sessions which helps them to work on their diagnosis and action planning and in raising conceptual issues. After the role efficacy lab, follow up and reinforcement may be planned.

The process of job enrichment is the process of providing valuable things to a person (those which a particular person thinks are valuable to him). Job enrichment helps in improving the motivational level amongst employees and contributes to their development, it also helps in reducing stress. In mid-fifties the concept of job design was proposed. Job design was implemented through the following three activities: specifying the content of individual task; specifying the method of performing each task, including the machinery and tools used and any special techniques; and combining individual task into specific jobs.

These OD interventions could help reduce organisational stresses and improve work performance and lead to job satisfaction.

Management of Stress:

Each individual needs a moderate amount of stress to be alert and capable of functioning. Given that, presence of more or less stress is inevitable, many researchers sought to find as to what could be done to counteract stress so as to prevent its negative consequences. Some researchers closely link 'stress' and 'coping'. Stress arises only when people find out that they cannot cope adequately with a difficult situation.

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Normally coping is defined as an adaptive response to stress: a response intended to eliminate, ameliorate or change the stress producing factors, or intended to modify the individual's reaction to stressful situation in a beneficial way. (Newman and Beehr, 1979).

An individual who thinks about forthcoming events and the potential stressors that may arise is seemingly in a better position to make adaptive response than the individual who rushes blindly from one event to the next. One should think realistically about mid-life changes in advance and prepare for them. Individuals should expose themselves to new skills and ideas, engage in exploratory behaviour, and develop flexibility and self-motivation (Dhar 1991).

To overcome stresses, efforts may be required from the organisation as also the individual (Pestonjee, D.M., 1987).

What an organisation can do?

What can an organisation do to alleviate stress? Some proactive interventions are listed below:

*   Undertake a stress audit (already discussed)

*   Use scientific inputs

*   Check with the company doctor

*   Spread the message.

Use Scientific Inputs:

Disperse information on how to face stressors in the organisation and outside. People derive immense benefits from knowing something about the fundamentals of the stress response, dietetics exercises and meditation.

Check with the Company Doctor:

What can he do to help the employees cope with the identified stress? Several progressive public as well as private organisations depute their chief medical officers or consultants to attend stress management programmes. They have acted as a valuable resource to fellow participants and to their organisations.

Spread the Message:

The importance of regular habits of work, leisure, proper diet, exercise and mental peace should be emphasised.

What an Individual Can Do?

When individuals experience stress, they adopt ways of dealing with it. An individual cannot remain in a continual state of tension, so even if a deliberate and conscious strategy is not utilised to deal with stress, some strategy is adopted. Pareek has suggested "approach" and "avoidance" strategies.

Generally effective coping strategies are "approach" strategies, to confront the problem of stress as a challenge, and to increase capability of dealing with it. Ineffective

strategies are "escape" or avoidance strategies, to reduce the feeling of stress, for example, by denying the reality of stress or through use of alcohol, drugs or other escapist behaviour.

Research has shown that social and emotional support available to the person helps him or her to effectively cope with stress. Persons maintaining close inter-personal relationship with friends and the family are able to use more appropriate strategies.

Social support includes both material support (providing resources), and emotional support (listening to the person and encouraging him/her). Approach or effective strategies of coping include efforts to increase physical and mental preparedness of coping (through physical exercises, yoga and meditation, diet management, creative diversions for emotional enrichment (music, art, theatre etc.), strategies of dealing with the basic problems causing stress, and collaborative work to solve such problems.

The various coping strategies or styles used in role stress have been studied, and the findings show that approach styles have strong relationship with internality, optimism, role efficacy, job satisfaction, and effective role behaviour in organisations.

Effective management of stress involves directing stress for productive purposes, preparing role occupants to understand the nature of stress, helping role occupants to understand their

strengths and usual styles, and equip them to develop approach strategies of coping with stress (Pestonjee, 1989).

Gmelch (1982) suggests the following five strategies to overcome stress affliction.

*   **'Take a hard look at yourself'**: Determine where stresses originate in your life. Critically examine your own contribution to stresses experienced by others around you, be they in the organisation or outside it.

*   **'Stay alert'**: Do things, other than your job, which give you a sense of meaning and satisfaction.

*   **'Take risks'**: Growth and productivity result .from taking moderate risks in various types of activities.

*   **'Avoid isolation'**: Withdrawing from others can lead to isolation and depression. Keep the channels of communication open with colleagues, friends and the family.

*   **'Stretch for success'**: Stretching for success keeps you on your toes. Make an effort with hope to achieve your goals. Efforts and desire to overcome the obstacle are essential to tide over Rust Out Stress Syndrome.

*   **'Overcome obsolescence'**: Update your knowledge and skill to face the challenge brought about by the changing technological environment.

Besides the above mentioned strategies to overcome stress, all individuals possess stress safety valves. A few <u>safety valves</u> are suggested below.

<u>Changing</u> <u>Gears</u>: Changing gears involves shifting 'from' work 'to' something else. In order to change gears, one has to try activities that capture his/her interest. Psychologists call such pursuits 'intrinsic motivators'. They give one a feeling of well-being. Changing gears not only removes one's attention from pressures of work, it helps drain off the pent-up tensions. The pursuit of almost any non-work project or hobby can reduce stress.

<u>Cutback</u> <u>on</u> <u>Excessive</u> <u>Hours</u>: For many people burnout and overtime go hand on hand. It is generally seen that the more hours you work the more likely you are to burnout.

Job burnout cycle keeps some people glued to their jobs through inefficiency. Some kind of work stress starts the cycle of energy consumption and consequent fatigue. Then they loose their efficiency at work and have to stay late more and more frequently to finish up. But this overtime only speeds up the process, for it adds an additional work stress. Often as the burnout victims falls further behind he or she can loose self-confidence and work even harder and longer to make up for the sense of inadequacy.

<u>Exercise</u>: Because burnout almost always comes from excessive mental and emotional stress, physical exercise offers one of the best safety valves. Exercise work as a stress inoculation according to Dr. George Williams (Director of the Institute of Health Research, San Fransisco), not only relieving the pressure

at the end of a hectic day, but making it possible for you to deal more effectively with stress the next day.

Exercise does not have to be strenuous or competitive. Walking offers many benefits and can put one into excellent cardiovascular condition, as well as reduce stress.

Pamper yourself: Most of us know how to pamper other people when they experience a life crisis. We send flowers to a friend in the hospital. Such special attention helps people cope with stress. Pampering yourself can have the same effect.

There are many ways to pamper oneself. The harassed assembly line worker might plan a series of mini-vacations instead of taking all two weeks in a single block of time. The housewife might arrange a trip to visit an old friend or plan an evening out - without the kids. The key object in pampering oneself is to break the routine.

Get involved: A boring job can lead to burnout as easily as a challenging one with too much pressure. If an individual's work does not use his skills, if it leaves him thinking that even a chimp could do this, then one may need to get involved.

Warm up slowly: One can often get control of a tense, pressured work day if one changes the way its begins. the basketball player warms up before the buzzer sounds to start the game. If an individual's day begins with a sudden rush of activity or a mad scramble on some crowded subway it will add to his stress. The most important two - hour period in one's day is prior to

starting work. During that period one should set the tone for the day. The little things one does in the morning prepares him for the tensions he encounters during the day.

Release pressures on the job: The people who burnout are often the best workers. They take their jobs seriously, work faster and harder than others and never shirnk responsibility. This very commitment makes them more susceptible to work stress. The pressures build up and they do not find it easy to open the safety valves, goof off, or escape for a few minutes.

One of the best ways of releasing the pressure on the job is to rearrange one's schedule. One way to deal with stress is to confront difficult tasks when one is fresh. When one is tired, the pressure can hit harder.

Practice Relaxation Techniques: The stress response goes through four processes: mobilisation, increase in energy consumption, muscular action involved in fight or flight, and then a return to equilibrium. One can aid the process by learning to switch off the stress response and switch on the relaxation response.

Advantages or uses of Stress Audit:

Stress audit can be used as an organisational development (OD) technique. It provides very valuable insights into the functioning of various units and departments; their policies, practices and climates. These data can then be utilised for planning other OD interventions. It has been found that a stress

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audit, even on a limited scale, in several organisations make the people receptive to other OD interventions and people tend to be receptive to changes.

Besides, the stress audit being 'person based' intervention, people tend to look at it as a demonstrated concern which organisations have for the individual executive.

Sharing the stresses in an open-feedback session has the added advantage of making everybody realise that it is not uncommon to have stresses and also given the same organisational environment people show diversity in reactions, both functional and dysfunctional. Besides these, structural imbalances within the organisation are revealed and can be rectified.

Conflicts and flashpoints also come to the fore making it easier for the management to deal with them.

Stress Audit also helps in exposing the unproductive practices which may be going on in the organisation and should be checked. It also helps in identification of problem executives and also executives with problems.

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