

Finding Positives in Workplace Stress

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Abstract

This poster summarises the foundation of the Department of Labour 2003 Stress Guideline. It shows how the concept of 'adding positives to work' was introduced. It mentions some significant developments since 2003, and suggests some concepts of Positive Psychology that could have a role in workplaces.

DOL involvement with Workplace Stress.

DoL began work on workplace stress, fatigue and shiftwork after a Ministerial directive in 1993. This was prompted by:

- the death of a young man who had worked 3 consecutive 16 hour night shifts at a sawmill (his car went off the road on the way home) and
- the suicides of two trainee doctors.

The original focus was to write a scientific backstop about stress, fatigue and shiftwork. It was published in 1998.

- Shiftwork** – Several significant conferences on shiftwork 1992 – 1995 - a serious issue – good advice available.
- Stress** - less agreement was found. No agreement about a definition. Commentaries on stress – fuzzy/confused.
- However, evidence pointed to strong relationships between the nature of work and health outcomes (See the three panels to the right).

Three significant stress cases were taken in the **Employment Court** (not by DoL) from 1998 – 2000. A Probation Officer, and a police photographer were awarded large sums. Significant case law resulted.

Changes to the HSE Act in 2003.

In 2003 the Minister for Labour directed DoL to develop practical Guidance for employers about managing Stress and Fatigue:

- An Implementation Advisory Panel (IAP) was set up by the Minister to oversee these changes.
- DoL referenced scientific literature (as in the 3 panels), its 1998 publication, the HSE Act and case law.
- Parallel developments in Australia, the UK and at the ILO referred to the same literature as the DOL Guideline.
- The IAP accepted the idea that, to address stress, it was important to add good things to work as well as take bad things out of it.
- A Table in the Guideline suggested 12 elements of healthy work.

Elements of Healthy work

Based on research findings like the ones cited and standard health, safety and ergonomics principles, 12 elements of healthy work were presented:

- There is a balance of effort and rest
- There is a variety of tasks, interest and stimulation
- There is a sense of personal control
- Mechanisms exist to address poor workplace relationships
- There is good communication
- Workplace hierarchies promote confidence
- Workplace collaboration is effective
- Healthy and safe workplace design and environment
- There is good change management
- There are appropriate rewards
- The workplace is supportive
- There are opportunities for personal progress

A tool was provided for employers/ees to construct a dialogue about the quality of work (Copy available). It asked the following questions for each of the 12 elements:

- What is the evidence for the presence or absence of the feature in the workplace?
- What is the extent to which this feature can be controlled by the (a) employer and (b) employee?
- What actions are needed to promote this feature – by Employers and Employees?

Karasek et. al. 1981. Heart Disease vs demand & control.

Results of a survey of 1600 Swedish men, 40 – 64 years old, selected at random from the workforce. Criteria for inclusion: developing 2 of 4 symptoms of heart disease over 4 years. Results tabulated against the **demands** of work and the degree of **control** a person had at work. Note the interaction in the top right cell.

	% men developing symptoms of CVD	Decision Latitude (Control)	
		High	Low
Psychological	High	2.8% E.g: Farmer, Physician	20% E.g: Waitress, Sewing machinist
Demands	Low	0.0% E.g: Architect, Programmer	3.2% E.g: Watchman, Miner

Reference: Karasek R , Baker D, Marxer F, Ahlbom A and Theorell T. Job decision latitude, job demands and cardiovascular disease: A prospective study of Swedish men. *AJPH*. July 1981. Vol. 71, No. 7. pp 694 – 705.

Karasek and Theorell. 1977. Prevalence of Depression.

Demand, control and support were measured against the prevalence of depression in a workplace population. Note the difference from good work to bad.

% reporting depression	Decision Latitude						
	High		Medium		Low		
Support	Hi	Lo	Hi	Lo	Hi	Lo	
Demand	Low	9	17	10	19	23	32
	Med	6	13	12	22	28	36
	High	9	15	8	25	27	41

Reference: Karasek R and Theorell T. *Healthy Work*. Basic Books. New York 1990.

Whitehall II: Effects of workplace hierarchies. 1994.

The Whitehall II study followed the health of more than ten thousand British Civil Servants in central government departments in London for nearly two decades. The data accumulated was person specific, offering advantages over studies based on group averages at a single moment. The age standardised mortality, over a ten year period, among males aged 40 to 64 was about **3.5 times greater** for those in the clerical and manual grades, compared to senior administrators.

A significant mortality gradient - suggestive of a dose response relationship – was found for a number of diseases. None of the people studied were living in poverty and all experienced similar work environments. 'Top people' who smoked were much less likely to die from smoking related diseases than 'bottom people'.

The summary conclusion of the Whitehall II study is that **something** operates **powerfully** to influence health, and is correlated with hierarchy per se. It operates on a **middle class** of people and its effects are **large**.

Reference: Why are some people healthy and others not? The determinants of health of populations. Eds. Evans R G, Barer M L, Marmor T R. Aldine de Gruyter, New York. 1994.

Subsequent developments

Scientific literature continued to come to DOL's notice and added to the precision with which DoL could speak about stress. Two sources that were thought particularly relevant were from Peter Hart and Peter Cotton, two Australian Psychologists and Dianne Gardner, a Psychologist based in Massey University in Auckland. Brief summaries of their thoughts are given. Note that Cotton and Hart presented 15 conclusions in all. The rest may be seen at the website:

www.osh.dol.govt.nz/publications/stress/index.asp

Peter Hart and Peter Cotton¹:

- Individual levels of distress and morale are independent; an individual's level of distress does not determine their level of morale or vice versa.
- Individual distress and morale have distinct sets of determinants.
- Because of this, different interventions may be required to address reported low morale or high distress problems.
- Personality is the strongest determinant of individual distress.
- Organisational climate is the strongest determinant of morale.
- Organisational climate is the strongest determinant of individual distress, once personality has been allowed for.
- Organisational experiences common to all workplaces are typically more 'stressful' for **everyone in an organization** than operational experiences ('stressors').

Taken together, these conclusions locate considerable responsibility for workplace stress in the way the organisation is managed.

Dianne Gardner²

"There is a need to identify and address both challenges and threats. Both of are stressors but in different ways, and different strategies are needed for dealing with each. My research shows:

- that stress and the enjoyment of work can coexist.
- that many 'stressors' may be matched by a corresponding 'satisfier' (e.g. 'difficult cases' with 'solving difficult cases'; 'unhappy customers' with 'satisfied customers').
- However there appears to be only stress and no satisfaction associated with quantitative work overload, and no stress but only satisfaction associated with the feeling of doing a worthwhile job.
- Whether a demand is seen as a threat or a challenge depends on the resources available to deal with it.
 - A threat:** demands are perceived to exceed personal, administrative and organisational resources or the ability to cope.
 - A challenge:** demands are seen to match coping abilities and the resources available.

Thus my preferred definition of stress and an alternative model:"

"A relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" Lazarus & Folkman. Stress, appraisal and coping. Springer. New York. 1984.

An alternative model for Stress.



Based on commentaries like these, and after consultation with selected individuals and groups, a revision of the 2003 Guideline was published in 2009 as a 2 page pamphlet (copies are available).

¹ Occupational Wellbeing and Performance: A review of Organisation Health Research. Cotton P and Hart P. Australian Psychologist, Vol. 38 No. 2. July 2003.

² McGowan, J, Gardner D, and Fletcher R. Positive and negative affective outcomes of occupational stress. NZJ Psych. Vol. 35. No. 2. 2006.

Key **new** messages were:

Morale and distress are more precise concepts than stress – and are thus likely to lead to better precision in dealing with problems.

Organisational climate – is a powerful determinant of distress **and** low morale.

Challenges and threats – need to be dealt with differently.

General agreement – exists about only two stressors:

- (1) Work overload is toxic. (2) Nobody feels bad about doing a worthwhile job. All other stressors can be viewed either positively or negatively.

Satisfaction with outcomes & Positive Psychology

Chris Peterson believes the key message of positive psychology is:

We need each other' or "Other people matter'.

This is related to the age old principle of 'Service to others'. PP therefore seems to suggest that self interest is legitimised when other people are put first.

So . . . does this mean the following?

Positive Psychology in the workplace, generally:

Human limitations and dependencies: The human brain can contain one idea at any one moment, it can switch quickly between 5+/- 2 ideas, but to develop, grow and contribute, it needs to rub up against other minds? **But**, can this occur fruitfully in an environment that is not congenial? If there is an attitude of "We need each other" will this rubbing occur more fruitfully? What does PP have to say about that?

Positive personal experiences: What would be the consequences for organisations that deliberately set out to ensure that employees had positive experiences at work? (Perhaps as is illustrated in the box 'Task Focused Coping,' where the positive attributes of engagement, persistence, positive thoughts, reservation of judgement, and humour are present?) What does PP have to say about creating positive experiences like these?

Positive thinking (optimism): Should it be taught everywhere? (In the sense of simply telling people about the issues rather than requiring it to be inculcated.) The diagram suggests that emotion focused coping can be important in having an enjoyable job.

Positive Psychology for the CEO – Morale seeping downwards:

Morale: Is the prime responsibility of the CEO to create high morale, on the grounds that, from it, everything else will follow, including the ability to ride over distress and to be engaged in one's work?

Empathy: When defined as 'interested in knowing how it is for others, without offering sympathy or a solution', empathy implies that a problem is 'a solution waiting in the wings'. Is a prime task of the CEO the exercise of empathy, in the expectation that his/her exercise of it will encourage and stimulate its exercise by everyone in the organisation, with the ensuing positive results?

Positive Psychology for individuals – exercising strengths:

Positive Psychology has identified that people can have both **Character Strengths** and **Personal Strengths**. A key finding of Positive Psychology is that when people exercise the former they are happier. **Character** is about who you are and what you stand for, but does not imply that a person makes an output.

Personal Strengths, in contrast, are about what we do, instinctively, with near perfect performance 95% of the time and not much effort.

Does this mean that we need to develop our Character Strengths before we should exercise our Personal Strengths, on the grounds that **before we do we have to know how to be**? Before you can be productive, you have to know what you're doing.

Conclusions

Positive psychology offers a way to present fundamental truths about how people can relate to and support each other, with the implication that at work the whole can become greater than the sum of the parts.

Its key conclusions counter nostrums of self help.

It reflects wisdom going back centuries but its contemporary language makes it accessible.