

STRESS AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS – SELECTED THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

STRES I STRES ZAWODOWY – WYBRANE KONTEKSTY TEORETYCZNE*

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ABSTRACT

Stress is a state of overload of the mental regulation system, which occurs in an emergency situation, difficulties or inability to achieve aims, objectives and values which are important for the person. Individual mechanisms of coping with stress, aimed at ensuring the psychological and behavioural stability of a person, are also important. These mechanisms are individual for people with different temperament and personality traits. In a stressful situation internal strategies for coping with stress are triggered, which can be either constructive or nonconstructive. These strategies are essential for resolution of conflict situations, internal stress tolerance and evaluation of different professional situations as more or less stressful [1].

The article deals with (on the basis of collected literature) issues related to the explanation of basic concepts related to stress, also occupational stress. It also presents basic models of occupational stress and the ways of managing stressful situations on the organizational ground.

KEYWORDS: stress, coping with stress, occupational stress.

STRESZCZENIE

Stres to stan obciążenia systemu regulacji psychicznej, który powstaje w sytuacji zagrożenia, utrudnień lub niemożności realizacji ważnych dla jednostki celów, zadań i wartości. Istotne są również indywidualne mechanizmy radzenia sobie ze stresem, które mają na celu zapewnienie jednostce stabilności psychicznej i behawioralnej. Mechanizmy te są indywidualne dla ludzi o różnych cechach temperamentu i osobowości. W sytuacji stresowej ludzie uruchamiają wewnętrzne strategie radzenia sobie ze stresem, które mogą mieć charakter konstruktywny lub niekonstruktywny. Strategie te mają istotne znaczenie dla rozwiązywania sytuacji konfliktowych, wewnętrznej tolerancji stresu i oceną różnych sytuacji zawodowych jako bardziej lub mniej stresujących [1].

W artykule zostały poruszone (na podstawie zgromadzonego piśmiennictwa) kwestie związane z wyjaśnieniem podstawowych pojęć związanych ze stresem, również stresem zawodowym. Zaprezentowano także podstawowe modele stresu zawodowego oraz sposoby zarządzania sytuacjami stresowymi na gruncie organizacyjnym.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: stres, radzenie sobie ze stresem, stres zawodowy.

Introduction

In scientific literature, the term „stress” appeared in the 1950s, and the first author defining stress was Hans Selye. He described it as a „non-specific response of the body to any demands placed on it” [2]. According to Lazarus and Folkman, stress should be viewed as a transaction between the body and the environment [3]. Stress is defined in a similar way by the Polish researcher – Janusz Reykowski. He perceives it as a relationship between the entity and his or her environment [4].

In the history of research on stress, its biological concepts can also be found. In this stream of research, studies were conducted among others by: Hans Selye and Walter Cannon. The latter, in the 1930s, defined

a state of dynamic balance of physiological processes occurring in the body and gave it the name of homeostasis. He also found that for this very desirable balance, stress is an unfavourable factor. In a stressful situation a man can trigger one of two reactions, which are aimed at stopping the crisis and returning to homeostasis. These reactions are “fight” or “flight”. An individual makes a choice which of the options will sooner lead to the desired state of balance [2].

Stress is one of the most deeply examined conditions and at the same time one of the most unknown and surprising phenomena that are parts of our contemporary everyday life. Stress is a negative feeling that has always accompanied the man in different life situ-

ations. It is beneficial, as it informs the individual about the threat and allows them to cope with a difficult situation. However, chronic, increasing stress disrupts the emotional state and may contribute to the occurrence of diseases [5]. It has been shown that the presence of chronic stress adversely affects the brain, leading to cognitive disorders, and mood disorders, which is one of the causes of depression. Studies confirm that chronic stress with the lack of physical activity is the main cause of cardiometabolic diseases and psychiatric disorders in today's society. Therefore, prevention of these disorders includes elimination of stress by, among others, strengthening constructive strategies to cope with it, which are as important as physical exercise [6].

Stress can also be divided based on the effects it produces. In this division eustress and distress should be distinguished. Eustress is so-called positive stress, which motivates to action and stimulates. This type of stress accompanies exciting experiences and evokes intense emotions. Distress, on the other hand, affects people negatively. It is the main cause of disorders of the autonomic nervous system and, affecting the stress axis, leads to the development of somatic diseases. It also causes behavioural disorders resulting from inadequate reactions to a current stressor. The most dangerous kind of stress for health is chronic stress, the one that requires the man to adapt to exceptional conditions, which are far from well-known and accepted standards in a longer period of time. Traumatic stress is a kind of destructive stress, disabling considerably the person's normal activity. It appears usually after a trauma, most often connected with the sense of immediate threat to life. Post-traumatic stress develops in about 50% of people who have experienced a traumatic situation, its consequences are significant functional disorders, cognitive disorders (mainly concentration, memory), agitation, panic attacks and sleep problems [7].

Stressors

Stress is triggered by many factors and can vary in strength, intensity and duration. It is caused, among other things, by: a sense of threat to life, health, self-esteem or job loss. It is also brought on by a sense of loss of control over the course of events or the appearance of obstacles, leading to difficulties in the normal, everyday activity and loss of values that are necessary to life. A particular type of stress is chronic stress whose appearance may be due to an illness or job loss, but it may be also connected with performing professional duties. Then we can talk about occupational stress. A factor causing stress is called a stressor. Any external stimulus which may change the established order can become a stressor, A sense of inability to meet demands

is also a stressor. The stronger it is and the longer the time of its influence on the human body, the stronger is the experienced stress.

Based on their source, stressors can be divided into three categories: frustrations, conflicts and coercion. Frustrations occur while a person who is pursuing their aim faces difficulties. Frustrations are the body's negative reaction to emerging obstacles. They can be caused, among others, by: discrimination, death of a loved one or lack of job satisfaction [8]. Conflict situations constitute the second category of stressors. A person seeking to achieve their goal, moves away from it, cannot clearly identify it or knows that they must make a choice between two bad or positive possibilities, and thus, cannot find a way out. The last category of stressors is coercion, whose sources are both external and internal factors. In the workplace coercion may be seen in the form of, e.g. expectations of high efficiency, punctuality, carrying out specific, not always pleasurable activities.

Coping styles

In stressful situations, a man uses various strategies to cope with it, depending on their experience, knowledge and intellect, cognitive constructs as well as personality traits and temperament. They also depend on the type of a stressful situation, or defence mechanisms triggered in it. Some of these strategies are more constructive, others less.

Lazarus defines stress in a so-called transactional model. He believes that a person in a stressful situation assesses their own capabilities and strives to meet the demands of the environment or tries to calm their own emotions. Coping is, in his opinion, a kind of an active struggle with the reality and with crisis situations. Lazarus and Folkman believe that coping "is a constantly changing cognitive and behavioural effort, aimed at specific external and/or internal requirements, which are perceived to be burdening or beyond the capability of the man." Researchers believe that when a person considers the situation stressful, a remedial strategy may be triggered. Lazarus lists four such strategies: searching for information, direct action, refraining from action and intrapsychic processes. Remedial methods proposed by the researcher are not, however, a way to combat stress. They do not change anything in a stressful situation itself. However, the measures which he proposes help to calm down, improve mood and reduce negative emotions. Focusing on the scientific theories by Lazarus and Folkman we can meet two functions of coping with stress – emotional and task-oriented. Controlling emotions reduces unpleasant tension and relieves other negative emotional states. In order to mo-

tivate a person to action, emotional arousal can play an important role. In the case of the task-oriented function, in other words - instrumental, it is aimed at solving the problem by changing the threatening environment or its adverse effects [3, 9].

The results of the research on remedial strategies are also significant. The first of them is a preventive strategy, which is used before the onset of danger. Using it, one can prepare for the upcoming threat by adapting to the crisis situation which is expected in the nearest future. However, this strategy may require a lot of commitment. Another strategy of defending oneself, hiding, assumes avoiding threat and waiting until it passes. As the last one, the escape strategy can be mentioned. It is used when other ways of dealing with threat have been exhausted. It is a sign of helplessness that may result either from the situation (e.g. situations of direct threat because no options are available), or from individual characteristics, when people themselves declare that they are helpless in a particular situation. This strategy leads to avoiding confrontation with a threatening factor in order to improve one's sense of security [10].

Different strategies of coping with stress may be used by the same person depending on situational factors and may prove to be effective in a particular case. However, a person shows some particular tendencies to react in a difficult situation.

Occupational stress

At the end of the 20th century researchers Cooper and Marschall distinguished six groups of job stressors. Following the theory developed by them, stress at work can be caused by factors related to work (bad working conditions, overload, time pressure), factors related to a performed role (sense of responsibility for employees, role conflicts), bad relationships at work (conflicts with superiors, co-workers), factors associated with professional development (lack of job security, lack of promotion or climbing the career ladder too fast), factors connected with the organisational structure and atmosphere in the organisation and non-organisational sources of stress (family and financial problems, life crises of an employee) [11].

Most studies concern long-term consequences of stress at work, which can lead to occupational burnout, reduce involvement of employees in professional activities and decrease efficiency, as it was mentioned earlier [12, 13, 14, 15]. Contemporary research is focusing on creating models of occupational stress, which should cover all factors that are significant in its development, which in turn, may be important for the development of suitable prevention systems.

Models of occupational stress

The transactional model of stress developed by Cox assumes that the occurrence of stress is simultaneously influenced by two aspects, namely situational factors and individual characteristics of the person. Both social demands put on an individual and their aspirations as well as working conditions and the health status of an employee contribute to the occurrence of a stressful situation. It is the interaction between the components that causes stress and leads to an emotional and behavioral reaction, and consequently also to a physiological response. The occurrence of such an interaction results in appearance of strong emotions, which can seriously disrupt or even paralyse the person's activity. Sometimes they also affect private lives of employees and cause problems also in the areas of life that are not related to work [16].

The concept of occupational stress by Kalimo assumes that stress is a state of mental tension caused by a discrepancy between requirements of the environment and possibilities of a man. According to his theory, a person subjectively perceives this discrepancy and identifies it with threat, such as health, life or integrity of their own self. Kalimo in his theory also mentions stressors that threaten the above-mentioned values. The group of the most common stressors includes: physical work overload leading to employees' exhaustion, mental overload, monotony of work and routine of performed tasks, unfair treatment by the employer, unclear definition of tasks or complex and conflict tasks, time pressure and lack of recognition and support from third parties. Interestingly, Kalimo believes that the experience of stress is subjective by nature – the same situation will be perceived by some people as a threat, whereas for others it will be still comfortable. It is a person's own experience and possessed knowledge, physical strength and support from the environment that will decide whether stress will be destructive for the individual [after: 10].

Methods of stress management in an organisation

An employer's objectivity is very important at work. Employers frequently deny messages from people they do not like or consider to be inconvenient. In addition to this, there is often a situation of abuse. Therefore, supervising an employer would certainly play a very important role in any organisation by determining both positive and negative qualities of the manager. Nowadays, employers and their ways of management are considered as one of the main factors that affect stress in employees.

More and more attention is paid to comfort and proper atmosphere at work, and also to the need to resolve conflicts at work in a constructive way as well as rapidly assess and eliminate their sources. Not only does it have a social dimension, but also a material one. In crisis situations, where a conflict between groups of employees or employees and managers is apparent, hiring professional external companies with experience in group conflict resolution pays off. This can prevent the most dramatic forms of the conflict, such as a strike of a group of employees, where stiffening positions often prevents any negotiations and constructive conversation.

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