Teaching a Comprehensive Course on Stress and Work

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Abstract
Given the growing literature on and documented importance of workplace stress, it is suggested that this topic deserves more than a casual mention in introductory management classes. The current article reviews a comprehensive course dedicated to the phenomenon of stress in the work setting, which addresses issues such as theories, demands and stressors, and individual and organizational consequences and coping methods. The structure and learning objectives of the course are also detailed, along with some future directions for incorporating work stress into other aspects of management education.

Keywords
stress, work, course, instruction, theories

Twenty years ago, Harvey Gittler (1991) wrote an opinion piece for the Wall Street Journal titled “Bless Job Stress.” In this brief article, he suggested that work is inherently stressful, that he and his colleagues never worried about the stress they experienced or felt that it was harmful, and that all those

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employees concerned about stress on the job should quit immediately so that “the thousands of unemployed people out there, who are tired of the stress of unemployment, can join the ranks of the employed who are thankful for stress and a paycheck.” Although he certainly has a point regarding the difficulty of unemployment, the years since have provided extensive information—both anecdotal and well researched—to suggest that stress on the job can have significant deleterious effects on both individuals and the organizations that employ them (e.g., Brun & Lamarche, 2006; European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000; Goetzel et al., 1998). If we accept those findings, an important question (and the focus of this special issue) is this: How should we best communicate what has been learned regarding stress in the context of management education?

Many instructors and the textbooks they use incorporate a discussion of the impact of workplace stress into basic courses in management and/or organizational behavior. Indeed, many organizational behavior textbooks are now devoting an entire chapter to the topic. However, the discussion of stress is generally brief and may not capture all the individual and organizational implications of this phenomenon. Indeed, consideration of stress and stress management may often be dropped completely due to time constraints. This article will argue that the inclusion of this topic into management education, and even the development of a stand-alone course on stress and work, may be justified because of the population that we are educating. Specifically, we who are involved in training future businesspeople and organizational leaders need to be cognizant that along with the cost of stress to organizations (American Institute of Stress, 2000), much of the stress perceived by employees is seen as being caused by their managers (Savič & Pagon, 2008), and the stress experienced by managers can often have a “trickle down” effect on their employees (Skakon, Nielsen, Borg, & Guzman, 2010). In addition, managers and employees often have divergent views as to the causes of workplace stress (Offermann & Hellmann, 1996). Given this situation, a management course that focuses on the sources and impacts of stress as well as how individuals and organizations can address these concerns is very appropriate for these future employees and managers.

The framework of such a course can vary significantly, ranging from a survey of research to a focus on the impacts of stress to a stress management seminar to something that combines all these areas. This article is an attempt to address the why and the how of teaching such a course on stress and work, and to present the class that I teach as an example of what can be done in the context of a business school offering.
Basic Course Perspectives, Methods, and Materials

The course that is the focus of this article is titled “Stress and Work” and has been offered as an elective numerous times, at both undergraduate and master’s levels, but in recent years solely for undergraduates. It was originally offered by a faculty member with a research focus in the stress area and after he retired I have continued to offer it. The typical size of the class ranges from 40 to more than 60.

Format and Textbooks

The class format is lecture and discussion, with occasional class exercises, and one or two guest lecturers as well. Many short videos emphasizing discussion points are presented during the class. (A listing of videos used in this class and from what source they are available is presented in Table 1.) The format of the course is unlikely to vary significantly if offered to MBAs because of the nature of the students in our college. Unlike many major universities, many of our undergraduates are somewhat older, often with a number of years of work experience, making them more similar to our MBAs than perhaps is the case in other settings. Thus both groups understand some of the stressors that actually occur in the workplace and are able to connect with many of the examples given.

As to text materials, two books are used. One is *Preventive Stress Management in Organizations* by Quick, Quick, Nelson, and Hurrell (1997), and the other is *Comprehensive Stress Management* by Greenberg (2006). Although neither of these books was written with a course like this in mind, they do provide the coverage of the areas that are felt to be important. Even though the Quick et al. book is more than a dozen years old, another text has not been found that does a better job of communicating the topics of interest at an appropriate level for students. It also uses a prevention approach, a perspective that fits well with the study of workplace stress. In addition, much of the material in the text is not outdated and is still relevant today. However, considerable material is presented in class that does not appear in either book, so students must both do the assigned readings and comprehend the lecture material to do well in the course.

What the Course Is and Is Not

Students are informed from the beginning that this is not a self-help class (though they will learn some techniques that may be of assistance to them).
Table 1. Examples and Sources of Videos Used in Stress and Work Course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources of stress</th>
<th>Job loss in older workers (60 minutes)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Workplace bullying (ABCNews.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Merger stress (Leadership in Focus—Stanford University)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Extreme jobs (workaholism; ABCNews.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>E-mail stress (YouTube.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Commuting stress (NBC.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personal space violations (YouTube.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impacts of stress</td>
<td>Stress and suicide among soldiers (CNN.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Karoshi (death from overwork) in Japan (CNN.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress and acne (EmpowHer.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Impact of work on sleep (CBS.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Road rage (NBC.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Biofeedback (multiple films on various methodologies; YouTube.com, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>approaches</td>
<td>Meditation at the workplace (CBS.com)</td>
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<td>to stress</td>
<td>Virtual reality therapy (ABCNews.com)</td>
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<td>management</td>
<td>Stress and hypnosis (ABCNews.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Massage therapy (ABCNews.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Power napping (YouTube.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tai chi (Ency cloMedia.com)</td>
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<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Tips for better meetings (BNET.com)</td>
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<td>approaches</td>
<td>Telecommuting strategies (BNET.com)</td>
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<td>to stress</td>
<td>Worker benefits at SAS (Fortune.com)</td>
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<td>management</td>
<td>Shorter workweek plans (BNET.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social support at the Wall Street Journal (WSJ.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humor training for traffic police in Bangkok (YouTube.com)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The APA Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award winners (APA.org)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humorous stress-</td>
<td>“Soft talker” and “close talker” clips from Seinfeld (YouTube.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td>related videos</td>
<td>“If you hate going to work . . .” (ad from CareerBuilder.com)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smoker in men’s room sprayed with fire extinguisher by colleague (YouTube.com)</td>
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Note: Many of these videos may no longer be available at these sources. Searching general video sites such as YouTube.com or Truveo.com may find these, similar, or new videos.

It is also not a research methodology course (although that is discussed at some length). The general intent is to move the students away from an anecdotal and personal familiarity with stress and its outcomes and treatments to
a clearer perspective based on research and accepted best practices. The hope is that this way of thinking about stress will enable the students to evaluate more critically the impact of work situations on both them and their organizations and prepare them to consider effective ways to deal with these concerns.

**A Comprehensive View**

As will be seen by the review of the topics surveyed in this course, stress is produced by many different factors, has impacts on both individual and organizational outcomes, and can be dealt with in many different ways. Thus, this class has a multidisciplinary framework, and information and insights are drawn from management, psychology, sociology, medicine, law, architecture, and other fields.

**The Importance of Both the Individual and the Organization in the Stress Management Process**

One idea that is emphasized to the students is that although individuals can do many things to either avoid exposure to stressors or to control their reactions to them, the importance of the organization as a source of stress, a provider of stress management resources, and an entity affected by the concerns of its members should not be underestimated. Unfortunately, most of the focus in the literature over the years has been on the impact individually oriented programs can have on individual outcomes. This importance of this point has been emphasized a number of times in the stress literature (e.g., DeFrank & Cooper, 1987; Giga, Cooper, & Faragher, 2003; van der Hek & Plomp, 1997). Thus, spending time detailing organizational demands and stressors, organizational outcomes of stress, and organizational approaches to stress management has become an important aspect of this course.

**Learning Objectives and Assessments**

This course has four primary learning objectives: (1) a systematic understanding of the current knowledge base regarding the various aspects of stress and work, (2) a critical awareness of how this information is and can be gathered, (3) experiential learning of the application of these issues to one’s own life, and (4) greater awareness of the experience of work stress in the lives of others. The goal is to provide students with a broad awareness of this topic that may be helpful both in their personal and professional lives.
The following sections will detail how these objectives are targeted and assessed in this class.

**Learning Objective 1: Stress and Work Literature**

*Overview and theories.* To begin we review the history of stress theorizing, with brief discussions of individuals such as John Locke, Claude Bernard, William Osler, and Walter Cannon. Mentioning Cannon naturally includes considering the fight or flight syndrome (and its concomitant in women, tend and befriend). Hans Selye’s work on the general adaptation syndrome is also presented, along with R. S. Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) cognitive appraisal approach, Karasek’s (1979) demands-control model, person–environment fit (Edwards, Caplan, & Harrison, 1998), and Hobfoll’s (1989) conservation of resources theory. We also discuss more current conceptualizations such as the distinction between challenge and hindrance stressors (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000). In this section is presented a local news video of a single working mother of two who was asked to wear a heart-rate monitor for a 24-hour period. Rather than her heart rate being low before and after work, it actually was higher as she dealt with dropping her children off at school, getting them ready for bed, and so on. Relating this to Selye’s work, having no time to replenish one’s adaptation energy may lead to exhaustion and significant health concerns.

Similarly, to demonstrate the individual nature of the appraisal of stress, and how some may view a situation as a harm/loss situation whereas others see the same setting as a challenge, another video focuses on two traders at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. They are best friends and have stood shoulder to shoulder for 20 years yelling buy-and-sell orders all day long. However, whereas one finds the job extremely difficult, has anger management problems and health and family issues, the other sees it as fun and never seems to be bothered by the pressure. Having visual and other aids like this helps tremendously in clarifying and driving home the salient points to the students.

*Organizational demands and stressors.* The emphasis here is on what aspects of organizations produce the stressors that employees have to confront. A series of job aspects related to any position that can affect employee mental health is presented (Warr, 2005), including opportunities for personal control and skill use, variety, and safety (featuring some startling pictures of unsafe work practices from around the world). Also reviewed are some of the physical demands (e.g., air quality, temperature, noise), task demands (e.g., routine
jobs, job future ambiguity, work overload), and interpersonal demands (e.g., status incongruity, abrasive personalities, distractions) encountered in many workplaces (e.g., Sprigg, Stride, Wall, Holman, & Smith, 2007). Expectations and fit, along with critical incident stress, are considered. We also discuss specific occupations including data and examples as to how stressful they are (namely police, teachers, nurses, executives, etc.). In addition, we look at the kinds of jobs that the students ultimately would like to have and note some of the problematic issues they may have to face in their future careers.

An example in this context of organizational stressors is SEALAB, an underwater habitat built and staffed by the Navy in the 1960s. I mention the stresses of living 200 feet underwater for extended periods of time (e.g., long decompressions required to return to the surface so critical that medical help was not readily available, cold and murky water to dive in, problems with breathing apparatus, dietary restrictions, cramped living conditions with no privacy, breathing a helium-filled atmosphere that made everyone sound like Donald Duck) and students infer that these divers would have suffered tremendously. In actuality they came through it in good shape, as they were volunteers who were well trained, knew what to expect, and whose exposure to that environment had specific time limits. These characteristics are often missing from less physically demanding but perhaps more psychologically stressful office jobs.

The stress response. This section addresses some of the mechanisms of physiological reactivity, without going into more detail than necessary regarding components of this process such as the sympathetic nervous system. The reactions of people to instances of traumatic stress are reviewed (American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, 2005), and we spend some time examining a variety of factors that modify the stress response (including anger and hostility, self-efficacy, locus of control, negative affectivity, and demographic factors such as gender and age; e.g., Marmot, Bosma, Hemingway, Brunner, & Stansfeld, 1997; Roskies, Louis-Guerin, & Fournier, 1993). Students complete a brief questionnaire in class that tries to discriminate among anger, aggression, and cynicism, to help them understand how these personal factors might relate to the stress process.

Individual consequences of stress. Initially we discuss some of the different research approaches to the study of the impact of stress, and then we consider at some length the types of individual distress that may occur as a function of exposure to stress. These consequences include behavioral manifestations
(e.g., alcohol abuse, accident proneness, violence, suicide—the latter particularly among American armed forces personnel, a growing problem; Glasscock, Rasmussen, Carstensen, & Hansen, 2006; Moore, Sikora, Grunberg, & Greenberg, 2007). The range of medical consequences (from compromised immune functioning and cardiovascular problems to headaches and skin disorders) are addressed (e.g., Allesøe, Hundrup, Thomsen, & Osler, 2010; Chandola et al., 2008; Epel et al., 2004; Sapolsky, 1996). We also review the various forms of psychological disturbances that have been associated with stress (e.g., depression, anxiety, sleep problems; Blackmore et al., 2007; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). In this area and throughout the course it has been helpful to refer to the report by the American Psychological Association (2007) titled “Stress in America,” which contains a wealth of information regarding the perceptions, experiences, and outcomes of stress within a large sample of American adults.

**Organizational consequences of stress.** In this section, the focus is on the overall impact of stress on organizations of any type. In this regard, it is important to ensure that students’ conception of “organization” includes not only for-profit corporations but also small businesses and nonprofits such as schools and health care facilities. We first look at direct costs such as performance, health care costs and participation (e.g., absenteeism, tardiness; Manning, Jackson, & Fusilier, 1996; van Veldhoven, 2005). While the range of estimates available for the total cost of stress to our country is discussed, the importance that assumptions regarding the impact of stress can have on the assessment of direct costs is illustrated using an example from Matteson and Ivancevich (1987). This example features an evaluation of the cost of stress to a fictional company and the different levels of magnitude that this assessment can take depending on the different assumptions made in the assessment process.

We then emphasize the significance of indirect costs from poor decision making, communication problems, and the like (e.g., Kop, Euwema, & Schaufeli, 1999; Michailidis & Asimenos, 2002). In this section, time is also spent on stress and the law, specifically stress-related injuries, legal remedies to workplace stress, and general ways to deal with legal issues. This is an important area to review because of the significance of factors such as the intentional infliction of emotional distress, the Worker’s Compensation system, and tort actions, with which many students may not be familiar (e.g., DeFrank & Ivancevich, 1998; Mignin & Gale, 1999). Also, the whole landscape of compensating people for stress-related claims has changed dramatically since the Quick et al. (1997) book was published, and thus, students
need to be brought up to date on the current trends with these more current references.

**Organizational coping: Modifying work demands.** The focus of this section is on the aspects of organizations that can be altered to reduce the experience of stress or to at least moderate its impact. Such areas include job redesign (Beehr, Jex, Ghosh, Johnson, Redmon, & Mawhinney, 2001), participative management (Kalleberg, Nesheim, & Olsen, 2009), flexible work schedules (Raghavan, Sakaguchi, & Mahaney, 2008), career development (Sethi, King, & Quick, 2004), and the design of physical settings (De Croon, Sluiter, Kuijer, & Frings-Dresen, 2005). For example, flexible work schedules are discussed in depth, along with daily transitions and boundary management and some specific approaches such as telecommuting. As all these issues relate to time, a video is shown that looks in depth at how our conception of time has changed over history and the implications it has for societies and employees. Additionally, as there are many programs that can be beneficial for employees targeting work–life balance, these initiatives are reviewed, along with how the United States compares globally on the provision of these benefits. At this point a natural tie-in is to consider male–female differences, including a video documenting some of the particular reactions that women have to work stressors and home stressors. Finally, we talk extensively about the stress that can arise from features of the built environment, potential ways that these factors can be altered to remedy such problems, and the presentation of pictures from both student projects (discussed below) and my own collection noting environments that either create distress among employees or are supportive of both the work being done and human needs.

Two other areas are reviewed in this context as well. One is that of business travel, both the commuting experience as well as domestic and international business trips (DeFrank, Konopaske, & Ivancevich, 2000; Hartig, Kylin, & Johansson, 2007). There are many aspects of travel that can add more pressure onto the actual work that must be accomplished, and we discuss ways to prevent or address the impact of these demands. Also, the general and specific types of stressors that result from technology and ways to reduce technology stress are noted in this context of organizational coping (Tarafdar, Qiang, Ragu-Nathan, & Ragu-Nathan, 2007).

**Primary prevention.** In the framework used in this class, primary prevention refers to devising ways to avoid the experience of stressful experiences or minimizing their impact if they occur. Thus, we consider nutrition (how aspects of nutrition can cause stress as well as help us resist its effects; Hamer, Owen, & Kloek, 2005; Leigh Gibson, 2006), the impacts of noise and how to avoid or manage them (Franklin Institute Online, 2004), and the benefits of
sleep, including a discussion of the increasingly popular and often organizationally sanctioned approach of napping on the job (Rutledge et al., 2009).

Much of the stress we undergo is produced by the ways in which we think about our life situations, and so changing our self-talk and restructuring our cognitions can be very helpful in forestalling the appearance of stress (Tenenbaum, Edmonds, & Eccles, 2008). The area of communication also presents problems that may generate substantial stress levels, so we consider different types of stressful communications, how to become a better listener, techniques for coping with public speaking (Hirokawa, Yagi, & Miyata, 2008), and the interesting relationships between different types of nonverbal communication and stress (Cropanzano, Weiss, & Elias, 2004).

Career transitions may also be fraught with stressors, and we review the importance of dealing with one of these transitions that has become particularly prevalent in recent years, namely job loss (Winefield, 2002). Ethical situations often present themselves in the workplace, and they must be dealt with effectively so as to avoid distress for all parties involved (Strandell, 1991). Last, we review an extensive number of time management techniques that can be very helpful in avoiding future stressful situations (Häfner & Stock, 2010).

Secondary prevention. Of course, not all stress can or should be prevented, and we need to consider ways of managing it as effectively as possible. Secondary prevention refers to coping, or the ways in which the stress response can be dealt with once it has been experienced. We start by reviewing the types of coping that can take place (e.g., approach vs. avoidance; problem-focused vs. emotion-focused; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), and then methods for decreasing stress-producing behaviors (e.g., self-monitoring, social support, self-contracting; Roth & Cohen, 1986). We then consider in-depth some of the formal approaches to stress management such as meditation, autogenic training, progressive relaxation, biofeedback, hypnosis, yoga, and diaphragmatic breathing (e.g., Kanji, White, & Ernst, 2006; Kiffer & McKee, 2007; Stein, 2001).

We also review other, less typical approaches to stress management such as music, tai chi, and pets (including therapy dogs). Finally, the beneficial effects for both dealing with stress and improving health in general are considered with regard to the many approaches to exercise (Jex, Spector, Gudanowski, & Newman, 1991).

Tertiary prevention. In this section, the emphasis is on the remediation approaches that can be taken when stress has already had a serious impact on an individual. Some of the approaches discussed involve various versions of psychological counseling and therapy (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994; Cooper,
Dewe, & O’Driscoll, 2010; A. A. Lazarus & Abramovitz, 2004; McCown & Reibel, 2010). One of these is behavior therapy, illustrated in class by several videos demonstrating the use of computer simulations in systematic desensitization therapies for both general populations and military personnel. In addition, medical care, particularly the use of pharmacologic therapy, is illustrated in the context of posttraumatic stress disorder (Bisson et al., 2007; Zhang & Davidson, 2010).

**Designing healthy organizations.** This final section of the course looks at personal development programs at the work site and the findings that support their implementation (Engbers, van Poppel, Paw, Chin, & van Mechelen, 2005). At this point it is noted again, however, that very few programs have targeted any other level than the individual, and that to have a major impact on the work experience of employees, efforts must be made to address organizational issues as well. We also discuss some of the issues and questions associated with implementing a stress management workplace program (Richardson & Rothstein, 2008). Last, a video is shown on the American Psychological Association’s awards for psychologically healthy workplaces and some of the characteristics that go into making a work setting beneficial for its employees are detailed (American Psychological Association, 2010).

**Assessment of stress literature knowledge.** Evaluation of students’ comprehension of this material is done through examinations, often multiple choice in format. Questions are included that incorporate scenarios to encourage critical thinking, and test development has followed accepted principles in producing an effective multiple-choice exam (Haladynn & Downing, 1989).

**Learning Objective 2: The Research Process in Stress and Work**

I believe that it is valuable for students to have at least some grounding in how best to assess stress in a workplace setting. Whether they are making decisions about how to examine problems in their job environments or how to determine the level of stress in their own lives, some exposure to important measurement concerns will be helpful. We start by examining several surveys published in the general press which purport to rank the most stressful cities in the United States and focus on the assumptions and even biases that may influence these ratings. We then look at four aspects of human stress measurement, the first being self-report stressor scales and their attendant psychometric issues (DeFrank, 1988; Ganster, 2008). The second aspect is the evaluation of physiological stress responses, including reactivity, and the various factors that might influence these assessments such as temperature,
novelty, and time of day (Cohen, Kessler, & Gordon, 1995; Fried, Rowland, & Ferris, 1984). Third, we review a variety of coping measures and the topics they cover (Dewe & Guest, 1990; Latack, 1986). The fourth area covers effects and outcomes such as physical and psychological symptoms (McDowell & Newell, 1987; Williams & Cooper, 1998), which even includes behavioral markers of stress such as speech problems and hand movements (Ekman & Friesen, 1972; Siegman, 1993). Finally, we discuss the overall evaluation process of stress diagnosis in an organization using an example of a pharmaceutical firm that has developed a very thoughtful and extensive process by which to assess the impact of the stress experienced by its employees (Kuhnen, Carr, Roden, & Wilkie, 1999). Student comprehension of these issues is assessed through the examinations mentioned above.

Learning Objective 3: Experiential Learning

A class on this topic presents a variety of opportunities to enable students to have firsthand experiences with the concepts discussed rather than relying solely on lectures and readings. Below are presented two examples of this approach, one an in-class activity and the other a more extensive project outside class.

We spend considerable time reviewing the various techniques that one might use to cope with stressful situations, and to illustrate the impact of one of these I conduct a brief autogenic training exercise. Small finger thermometers are passed out to all the students and they are asked to hold the bulb between their thumb and index finger and write down the temperature it reaches after a couple of minutes. Then, as they continue to hold the thermometer, they are asked to get comfortable, close their eyes, and listen to a script that asks them to focus on increasing feelings of heaviness and warmth in their extremities. After about 6 to 8 minutes, they are asked to slowly start to become active again, open their eyes, and write down the temperature that is now displayed. Most people report this episode to be quite relaxing, but of even more importance is that the temperatures of around 80% of the students have increased, some substantially (10° or more). Some do have temperatures that stay the same, and some see their numbers actually decrease, but this only illustrates the idiosyncratic nature of the stress response. The biggest takeaway for students, beyond a greater understanding of this stress management technique, is the measurable impact that the mind can have on the body, even using a brief exercise evaluated by a crude biofeedback device.
A second experiential activity involves a required paper with three distinct components. First, students must choose an assessment exercise from the Greenberg (2006) book to complete and then discuss their reaction to it. There are 15 exercises to choose from, including ones focusing on intrapersonal factors (e.g., stressful life events experiences, hassles encountered), interpersonal factors (e.g., level of assertiveness, conflict resolution strategies, amount of social support), or perceptual issues (e.g., level of self-esteem, locus of control, irrational beliefs). Second, they must select a stress management technique (preferably one they have not used before) and practice it regularly for a 3-week period. They are then asked to write about their expectations prior to engaging in the activity and their reactions to it. The choices include meditation, autogenic training, progressive relaxation, biofeedback, diaphragmatic breathing, massage, yoga, and so on. Students are encouraged to make an effort to give these techniques a reasonable chance to be effective, and to be honest as to the effectiveness of their chosen technique. Finally, they must complete two more assessments, one being a health risk appraisal determining problems associated with their health-related behaviors. The second asks them to select one of the health behaviors that seemed problematic for them in the first assessment and look at the barriers that might be preventing them from engaging in a healthier lifestyle. Their discussion of these results completes this assignment. Based on their statements in the papers as well as individual comments, most students seem to feel that this activity is at the minimum interesting and involving, with many indicating that the stress management techniques they learned will likely continue to be part of their ongoing routines.

Learning Objective 4: Other People's Perspectives on Stress and Work

A key aspect of stress that is emphasized throughout this course is its individual nature in terms of both its perception and response. Although the activities above may help students focus on their own experience of stress, comprehending the types and severity of the stressors that others undergo is helpful in broadening students’ awareness and sensitivity to the work lives of those around them. This is done in this course through the use of a second writing assignment.

Students may select one of two alternative topics. The first option is to interview a person who is fully employed outside the home and has a job that the student might want to have some day or that is particularly interesting. Some of the questions recommended to the student include the following: Do
you consider your job stressful? If so, in what ways? What are some examples of the situations that you have felt to be stressful? Do other people in your organization feel the same way? What are your reactions to this stress? How do you try to cope with the stress as an individual? What could the organization do to help you in the coping process? The intent is to break students out of their own perceptions of what stress on the job is like and to see how other people react to workplace situations. This paper is not to be a transcript of the interview but rather a summary of the interviewee’s concerns in the student’s words. It is interesting that for this assignment a number of students choose to interview a relative, often a parent, and frequently remark that they had never really understood the pressures their relative faced until writing this paper.

A second choice for this writing assignment focuses on the increasing research and practitioner interest in the impact of the built environment on work stress (e.g., Aspinall, 2001; De Croon, Sluiter, Kuijer, & Frings-Dresen, 2005; Elsbach & Bechky, 2007; Elsbach & Pratt, 2007; Genaidy, Sequeira, Rinder, & A-Rehim, 2009; Kinman & Griffin, 2008; Singh, Syal, Grady, & Korkmaz, 2010; Vischer, 2007). Students can select a public building (not a private home, apartment, dorm, etc.) and examine how aspects of the building’s design, furnishings, lighting, accessibility, and so forth (all issues discussed in class) affect the perceptions, performance, satisfaction, and other outcomes of the people who use it. They are also asked to take digital pictures of the facility (if they have permission) which are shared with the rest of the class during consideration of this topic to illustrate the effects of our surroundings. Generally, the majority of students choose the interview alternative, but those choosing this paper option have provided some interesting assessments of workplaces ranging from a delivery firm to a physician’s office to an oil company’s headquarters to the offices of a professional sports franchise. Both of these options provide an opportunity for students to obtain a clearer perspective on how others experience their work worlds.

Other Considerations and Future Directions

Generally students have rated this course fairly highly, with an average composite evaluation of 4.82 out of 5 the last time it was taught. (Almost 75% of the class completed this most recent evaluation, a high number for an online, anonymous, voluntary assessment.) Some representative comments included in the course evaluations were statements such as “This topic is an interesting one considering the rise of stress in our culture. It is an important class that will become only more important in the future,” “The lectures contained
valuable information which was presented in a fun interactive way. The material was interesting and even more so with the many real life examples,” and “I especially loved the in-class exercises like the Type A interview and the relaxation exercise.” One student recently said, “I have never kept a textbook with the thought that I would use it again. The text for this class has such valuable information that I will definitely be hanging on to it for future use!” Although the feedback has been positive, this course will continue to evolve over time. An ongoing effort is made to add newer examples, exercises, videos, and other materials to the course beyond what has been discussed to both keep the class engaged and to stimulate conversation. Other textbook alternatives are being explored, including different books or perhaps a new approach entirely (e.g., custom texts with material from multiple sources, online resources). In this process, it is important to keep in mind that, coming into the class, many students may not recognize the extensive bodies of research that underlie much of the material presented in a course like this, and it is crucial that they be made aware of the rigor of the investigations which the study of this area demands.

Although most iterations of this class have had at least one guest speaker (e.g., a clinical psychologist who sees patients dealing with a variety of stress-related disorders), other ways of bringing the real world into the classroom are being pursued. One approach might be to incorporate case analyses, using situations that present real-world dilemmas related to workplace stress, including case-based role playing (Dean & Fornaciari, 2002). Even though the first written assignment asks students to explore in depth the stress in another’s work life, this could be expanded by having teams of students examine the stresses and concerns of real organizations (e.g., Kloppenborg & Baucus, 2004; Volkema, 2010). Coordinating these activities might be quite time consuming in this context, however, given the size of each section of this course. Still, efforts to connect the material being studied with actual situations would be helpful in conveying the importance and reality of organizational stress, particularly among students with relatively little work experience.

Having the opportunity to devote an entire course to stress is a luxury that may not be available in every setting. However, I believe that some broadened focus on this topic can be brought to basic organizational behavior classes. I teach these courses as well at both the undergraduate and MBA levels, and I incorporate some of the basic elements discussed here into a lecture for those students, including basic definitions and theories, sources of workplace stress, and individual and organizational impacts and stress management approaches. Issues related to stress can also be woven throughout
the course in the context of other topics such as control, conflict, ethics, and others.

In addition, I believe that it would be of value to bring a stress perspective to other courses and programs. For example, I think it would be quite interesting to talk in depth about stress in the context of human resources. As many of the activities and services to create a healthy workplace would likely fall under the aegis of human resources, having an in-depth consideration of these issues within a human resources course would be helpful in gaining recognition for the value of these approaches. Similarly, courses on ethics address many different aspects of these types of workplace concerns, but do they look at stress as both a factor that might predispose employees to experience ethical lapses, or the stress that affects both individuals and organizations when ethical violations have been committed?

Additionally, there is much ongoing interest and research in the area of leadership, and courses on this topic would benefit from paying attention to what personal characteristics enable effective leaders to manage stress, what actions they take when confronted with stressful situations, and how they can assist their followers in overcoming these difficulties (see, e.g., Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007). Conversely, recent interest in the topic of abusive supervision (e.g., Tepper, 2000; Yagil, Ben-Zur, & Tamir, 2011) might profitably focus our attention on the problems created from undesirable leader behaviors. I believe that expanding the exposure our students receive to the areas of stress and well-being will help move these issues from being simply interesting topics to concerns whose effective management is seen as integral to the overall success of any organization.

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