

Stress Management: An Effective Methodology to Maintain Healthy Environment in Organization

Prof. Lawly Das

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, MODERN COLLEGE, COMMERCE, WING OF COMPUTER & BUSINESS STUDIES, SHIVAJINAGAR PUNE-5

lawly_das@yahoo.in

ABSTRACT

Stress is one of the most talked about issues in the recent times. Every individual, of any gender or any age group come under the envelope of stress. However I would limit my study to Occupational Stress / Organizational Stress / Work – Related Stress (as it is commonly known as).

Organizational Stress is a pertinent issue of growing concern in both the developed / industrialized and developing countries due to significant progress taking place in today's fast paced modern world. The considerable developments being **GLOBALISATION** & the **CHANGING NATURE OF WORK & THE WORKFORCE**.

The study thrusts on the various facets of stress and on individual's ability to adapt to stressful circumstances irrespective of rapid and drastic socio – economic transitions. It is only when employees (themselves) along with the invaluable support provided by the Management to these employees by understanding and setting effective stress management techniques, that there would be remarkable uptrend seen in the qualitative and quantitative productivity of the workforce as also build a strong, positive, happy and contented organizational culture.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

According to **John S. Pingram & Steven Di Pilla**:

“Stress can be said to be experienced when the demands of the work environment exceed the employees' ability to cope with (or control) them”.

Stress is one of the major problems faced by the working population in the recent times, many of whom are juggling between work and home. It's no wonder that stress is on the rising trend.

Organizational stress defines an individual's physiological, emotional, cognitive and behavioral reaction to some of our extremely daunting work environment. When people experience work related stress, they get tensed, distressed and their inability to cope with it causes further stress. Workers who are stressed are more likely to be unhealthy, poorly motivated, less productive and less safe at work. The organizations are also less likely to be successful in a competitive market.

Due to Globalization and changes in the nature of work and workforce, people living in both the developing as well as the industrialized nations are becoming more prone to work related stress. Cultural differences at workplace, occupational risks, changing mentality of human mindset which is now more addicted to acquiring material wealth / money, the fast changing workforce demography (male vs. female and old vs. young) as well as the daily routine tasks which at times are not only time consuming but also physically & emotionally taxing are some such factors causing stress in our modern world.

Especially in the developing economies, the work related stress is quite prominent because of the existence of some of the broader spectrum of problems viz. gender inequality, rate of illiteracy, poor health & sanitation, poor nutrition, precarious living & working conditions and increase in general poverty.

Furthermore, with the recent dwindling economic scenario worldwide, an increased rate of unemployment and higher risk of job insecurity; the stress is continually rising.

However the definition of stress varies from person to person as per their adaptive capacity of the mind & body. Stress is welcome & helpful, if handled positively. However if the demands are too debilitating, stress is harmful. In the words of **John S. Pingram & Steven Di Pilla**, "Stress is both good & bad. It is not the events that determine if we are stressed; it is our reaction to them. Stress is a demand made on the body's capacities. If our capacities are sufficient, we respond well. If they aren't, we give away soon".

Stress is actually harmful, when it reaches an intensity which impairs our day to day activities.

INTRODUCTION TO STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress Management is one of the most vital processes which is the key to a happy and successful life in modern society. Though life provides numerous demands which are difficult to handle at times, however stress management provides a number of ways to manage anxiety and maintain an overall well-being.

Many stress management techniques are available, some for use by health practitioners and others for self-help, which may help an individual to reduce stress, provide positive feelings of being in control of one's life and promote the general well-being.

The Stress Management interventions target the individuals rather than the organizations. It is no doubt a good management practice which brings in psychological content and a healthier and a happier work environment.

Organizations which appear to be directly and deliberately addressing the management of occupational stress are in fact providing a conducive working environment to their employees. They help every individual to help themselves. This is also one of their explicit goals for their employee support programmes.

STRESS ON THE JOB

Job stress is intrinsic to the job itself, where never ending demands and pressures cannot be escaped by employees. It poses a serious threat not only to the health of employees, but also to the health of organizations. It arouses a sense of depression, anxiety, overwork, ambiguity and workplace conflicts in those who succumb to stress very easily.

It is often been stated that to perform a job, a certain amount of stress is always desirable. Qualities like motivation, alertness of mind, positive mindset, physical and mental vigor are some of the beneficial stress stimulants. These stressors are an aid to learning new skills and contributing towards being an efficient and a productive worker. Thus we can deduce that stress in smaller quantity is

always good for people, provided they know their limitations and set realistic and achievable goals. Else, nothing can stop us from being a physical and an emotional victim of stress.

As per the survey carried out by the ESIS, Inc. - Global Risk Control Services of USA on Occupational Health & Safety,

- 1 out of every 4 employees consider their jobs as number one stressor in their lives.
- 3 out of every 4 employees believe that today's workers have more on – the – job stress than a generation ago.
- Problems at work are more closely related to health complaints than what financial complaints or family conflicts used to be earlier.

According to the 2001 study, around 88 % of the people suffer from mental and psychological ailments due to their poor / non – performance at work because of the level of stress they experience at their respective workplaces. However if the management help employees deal with stress; then there's a decline seen in the reporting of emotional and physical ailments, higher worker morale & higher productivity.

TYPES OF STRESS

- **Economic Scenario:** As companies are forced to trim down, employees are afraid of losing their jobs thus spending their valuable energy into worrying rather than engaging in productive work.
- **Workplace Diversity:** Due to Globalization, there is a frequent intermingling of employee population from different cultural set up & communication patterns. People often feel their personal space being invaded by “outsiders”. With several sensitive issues arising out of cultural differences, disturbance and employee frustration is bound to creep in.

- **Changing Male – Female Dynamics:** Women entering the workforce have posed a challenge further. The different work motivations and work techniques often create confusion and conflict between men & women.
- **Dealing with Change:** Change is inevitable. It is the only thing which is constant in this Universe. Many people resist changes both at the personal front and at workplace. Fear of the unknown and fear of change contribute to the rise in the level of pressure.

CAUSES OF JOB STRESS / STRESSFUL CHARACTERISTICS OF WORK

Job stress results from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work. However due to differences in individual characteristics such as personality traits and coping style, perception about job related stress also differ from person to person. Following are the few causes cited below:

- **Job Design / Content:** Monotonous, repetitive & meaningless tasks; lack of variety; work overload or underload, working under time pressures; underuse of skills; inflexible working schedules; long and sometimes unpredictable working hours; poorly designed shift systems.
- **Management Style:** Lack of participation of employees in the decision making process; lack of control over work; poor organizational communication channel; lack of employee friendly policies.
- **Interpersonal Relationships:** Inadequate, inconsiderate and unsupportive supervision; poor relationship with superiors and / or co - workers; violence and harassment; physical or social isolation; no agreed procedures of employee grievance redressal system.
- **Work Roles:** Role ambiguity; conflicting roles within the same job; unrealistic goal setting; donning too many responsibilities at the same time.
- **Career Concerns:** Career stagnation; job insecurity; lack of promotion avenues; poor pay; work of 'low social value'; unfair performance evaluation systems; rapid change in business dynamics for which workers are unprepared.

- **Environmental Conditions:** Unpleasant physical conditions like overcrowding; noise, air pollution; ergonomic problems.
- **Organizational Culture:** Poor communication; poor leadership; lack of clarity about organizational objectives and structure.
- **Home-Work Interface:** Conflicting demands between work and home; lack of support to deal with personal problems at work and vice-versa.

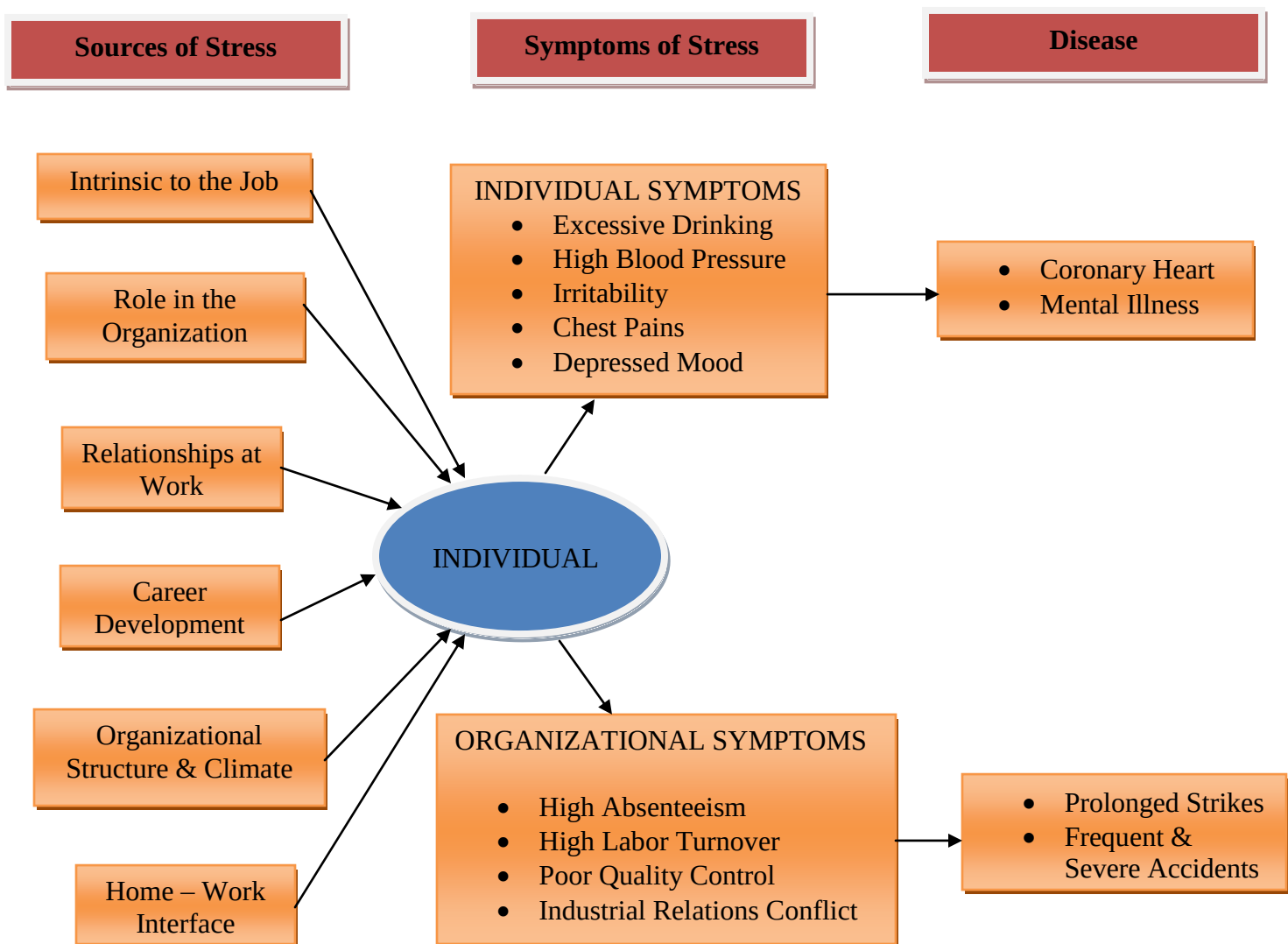


Figure 1: Cooper's Model of the Dynamics of Work Stress (Adapted from Cooper & Marshall, 1976)

EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION & THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

Globalization is defined as “the total world economic activity carried out as a result of liberalization of trade and elimination of the roadblocks to the transfer of capital, goods and services across the national border” (Rantanen, 2000).

Though Globalization has remarkable positive sides at both the National and at the International level, however it isn't without its grey areas as well.

- It has increased the gap between the rich and the poor, particularly in developing countries.
- Developing countries face the challenge of dealing with the changing nature of work and workforce due to increasing fragmentation of labor market; increased job insecurity; long and irregular working hours; low pay; exploitation of labor force based on gender discrimination, age discrimination, religion / caste / creed / regional / ethnic discrimination; along with the obsolete and new technologies.
- A more globalized workplace brings in culture shock amongst those transferred to new countries, or from a rural to an urban setting, or displacement due to mega – mergers and downsizings.

And all these bring a huge responsibility as well as the expectation on the workers to deal with:

- Increased demand of learning new skills
- Adapt to new methods of working
- Pressure on demand for increased quantum and quality of work
- Increasing stiff competition
- Less time for socializing

When workers are unable to handle these demands, work related stress slowly creeps in which not only affect the physiological and psychological well being of the workers but also affects the industrial

performance due to increased absenteeism and labor turnover, impairing performance and productivity, increased accident rates, frequent training of substitute workers and so on, thus damaging the organization's image both among its workers and externally.

WORLD HEALTH STATISTICS

According to a 2001 study conducted by the ESIS, Inc. – Global Risk Control Services:

- About 73% of the workers stated that their performance in the workplace was affected by the level of stress they experienced.
- 40% have experienced fatigue due to job related stress or exertion.
- 35% have stress related headaches.
- 53% have reported back and neck pain.

According to a 2003 World Health organization (WHO) estimates:

- Worldwide only 5 – 10 % of the workers in the developing countries and 20 – 50 % of the workers in the industrialized countries have adequate access to Occupational Health Services. Work related issues are barely dealt with even where they are available due to ignorance or lack of awareness amongst the workers or lack of employer initiatives.
- About 75 % of the world's labor force lives and works in developing countries.
- 20 – 50 % of the workers in industrialized countries are subjected to hazardous exposures at work.
- 50 % of workers in industrialized countries judge their work to be mentally demanding.
- Poor occupational health and reduced working capacity of workers may cause economic loss up to 10 – 20 % of the GNP of a country. Also globally, occupational deaths, diseases and illnesses account for an estimated loss of 4 % of the GDP.

CONSEQUENCES OF JOB STRESS ON HEALTH

Stress affects different people in different ways. The experience of stress can cause variety of physiological, emotional, cognitive and behavioral reactions. The early signs of job stress are easy to recognize. However effects of job stress on chronic diseases are difficult to identify because chronic diseases take a long time to develop. Some such consequences of work related stress are as follows:

- Increased heart rate and blood pressure
- Sweating
- Fear
- Irritation
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Demotivation
- Reduced attention span
- Forgetfulness
- Reduced problem solving and learning ability
- Reduced actual productivity
- Mood swings and sleep disturbances
- Stomach ailments and headache
- Increasing smoking, alcoholism and drug use
- Making errors
- Disturbed relationships with family and friends
- Stress may also affect the immune system impairing people's ability to fight infections

Thus when in stress, people find it difficult to maintain a healthy balance between work and family.

WORK HAZARD – STRESS – HEALTH RELATIONSHIP

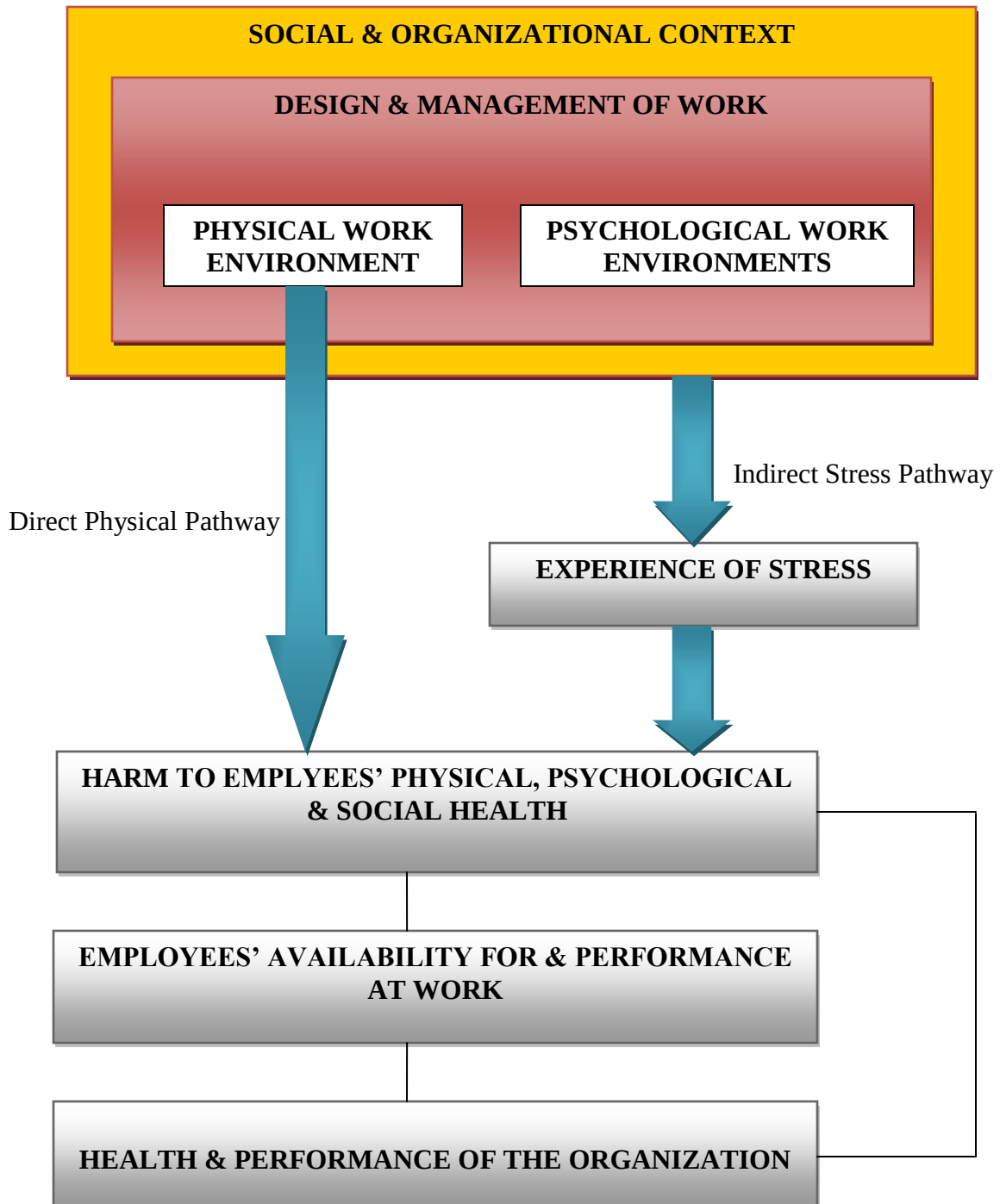


Figure 2: The Pathway of Hazard – Stress – Health Relationship

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRESS, HEALTH & PRODUCTIVITY

A healthy organization is one with low rates of illness, injury and disability and also being competitive in the marketplace. A sound organizational culture goes a long way in determining both healthy, low stress work and high level of productivity.

This culture is reflected in the right attitude of the staff, their shared beliefs and value systems and approved ways of behaving at work. It is exemplified by:

- Recognition of employees for good work performance
- Opportunities for career development
- Worker education and training
- Enhanced occupational health provision
- Creating and maintaining open lines of communication
- Reasonable level of socializing and teamwork

ACTION PLANS TO REDUCE JOB STRESS

There are a number of ways by which the risk of work related stress can be reduced. These include:

- Equitable distribution of work
- Prioritize tasks
- Offer relevant training courses to the employees
- Job rotation and job enrichment to prevent monotony and repetition of work
- Provide personal protection devices to workers to avoid physical risks at workplace
- Arrange regular team building activities
- Stimulate and reward team work and skill development
- Flexi work time / Work from home facility
- Make transportation services convenient
- Use of computers for skill development

- Encourage innovation and employee's participation at workplace
- Provide readily available resources
- Provide reasonable shift schedules to allow adequate time for sleep each day
- Clearly define worker's roles and responsibilities to avoid any future role ambiguity
- Reduce uncertainty about career development and future employment prospects
- Job redesigning to reduce incidence of physical hazards
- Improve equipments used at work and physical working conditions
- Healthy use of technology
- Extension of career ladders
- Set realistic goals and priorities
- Take short breaks in between work
- Do not procrastinate
- Give a sympathetic ear to employee grievances
- Maintain a sense of humor and remain cheerful to keep tensions at bay
- Regularize monitoring of employee satisfaction and health

MANAGING JOB STRESS: A STEP WISE APPROACH

There is no specific prescription to prevent work related stress, yet there are few guidelines for the prevention of stress in organizations. This will initiate in building a motivated workforce who will be safe, satisfied and secured in their jobs. Prevention of work related stress therefore is an important assignment which follows a stepwise process depicted below:

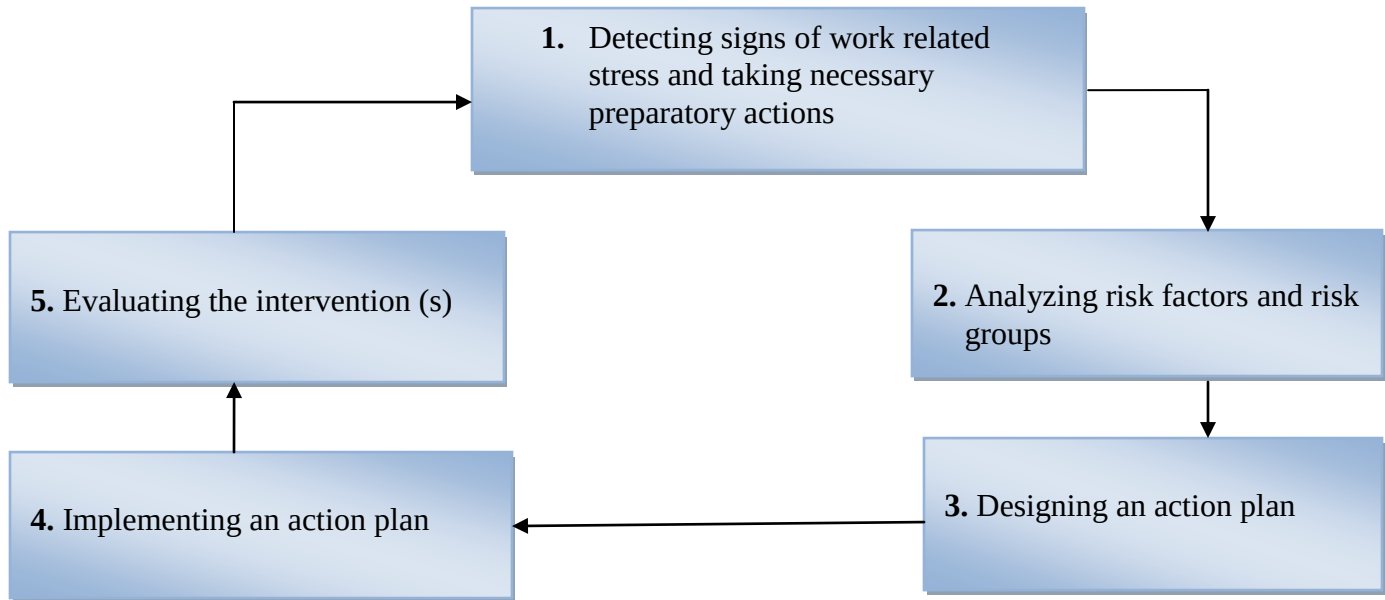


Figure 3: Process of Stress Prevention

CONCLUSION

Work related stress is a current and future health and safety issue and as such should be dealt in a systematic way as other health and safety issues. Management can and should provide invaluable aid to employees and themselves by understanding and setting effective stress management techniques.

If employers and employees together work towards work related stress and towards building an improved quality of working life, this will not only ensure a healthy and a productive workforce but also ensure sustainable economic benefits for the company and the nation as a whole.

Therefore it becomes inevitable that the workplace is being continuously monitored for stress problems which when identified will only help in dealing with them and promoting a healthy, happy, safe, peaceful and a developing work environment. We all must abide with the dictum “**A GOOD MANAGEMENT IS STRESS MANAGEMENT**”.

REFERENCES

1. Research Report on 'Stress in the Workplace' by John S. Ingram & Steven Di Pilla dated April 2007
2. Research on "Work Related Stress" by European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
3. NIOSH (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) / <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage.html>
4. WHO (World Health Organization) / http://www.who.int/occupational_health
5. International Labor Organization [ILO] (1986) Psychosocial Factors at Work: Recognition and Control