

Stress Reduction through Innovative Training: Dancing with Stress

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Abstract

Occupational stress becomes more and more a problem in Romanian organizations. As high level of stress experienced by employees is reflected in reduced work productivity and absenteeism, just to mention the most important consequences. This article reviews the definition of organizational stress and proposes a method of stress mitigation: a training program to reduce stress through dance. Our survey of 120 participants that attended such a training showed that the overall level of stress decreases and the mindset regarding stress changes from negative to positive by the end of the training for the majority of the participants.

Keywords: Organizational Stress, Training, Dance, Positive Mindset, Negative Mindset

Introduction

Stress is part of modern everyday life for most people. A person's ability to mobilize in order to face, successfully or not, stress factors is called coping. The interest in how people manage to cope with stress has skyrocketed since the 1980s. In other words, stress management refers to all the means used to counter a stressful situation which is objectively or subjectively perceived by an individual.

In 2014, in a report of the European Commission (European Commission, 2015) it is stated that most common stressor for an adult in EU is caused by the workplace. Moreover, the stress in the workplace is the second health problem by frequency in Europe - after musculoskeletal disorders. What it is important to note is that nearly half of workers consider stress as a common phenomenon at their workplace (ESENER-2, 2015). So it is no surprise then that stress is responsible for nearly half the number of lost workdays annually and is estimated to represent an annual cost to society of 240 billion euros (European Commission, 2015). From a different perspective, there is also some evidence that sickness absence can be correlated with poor management style (Michie & Williams, 2003).

Due to the negative effects of the occupational stress, stress management is also an important topic for Romanian managers (Baciu, 2007). Romanian managers are interested to reduce its

effects and the impact of stress on the overall performance of the employees as to sustain the good performance of the companies and/or departments.

As workplace stress has a negative impact on productivity, this article will review some of the stress-reduction strategies that are documented in the scientific literature. Moreover, the article proposes a case study on the effects of a training program that was aimed at reducing stress. The training program involved breathing and relaxation techniques, and also dancing exercises to reduce stress and also help change the negative mindset regarding stress to a positive mindset. The objectives of the training program refer to gaining a better understanding the impact of stress on the mind and body, both the negative impact but also the positive effect. The authors also bring arguments both from theory and practice to support the training's efficiency.

Literature Review

This section will define stress and present some of the stress management and stress reduction strategies that have been previously been documented.

In order to reduce stress, we first need to have a clear understanding of the phenomenon. Hans Selye introduces and defines the concept of stress as a nonspecific general reaction of the organism to external action of the causative factors called "stress agents" (Szabo, Tache, & Somogyi, 2012).

Stress is a state of tension and discomfort. It occurs when we are not able to solve a difficulty that disrupts our lives. Mental stress is a particular case, registered under the concept of "general stress", triggered by certain psychological stress agents. It is important to note however, that there are two types of mental stress: positive stress (eustress) is caused by positive events and negative stress (distress), the most common, is caused by unpleasant situations and negative events (Kupriyanov & Zhdanov, 2014). Unfortunately, in most cases, stress tends to be registered as negative.

However, stress is not a disease in itself, but its intensive and frequency can lead to the emergence of mental and physical health problems. Work-related stress occurs when the demands of work environment exceed the capacity of employees to cope with them or keep them under control. The pressure of status of some positions in the company might improve an employee's performance and bring some work satisfaction. But when demands and pressures exceed certain limits, they lead to stress, and this situation is not favorable neither for employees nor for the enterprise.

There are quite a few strategies individuals could use to control their stress, but not many individuals know about them and/or actually use them. Managers could use training programs aimed at training people in organizations to use with greater frequency adaptive control strategies for occupational stress (Pitariu & Vîrgă, 2008). Moreover, in order to prevent reaching a high level of occupational stress, organizations should pay attention to the implementation of periodic stress diagnosis – assessing the stress levels perceived within the organization and implement accordingly measures to reduce the impact of stress on personnel (Pitariu & Vîrgă, 2008).

Moreover, stress relief can be learned through short educational training programs. In an extensive literature review of the occupational stress management field, Murphy (1984)

concludes that worksite stress management programs do help employees cope with stress and exert greater control over physiological systems which are reactive to stressors. There are of course advantages and disadvantages of various worksite stress management programs and a lot of improvement to be made. Along the same line, Michie & Williams (2003) conclude that many work related variables that are associated with stress are subject to change and they propose training and organizational approaches in order to increase the participation of employees in the decision making and problem solving processes, to increase support and feedback, and improve communication.

Van der Hek & Plomp (1997) have also reviewed a large number of studies on occupational stress management programs and conclude that is still impossible to determine which type of interventions or techniques are most effective. However, a large variety of studies shows evidence that organization-wide approaches show the best results on individual because such comprehensive programs have a strong impact on the entire organization.

Looking at actual stress reducing techniques and methods, a study involving employees with hypertension showed that that a brief workplace stress management intervention resulted in measurable better blood pressure and improved emotional health among hypertensive employees (McCraty, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 2004). Moreover, the results regarding lowering of the blood pressure and improvement in the emotional health could be measured three months after the end of the program.

Other studies regarding dance as stress reducing method, showed that the stress management strategies were significant in the short-term and some of the effects of the dance movement therapy does last over time (Bräuninger, 2012). Moreover, West et al. (2004) studied the effects of Hatha yoga and African dance on perceived stress and concluded that dance and yoga have been shown to produce improvements in psychological well-being. Both techniques (dance and yoga) reduced perceived stress and negative affect. Moreover, as dance involves music, music is also documented to reduce stress. In a study of the effects of music on stress hormones levels, McKinney et al (1997) showed that short series of guided imagery and music sessions may positively affect mood and reduce cortisol levels in healthy adults. Such changes in hormonal regulation may have health implications for chronically stressed people

Indeed, other studies show that mindfulness practices are related to stress reduction. Chiesa & Serretti, (2009) showed that a mindfulness-based meditation can reduce stress levels in healthy people. This clinically standardized meditation proved its efficacy for several mental and physical disorders. Mindfulness based mediation has a nonspecific effect on stress reduction and also it enhances spirituality values, having a possible specific effect compared to an intervention designed to be structurally equivalent to the meditation program.

Methodology

Keeping in mind the findings regarding the stress reduction strategies, methods and techniques presented above, the authors designed a stress mitigation program that was implemented in six organizations in Romania. This innovative training program which aims to reduce stress and to change the mindset on stress is entitled *dancing with stress*. It is dedicated to both employees and managers which are facing pressures of various intensities at the workplace.

For the current research, one of the used methodologies was action research. The research was part of the observed phenomenon, acting to change the setting and create solutions along with the participants. The aim of the activity was both to assess stress before and after the activity, and more specifically to decrease the negative mindset about stress and change it to a positive mindset.

The research monitored a group of 120 participants that were involved in the training activity: using dance and other techniques and exercises to reduce stress and change the mindset of stress. The participants were employees, managers and entrepreneurs in Romania, with ages between 18-65 years old, 91 females and 29 males. The training activity was developed and implemented in since September until December 2016.

The duration of the training program was four weeks, during which there was a weekly meeting with groups of maximum ten participants. In total, each participant was exposed to four ninety minutes sessions.

All the participants received a survey before and after the training. The objectives of the survey are three folded. One, identifying the problems experienced by the participants that are due to stress. Second, the assessment of the perceived stress and mindset regarding stress of the participants and third, to compare the mindset regarding stress before training and after training and the correlation of the change in mindset to the training activity.

There were developed two different questionnaires to measure the perceptions of stress, one for before and one for after the training. The tests identified the type of mindset (perception) that participants have regarding stress: positive or negative. Moreover, short interviews with some of the participants were documented at each session.

The main assumption of the questionnaires is that stress is not harmful to health by itself, but negative mindset about stress is. Therefore a negative mindset on stress will create more persistent and powerful symptoms of stress in the activity of the respondents. The researchers worked with this assumption because the latest approaches in health psychology argue that stress is not our enemy but rather that our beliefs about stress and the harm it provokes us (the negative mindset about stress) is what is truly harming our health state. However, stress can become a friend, and we helped our participants to use their stress triggered energy to increase their performance and have a healthy lifestyle.

The questionnaires applied methods such as self-knowledge: cognitive-behavioral exercises, which are acknowledged aspects of the relationship with the external pressures / interior. The training involved both discussion on themes such as: types of stress (positive-negative, professional-personal), effects of stress at body, emotional and behavioral levels, building healthy habits and also practical exercises. The training included techniques to reduce the actual and perceived stress by participants and also to reduce the negative symptoms associated with stress such as breathing techniques (main focus on abdominal breathing), progressive relaxation techniques (guided meditations for relaxation), body-scanning, mindfulness exercises and dancing exercises.

The questionnaires had both open and closed questions. The collected data was processed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel.

Results: training through dance as an effective strategy to reduce organizational stress

The results of our study highlight a series of problems that are due to stress. The participants elicited the following effects of their occupational stress: tiredness and exhaustion(mentioned by 40%), reduced thinking clarity (22%), decreased ability to concentrate (52%), decrease in intuition (9%), dramatic drop in long-term mental resilience (9%), indecision (10%), making easily avoidable mistakes (26%), forgetfulness (33%), insomnia (44%), decreased ability to anticipate the results of actions and orders (4%), irritability (66%), nervousness (52%), pessimism (10%), depression (11%) , anxiety (29%), loss of self-confidence (9%), cynicism (11%), lack of enthusiasm and motivation (22%), decreasing incentives to socialize and to communicate with others (31%), a feeling of isolation (9%), lower work productivity (90%), increased frequency of smoking, coffee and alcohol (60%), absenteeism(11%).

Most of the participants (89%) agreed that their management needs to take immediate action to reduce the stress level in the organization they work for. Moreover, for 60% of the participants, this training was the first stress reducing program they ever attended in their organization.

The results regarding the innovative training and use of dancing for stress reduction show that from the 120 participants, at the beginning of the training, 29% of the participants had a positive mindset about general stress while for 71% the mindset was intensely negative. After the four weeks of training, the mindset of 86% of the participants was positive for general stress while for 14% of the participants the mindset of general stress remained negative. Considering a particular kinds of stress, at the beginning of the program 21% had a positive mindset and 79% had a negative mindset whereas at the end of the training, 79% had a positive mindset and 21% had maintained the negative mindset on particular kinds of stress.

Our participants also made the point that they could not be the only employees that need to attend such trainings for the stress reduction to have a lasting effect at their particular workplace. Most of them argued (during the interviews) that stress is contagious, and that in interacting with stressed colleagues they cannot always maintain a calm state. Therefore, the approach to reduce stress needs to be implemented at organizational level.

Dance is a good technique for relief of general stress. In the group, 65% of the participants (90% of the women and 60 of the men) agreed that dancing is a good exercise that improves their overall mood and reduces the perceived level of stress. For some of the participants (60% of males and 20% of females), dance was a bit stressful at the beginning of the program, but by the end of the program, as they have learned the steps, their perception of dance changed, becoming an exercise that reduces overall level of stress and increasing the level of self-confidence.

In our training, dance was connected to a mindfulness state. More than 80% of the participants stated that learning and practicing simple mindfulness exercises improved their ability to concentrate and reduce stress. Of course, for a sustainable and permanent reduction in stress there must be some lifestyle adjustments, but the simple techniques communicated during the training program have left their mark on participants. The researchers also recommended to the managers of the participants in the training to implement other suggestions that emerged during the interviews with the participants.

At the end of this program, participants were able to differentiate between positive and negative aspects of stress, being more inclined to choose a positive perception of it. Moreover, 75% of the participants declared they will apply in everyday life the techniques to reduce stress-related symptoms and that will implement a personal plan to build a healthy habit, usually to help in managing the pressures of work and organizational stress.

Our results show that the program has at least a short term effect. The results were achieved after a 16-hour program, which included instruction in positive emotion refocusing and emotional restructuring techniques.

However, we do caution that this training needs to be integrated in full programs that aim to relieve stress at work. In order to obtain a sustainable reduction in the stress level of employees, many more factors need to be considered: organizational culture and organizational communication, work load and exposure to physical hazards in the work environment, and labor relations (e.g. intimidation and harassment).

Conclusions

The main objective of this study referred to identifying some of the strategies and techniques to reduce the workplace stress. After providing some of the relevant arguments from the literature, the study presents the results of own research regarding a training that aims to reduce stress through several techniques.

Based on our field work, we conclude that stress relief can be learned through short educational training programs. This conclusion it is also supported by early studies.

The training was design to include a mix of strategies and techniques that are documented to reduce stress. In the scientific literature there are studies that document dance, breathing exercises, meditation and mindfulness practices, to contribute to the decrease in the stress levels. The results of the training are in line with the scientific literature. The training program shows results because all the techniques involved have been proved efficient: mindfulness and relaxation exercises (Chiesa & Serretti, 2009), dance (West et al., 2004; Bräuninger, 2012), music and visualization (McKinney et al., 1997).

The authors argue the program they created has all the premises to reduce the overall level of stress for the participants and also change their mindset regarding stress. Moreover, the results support our claims. The managing of stressful situations changes for most participants and the symptoms caused by occupational stress were mitigated by applying specific techniques; and developing a positive mindset related stress. From enemy to friend, only by changing the mindset of a person about stress some benefits for their overall work performance could be noticed.

We also argue that the creation of specific programs aiming to reduce stress that could be implemented at organizational level could have a positive impact on the performance of the overall company.

As lines for further a study we shall track the performance of the companies and departments of the participants. We are in the process of collecting data on sick days and overall performance of the departments. Together with managers, the effects of the stress reducing programs will be evaluated in six months' time, when the stress level of the participants will be

re-evaluated, their stress mindset re-assessed and their current practice of the techniques and methods presented in the training program investigated. With a clear cost-benefit analysis more managers could be convinced to invest in stress reducing programs

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