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STRESS AMONG WOMEN EDUCATIONISTS: CAUSES, REACTIONS AND MANAGEMENT

BY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the nature of stress as it applies to women educationalists, causes, effects, reactions and practical management strategies were discussed. In order to achieve its intended objectives, the paper was divided into four parts. Part one is the introduction, which focuses on the characteristics and types of stress. Part two discussed the different causes of stress to women educationists. Part three talks about the effects of and reactions to excessive stress. Part four discussed the potential strategies for managing stress while the concluding part summarizes the discussion and points the way forward for women educationists in thriving with stress through the turbulent times and challenging institutional environments.

INTRODUCTION

The prevailing decade is a challenging one to institutions and to the educationalists within them. Many organizations are facing turbulent times as they restructure to meet various changes and demands of an economic, technology, social and political nature and increase competition rate. To help meet these challenges, managers must operate at peak performance and learn to operate effectively under various stressors and increased stress levels (Cranwell-ward, 1990). The situation is even more challenging and stressful to women educationalists due to demands at home and the nature of institutional cultures within which they operate.

Stress is an event or group of events causing wear and tear on the individual or it is a situation that places a heavy demand upon a person's mental and physical resources. Stress is not a disease. It only becomes a disease (distress) when the body can no longer cope with the demands made on it. It is noteworthy that:

- i. Stress is not peculiar to the poor or the rich. However, poverty is one of the world's greatest stressors.
- ii. Stress is not always negative. It can be positive galvanizing, energizing and propelling one to reach optimum potential. We all need some amount of stress in our lives because it adds flavour, opportunity and challenges.
- iii. Any situation can generate stress-social, family, educational, economic, job, political, sports, competition, bereavement, ill-health, promotion, good fortune etc. Cranwell-ward (1990) defines stress as a physiological reaction, which occurs

when people perceive an imbalance between the level of demand placed upon them and their capability to meet those demands. Stress therefore is essentially a response to our perceived relationship between demands and pressure on us and our ability to cope (Afolabi, 1997).

CHARACTERISTICS AND TYPES OF STRESS

The definition and table 1 suggest that the nature of a particular event, individual perception of situation and capabilities determine whether any given event will act as a stressor or not. Consequently, a major characteristic of stress is that it is a very individualized phenomenon because no two individuals will have precisely the same perception of even very similar events or possess similar capabilities.

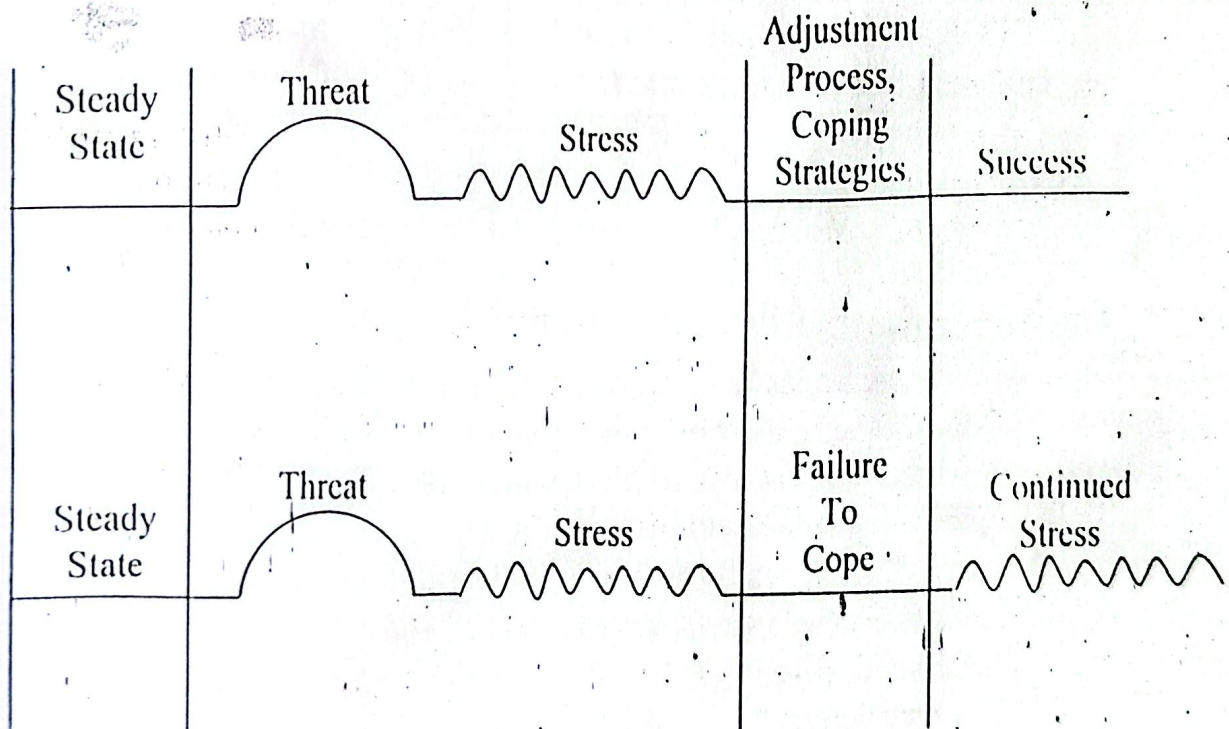


Fig. 1: The Copper-Cummings Framework

(Sources: Cummings and Cooper, 1979: 395 – 419).

A second characteristic of stress is that it induces further stress not only to the overstressed individual, but also to one whom that individual interacts with (Greenwood and Greenwood, 1979).

Therefore, stress can be healthy or unhealthy as the following figure illustrates.

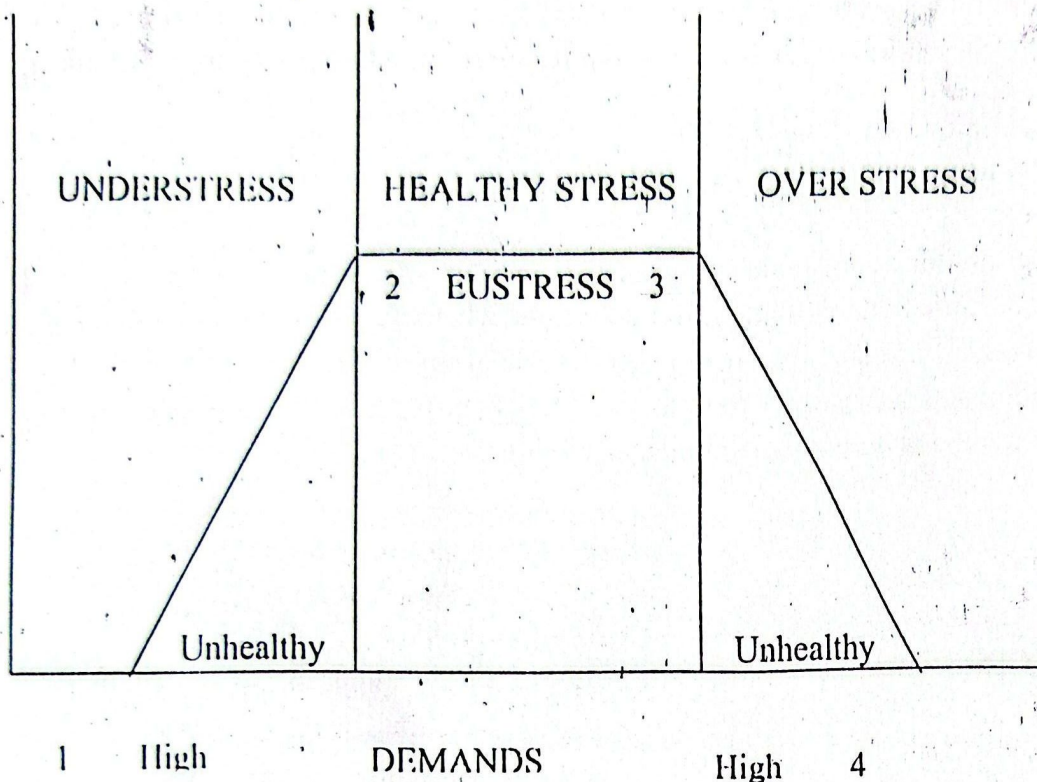


Fig. 2: The stress curve

(Source: Warren & Toll, *The Stress Work Book*, 1993, p. 11).

According to the diagram, there are three types of stress; under-stress, healthy stress and over-stress. Under-stress is experienced when an individual is under-stimulated, bored or lethargic during which performance effectiveness would be reduced. As stress increases, the energy level generally rises and individual performance grows until the optimal stimulation point is reached (i.e. point 3). In area (2-3) on the curve, an individual is performing at his/her absolute peak. One feels stimulated, excited and challenged by the opportunities presented by a demand, appropriately in control and with the right amount of variety and change (Warren & Toll, 1993). At this level one is experiencing healthy stress. If pressure increases, one begins to feel over-stretched and over-stimulated and performance diminishes. At this level one begins to feel that the demands are too great and commitments cannot be fulfilled as over-stress is being experienced.

Given that stress is an individualized process, there is no standard level of stress, which is optimal to everyone. To optimal stress level differs among individuals and changes from situation to situation depending on the nature of the stressor, previous exposure to the stressor, prevailing state of health, diet, and genetic factors.

CAUSES OF STRESS TO WOMEN EDUCATIONISTS

Women Educationists' Style of Managing

It has been found out that, most women educationists have difficulties in delegating and they are prone to close supervision styles. (Greenwood and Greenwood, 1979). This is because while certain aspects of the interpersonal and communication styles that women

tend to bring to their job, as managers are strengths, others stand in the way of effective management and results in self-imposed stress upon them.

In many cases, it has been observed that women educationists are concerned with the nitty gritty of every day operations instead of delegation to make time for more important task such as making key decisions about the future of the institutions they manage. Reasons for not delegating include fear that others may make mistakes and a false belief that they can do better than anyone else. Failure to delegate results in their being overloaded with unnecessary burdens and exposes them to risks experiencing excessive stress.

It has also been found out that women educationists do not grasp the notion of institutional political system and its importance, how power is acquired and experienced in institutions, and how to tap informal power. Most women educationists do not think what is going on around them, that is, the politics, the power bases that are being built and the evolving power acquisition strategies. Instead they spend time and energy on short-term career such as becoming as competent as possible on the present job. Their male counterparts on the other hand are very active members in institutional power politics. They build powerful networks of supporters. They pass on and share power with peers and subordinates and they plan their future careers with stark determination.

Men's basic game is "learn and move on". As a result, male educationists advance in their careers at a faster rate than women educationists. Staying on one job for a long time without prospect for upward movement can be a course of frustration and stress to women educationists.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE WITHIN WHICH WOMEN EDUCATIONISTS OPERATE

Institutions within which female and male educationists functions are gendered in the sense that some tasks are perceived as women's and others are seen as specifically men's work. One of the tasks, which has been traditionally considered to be men's work, is managing within institutions/organizations. As a result, the majority of institutions have males as top executives and senior managerial/administrative officials. Shakeshaft (1989) observes those activities and positions considered being important, authoritative and prestigious are appropriate for men. Consequently, women educationists operate in institutions that are male dominated and driven by male values, in which they are perceived as wanderers/travelers in a man's world. In other words, women educationists operate in a rather hostile environment to them. As a result, they have to work much harder than their male counterparts in order to gain same recognition.

When relating to subordinates, women educationists are generally expected to act in a supportive, motherly or sisterly manner, but not in a task-oriented and authoritative manner (Utouh, 1995: 79). When they act in an authoritative task-oriented manner they encounter more rejection from subordinates compared to their male counterparts (Greenwood and Greenwood, 1979).

TIME PRESSURE

The multiple roles that women have to play at home and place of work put them in a situation whereby they have too much to do and too little time to do it. In the office they have to beat deadlines in accomplishing various important tasks such as preparing marking scheme, marking and recording of results, financial reports, quarterly and annual progress reports, various board papers, attend several meetings as well as plan for future development of the institution they manage.

At home they are responsible for managing the household including taking care of the sick and the old sometimes under situations of unreliable house help. All these compete for women educationists' time. As a result, they have little time to relax and to even exercise, a situation which exposes them to greater risks of excessive stress, compared to their male counterparts.

MULTIPLE ROLES

Being an executive does not exempt a woman from multiple roles in society. Multiple roles essentially mean more than one set of roles that women play in ensuring the well being and survival of their families and communities on one hand, and meeting the demands of the workplace on the other. In the course of fulfilling these roles, women educationists have to work within a complex set of domestic and work place relationships, sometimes as a superior and at other times as a subordinate. At the work place, a women educationist is a leader and a decision maker and the decisions she makes may bind a number of individuals. At home she may have to succumb to an inferior, dependent and subordinate position and becomes a mere implementer of decisions made by the spouse/male partner, (Utouh, 1995; Davidson & Cooper, 1992).

This situation is stressful and difficult to handle, more so, because neither the household nor the workplace offers necessary support. Even though women educationists may employ domestic help, the reliability of such help poses a major problem. Employment within households is considered to be a low-status job; as such houseboys and housegirls are constantly in search of better jobs. Consequently, the probability of them leaving without giving a notice or giving a short notice is very high. The poor economic conditions, which have contributed significantly in eroding the purchasing power of families, have contributed to an additional burden on some of the women educationists. This is in terms of forcing them to participate in informal sector income generating activities such as poultry keeping, dairy, sewing, retail and other business activities. The women educationists have to devote time and energy in ensuring the success for such informal income generating activities (Mbiliyi & Mbhughuni, 1990).

INCREASED RATE OF CHANGE

Institutions are facing rapid changes of a technological, economic, social and political nature and increased rate of competition. The challenge to administrators, female and male alike is to manage the change creatively and effectively and to ensure the survival and prosperity of the institutions they manage. This is not an easy task to handle and it is quite stressful. An interplay of several factors including the women's multiple roles, time

pressure, male dominated organizational culture, self-defeating styles of managing genetic composition and congenital factors as well as increased rate of change act as predominant sources of excessive stress of women educationists.

GENETIC CONGENITAL FACTORS

Certain physiological predispositions to (or cause of) stress are result of factors that develop before birth. One of these prenatal factors is the individual's genetic composition. For instance, the susceptibility to hypertension may be inherited traits (Greenwood & Greenwood, 1979). According to Greenwood, the entire physical and mental characteristics of each individual, including the whole range of strengths and weaknesses are controlled to a significant degree by genetic composition. The process of foetal development during pregnancy also predisposes women to stress. Injection by the childbearing mother of certain medications, drugs, poisons, alcoholic beverages may serve to produce congenital defects in the baby and the effects may last the lifetime of the child (Greenwood & Greenwood, 1979).

EFFECTS OF AND REACTIONS TO EXCESSIVE STRESS

EFFECTS

Poor Interpersonal Relationships

Executives are members of many organizations including a family. Any event, which affects them including stress also, affects their relationships with every other person in every organization of which they are members. All those members of organizations who must deal with the stressed executive therefore end up suffering some of the same adverse effects.

Lowered Effectiveness and Efficiency

Excessive stress disrupts thought processes and reduces general body stamina. It impairs clear creative and innovative thinking. It affects retrieval of information from the brain and renders one ineffective in decision-making and finding solutions to problems.

Stress-related Illnesses

Stress-related illnesses are essentially diseases of adaption that result from inappropriate responses by body-system to stressors. Such diseases can be of a physical or mental nature. Physical illnesses include ulcers, heart attack, palpitations, arthritis, asthma, constipation, insomnia, diabetes, backache and neck-ache. Mental illnesses or emotional disturbances include certain psychosis, certain neuroses and depression (Greenwood & Greenwood, 1979; Cranwell-Ward, 1990). Diseases of adaptation lead to restricted activity, incapacity to perform to normal levels, absenteeism and illness and may cause death to the victim.

Turnover

Those women educationists or administrators who cannot stand the heat in the stressful positions they occupy, get out of the positions so as to relieve themselves from excessive stress. Even though optimal stress level enables one to perform to the peak,

excessive stress is destructive and leads to stress-related illnesses, increased medical expenses. Lowered individual and organizational effectiveness and efficiency, poor interpersonal relationships and executive turnover. As such managing stress in ways, which prevents it from getting to extremes, is important to educationists or administrators.

STRESS REACTIONS

Anxiety

A common reaction to stress is anxiety. This may occur during the period of stress or sometimes after. In addition to anxiety, specific fears of things or event related to the stress, such as fear of a new performance appraisal system may occur. After such a stressful event, the individual may become and remain depressed for a considerable period. Stress may also leave the individual more vulnerable to minor stressors and initiators, for instance, in the aftermath of losing a desired promotion, a woman educationist may flair off when a worker or subordinate asks for assistance (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1983: 10). Perhaps the most serious damage done by stress-induced irritability, however, is that we often think minor irritations are the cause of the anger rather than recognizing them as the triggers that set it off.

Cognitive Reactions

Under stress, individuals sometimes find it difficult to concentrate or think clearly. An employee who completes a major report may write everything up, but fail to schedule a secretary to type it on time. This effect of stress on concentration can lead to inefficiency. After the stress is over, individuals may have unpleasant recollections of the event intruding in their thoughts, sometimes repeatedly.

Physiological Reactions

Stress sets off an automatic physiological reaction, the sympathetic nervous system that prepares the body for "flight" or "fight". Blood pressure and respiratory rate climb to better supply the body with oxygen; adrenalin is released; muscles are tensed and soon on. While these reactions were probably adaptive for our ancestors to fight the elements and saber-toothed tigers they are not well suited for organizational life today (Hofall & Freedy, 1993).

People can fight or run away from only very few of the workplace stressors. When stress is intense and especially when it is chronic, over-arousal can result in a variety of problems including migraine headaches, muscle aches, sleeplessness, trembling, muscle ties and urinary and bowel dysfunction. Of course, whether these bodily reactions will occur, and the seriousness of them if they do occur, depends on the severity and duration of the stress and on the nature of the individual (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1983).

Other Reactions

Reactions may occur in other behavioural dimensions. For example, it is not unusual to find a highly stressed good performer turn into a mediocre or poor performer. There may also be changes in motor (pacing or hand wringing), verbal (stuttering, rapid speech), or self-care (bathing, grooming) activities. In cases of very severe reaction, the stress even may bring about a period of "irrational" "bizarre", even schizophrenic-like

behaviour. Whether there is a severe reaction depends upon the individual and the intensity and duration of the stress event (Hobfall, 1989:513-524).

STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Self Analysis

Self-analysis involves determining one's own physical and physiological strengths and weaknesses as well as identifying the specific stressors and types of contexts, which constitute the greatest contributors to stress. If self-analysis reveals specific vulnerabilities, one has to take action to abate them (Greenwood & Greenwood, 1979). It is also helpful to adopt realistic expectations about oneself, one's job and people around oneself (Cranwell-ward, 1990).

Self-Management

According to Cranwell-ward (1990), the following principles are useful in optimizing stress levels to maximum performance:

- i. Use time effectively by avoiding time-wasters such as interruptions, procrastination and lack of organization.
- ii. Establish a clear system of priorities; including proactive and reactive tasks.
- iii. Develop action plans which convert goals into actions.
- iv. Delegate effectively and as much as you can.
- v. Identify time of the day when you work most effectively and schedule difficult work at that time.
- vi. Regularly review your progress and make improvement to your self-management.

Support Networks

Women educationists need to have people around them who can help in time of need. They need people who will accept them as they are. Somebody who will be reliable in a crisis period. If an individual executive has people whom he/she can discuss and intimate problems, situations are less likely to develop out of proportions (Davidson & Cooper, 1992).

Regular Exercise

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that vigorous exercise for someone in good physical condition helps to dissipate harmful effects of stress by burning up excessive adrenalin and preventing build-up of cholesterol in the arteries. (Warren & Toll, 1993). Best exercises include running, swimming, cycling, walking (Greenwood & Greenwood, 1979). However, it is important for everyone who is about to go on a rigorous programme of exercise to consult a doctor before doing so.

Balance Diet

The essential thing is for balanced diet, which suits us individually. Equally important is the consideration of what not to take, for healthy purposes, e.g. excessive salt, excessive sugar and too much alcohol.

Work/Home Balance

Employment seems to require full attention and commitment, which can result in our neglecting other important aspects of our lives such as family, health and friends. With-

out losing sight of the need to work effectively, it is useful to determine the extent to which we devote ourselves to our jobs and whether we are happy with that in the context of other important area of our lives (Warren & Toll, 1993).

CONCLUSION

Stress is part of the very fabric of life; it is not necessarily evil, but essential to life. Without it, there is no challenge in life. To take full advantage of it, women educationists/administrators need to understand it, adopt a positive stand to it and take a sound approach to managing it.

Stress can be effectively managed by adopting practical strategies including understanding and accepting ourselves, managing ourselves effectively, effecting a reasonable balance of time spent at work and at home and going for healthy diet and programmes of exercise. A way forward requires women educationists to be more assertive in their lives with the male dominated organizations and to participate more actively in the institutional politics.

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