

# SASMA Portal 2011

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## People functioning in a crisis situations - Dorota Michura

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Every day we make a dozens of decisions. Less important, such as whether to eat the morning sandwich, or maybe have a quick coffee. Sometimes we are facing more difficult choices. How to save a company in a crisis situation? What kind of actions we should take to reduce the risk of an error and to minimize losses that can affect our business? While, in the first case, the solution does not require from us great energy input, whereas in the latter, we have to reckon with a serious costs. Such crises situations switch us to an emergency mode almost automatically. We begin to operate under stress. Can it be a stimulant for us? Or is it always a synonymous of the failure probability increase? What affects the stress strength and who will cope better with such situation?

### THE STRESS STRENGTH

Imagine that you are a mid-level employee. For years you work for the same company. Your responsibilities are simple, monotonous, repetitive and unchanging. Every morning you sit at the same desk and fill the sheet with the same columns of numbers. You have a coffee break, then again, you sit down and fill out ... boredom. The overwhelming boredom, right? After some time, you will probably feel professionally burnt out. You will have a sense of emptiness and futility. Simple operations will grow to enormous level, you will make mistakes more often. In the mornings you'll notice that it is more difficult to get up and move out of your bed. That sleep does not bring a relief cause you wake up and again feel so tired. Although in theory, your work is not too demanding you still complain about the lack of an energy. Finally, you can catch a depression. Why?

Paradoxically because of that the stress level that you feel is too low. Man is constructed so that he needs a certain dose of adrenaline, precisely in order to work better. Incentives that will stimulate him to life. The moderate stress is therefore normally required. And here appears the first staircase. Because what does it actually mean a moderate? Everyone has a personal response threshold. For each it can mean something completely different. Coping

with stress is similar to cope the pain. Some people faint at the sight of the blood and scream when they prick with a pin, others calmly pull out of their foot a deeply planted piece of the broken glass, without any grimace on their face. We feel an optimal level of stress when "something" is happening from time to time, but it is not for us - subjectively- very incriminating.

If we sway the other way, when stress rises excessively, it is more likely that we will have to reckon with such ailments as:

- general physical tension of the body, which can appear for example with abdominal pain, paleness, fast heartbeat, dry mouth, increased sweating, shivers, feeling of weakness, trembling hands, legs, joint pain, back, neck and other body parts, speaking difficulties, nervous tics, high and nervous laugh, teeth gnashing;
- impaired coordination, blurry vision;
- slow reflex- which is often combined with a sense of "unreal";
- anxiety and confusion in the head;
- inability to concentrate and thin normal;
- significant reduction in efficiency.

## **STRESSORS INFLUENCE**

How we can handle in a situation of stress depends on several factors. The most basic is the same stressor, a stimulus or situation that causes stress.

We can identify three stressors categories:

- **Disasters**, accidents affecting a larger group of people simultaneously (e.g. natural disasters-floods, fires). Usually appearing suddenly and are unpredictable. They are extremely burdensome for the psyche. They require enormous efforts to deal with stress.
- **Personal stressors** - related to an individuals. These are events such as, for example, job loss or the birth of a child. While sometimes they can be foreseen, without a doubt they have a very strong influence. Sometimes it is more difficult to cope with personal stressors than with natural disasters because of the lack of support.
- **Peripheral stressors** - the daily life troubles. Small, persistent, annoying problems. These includes for example the sound of road works during the operation. If we force to ignore them and they remain unresolved, they can result in greater damage than natural disasters or personal stressors.

The more stressors at one time, the bigger they are (objectively and also subjectively, because we have a different endurance limit), they last longer and the more they are sudden, unexpected and new to us - the worse we act. It is more difficult to get over and we make bad decisions more often.

## RESOURCES, WHAT SUPPORTS US IN A STRESS SITUATION

It's easier and faster to defeat stress for people with high and stable self-esteem and a great sense of attribution (perpetration). A little like a self-fulfilling prophecy, such person believes he/ she can cope, and indeed it is easier for her to focus on problem solving. Human physical characteristics are also playing a significant part, such as strength or health (when we are tired and weakened our psyche is more fragile.) It is significant to have close relatives support in difficult times (sometimes simple and short chat about the problem significantly reduces the tension) and our material information and educational resources (if you know precisely what we should do in a crisis situation the stress levels will drop significantly).

Summarizing, the stress will go smoothest way in case of such a person who beliefs in himself , who is open, flexible and self-confident. To the large extent it should be a person who has realized general need for security (financial stability and satisfying relationships with others). A person who has positive experience from the past in dealing with problems, or the one that is prepared for a specific stressful events (for example, who have participated in the tests and exercises simulating specific crisis situations).

## STAGES OF STRESS – THE MOMENT WE ARE STARTING TO ACT

For many years in the psychology is functioning the concept General Adaptation Syndrome - GAS, which is the overall reaction scheme in a difficult, stressful situation. Its author, Hans Selye divided it into three successive stages:

- **ALARM REACTION STAGE.** The first strong reaction to an appearance of a foreign factor. This leads to physiological changes (described above) arising as a result of many biochemical changes in the body.

If the stressor is extremely strong, we will probably respond with a sudden shock and denial. The shock may be revealed either by a violent emotional reaction (screaming, crying, anger) or as immobility and bewilderment. The denial is that it does not fully reaches us what has happened. Our mind defends itself against threatening information. We do not trust this, we are cut off. When this kind of stupor passes our mood swings, which can also disorganize our daily lives. At this stage, therefore, we will not be able to perform any tasks.

- **STAGE OF RESISTANCE** – a time when your body gets used to the new, harmful conditions. Physiological processes are back to normal. Emotions are calmed, but we can still feel the tension, annoyance, concern. We are able to take constructive action and focus on problem solving.
- **THE STAGE OF EXHAUSTION** – it appears when the action of the stressor increases, and we do not find a way to deal with the situation. The body is no longer able to defend themselves. Multiplied signs of an alarm return. This leads to exhaustion, depression, and in extreme cases-death.

## TYPES OF STRESS REACTION AND THEIR DURATION



**Acute reaction to stress lasts from 24 to 48 hours.** On the third day the symptoms are minimal. It only appears when the stressor is very tough (e.g. in case of disasters) and our resources are limited. It is characterized by symptoms of panic, mind confusion, distraction, serious sleep disorders, suspiciousness and a periodic inability to perform daily tasks. Professional help - such as crisis intervention concerns providing immediate assistance, providing a shelter outside the place of an event, sometimes pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy during later stage of maintenance.

**The normal reaction to stress** (into which an acute stress reaction may transform). It may also occur spontaneously without prior acute phase - usually lasts several weeks. In this situation a normal conversation with a friend can help. If the stress involves more than a few people (e.g. employees of the same company) it is necessary to conduct a reconstruction (debriefing) - to share in a group their memories, feelings, thoughts, description of their reactions. Then should familiarize with regularities in traumatic stress response and ways of coping with such situation.

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, (PTSD)** is a set of specific symptoms that may occur after surviving an extreme, traumatic event. In the post-traumatic stress syndrome, there are three bundles of symptoms:

- excessive arousal: persistent expectation of danger (intensive indicative reflex focused very heavily on incentives although a little reminding of the trauma), signs of physiological arousal, aggression;
- intrusion: an inability to forget traumatic events. Nightmares or intrusive memories, which are experienced as if it is still repeated in the present; overwhelming anxiety;
- tightening: apathy, in which a man falls after giving up, persistent avoidance of people, situations, places that are associated with trauma, depression.

PTSD lasts at least several weeks (over a month). However its effects may persist for a life time. Untreated, can lead to permanent personality disorders and even death. Therefore, in the treatment of these problems professional help is absolutely essential.

## SUMMARY

A small dose of stress is essential for the proper functioning of people. We need the stimulation to be able to evolve and do our job properly. Determining a single, optimal and common to all level of stress is impossible. Two people subjected to the same stressor may react radically differently. It all depends on their life-history, experience in dealing with difficult situations and the resources they have. A person with low self-esteem, relying on "blind chance" without the support of relatives, sick, or "just" overloaded is more vulnerable to the occurrence of stronger signs of stress, which will last longer with her. Such a person may not cope with the challenges.

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