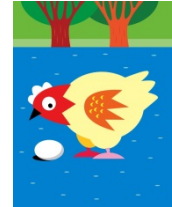


*A summary of a seminar arranged by the NJ faculty's Equal Opportunities Committee
(June 18th, 2014, 13-15)*

Stress – cause and effect

What's the hen and what's the egg?



Invited speaker: **Anitha Kiianlinna**, Sensus studieförbund

This seminar offered insight and inspiration for managing risks associated with stress. It problematized the phenomenon psychosocial risks; it also offered insights about pro-active work against institutionalized work related stress, for example by using the new stress checklist made by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket, AV). Stress is a symptom; stress causes illness in itself but is also a cause to other work environment problems (inefficiencies, poor quality in output and lower work retention). The goal for this seminar was to provide information and tools for preventive measures to address work-related stress, personal stress as well as stress in caused by the organization (the cultural setting, tasks and institutionalized management structures).

A PP-handout (in Swedish is available from this presentation). This verbal summary is merely an interpretation of some of the key messages in this PP-presentation. <https://internt.slu.se/lv-nj>

Outline for the presentation

- What is stress? And what are stress symptoms?
- How should stress be handled in terms of work environment?
- Causes of stress
- Expectations and control – key factors
- The stress cone – where are we?
- What are the legal obligations for an employer?
- What are the legal obligations for an employee?
- Four key areas to health in an organization
- How do we follow up on stress?
- KASAM

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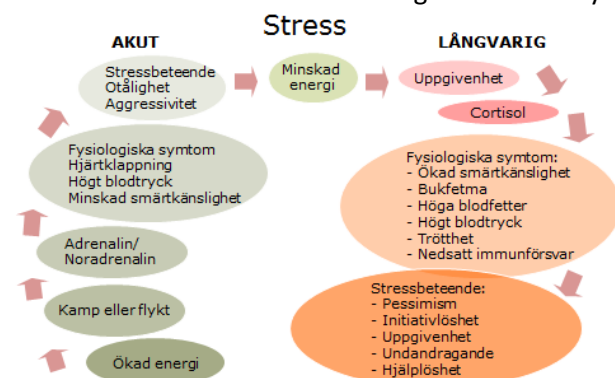


The NJ faculty's Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuula Eriksson, Faruk Djodjic, Cecilia Mark-Herbert, Marlén Tälleklint & Julia Löf

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Stress is a physiological defense mechanism that protects the individual. There is a big difference between acute and long-term stress symptoms



Stress symptoms appear in stressful situations and we commonly experience these at times of harassment, nasty behavior, physical illness and feelings of discomfort.

Stress in the work environment should be managed pro-actively – with regards to what can be managed once it is identified and communicated, possible to forecast and in general possible to avoid.

React and Rehabilitate (SAM ¹)	Preventive work	General support for what is desirable in a work environment
Hinder	Investigate	Starting with what is desired ²
Minimize	Make risk assessments	Physical
Learn from	Make plans/ manage	Psychological/ mental
	Follow-up	Social/ collaborative
		Existential (KASAM – see last page)

Where is your organization in this continuum?

Causes of stress are often referred to as risk factors (with examples from “our world”)

Insecurity regarding the employment (for example, job positions that are not permanent)

Recruitment strategies that do not support the work-tasks (here: too few teaching positions)

Shortcomings in management capabilities (for example, communication, formal procedures, time frames in processes)

Over OR under information – intimately connected to leadership style

Hidden agendas (politics) - for example in strategic decisions for new positions

Unclear expectations – responsibilities, work tasks and challenges in assessing “good enough”

Resource constrains – often referred to in terms of time (short time frames – lack of respect for other individuals needs for planning) but also financial measures or strategic assets

Σ: Ambiguity, lacking feedback and shortcomings in communication

¹ SAM= Systematic Work Environment work (a plan for managing work environment continuously) (Systematiskt arbetsmiljöarbete = ett primärt ansvar för samverkansgrupper)

² Starting with what is desired/ healthy is often referred to as a salutogenic approach (salutogen)

What are the key domains in which an individual may perceive stress?

So called stress factors may appear in various situations and roles for an individual:

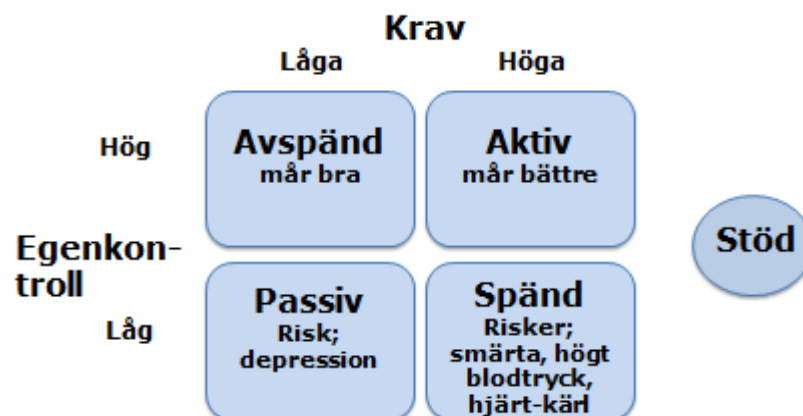
- ✓ In the work organization (at various "levels")
- ✓ In private life
- ✓ In the individual (we commonly talk about personalities as type A, for example – very output oriented in contrast to type B who's more happy as is- "I like who I am")
- ✓ The external environment

The causes of stress are highly individual – where private and professional life stressors are integrated and interdependent. A very stressful situation for one person may not at all be stressful for another person. In an organization it is desirable to have a mix of personalities and respect between them.

Comparative stress – is manifested in various ways at different stages in our lives. It may refer to physical looks, output, titles, salary, capabilities and the ability to stressors.

Many work environments do not have limits in time or in space – working at home and at work, working with tasks that require concentration at a time when the individual has concentration.... **All of this point to one of the key roles for an employer's a responsibility to assist the employee to set boundaries and obtainable objectives.** This can be done during the work development conversations and salary revisions – but that is not enough. It has to be done continuously.

Perceived stress is often described in two dimensions – expectations (krav) and ability to influence the situation (egenkontroll). High versus Low expectations in combination with high versus low ability to make own decisions/ influence the situation can be influenced by external support (stöd).

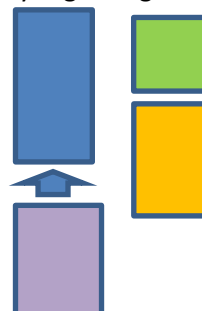


Ability to influence the situation may refer to time management, prioritizing tasks and being actively involved in decisions that influence the individual's work situation.

Support (stöd) refers to, for example, feed-back concerning all aspects of a work performance – not just output but also social contributions and other valuable contributions. Work-mates may offer feed-forward (support) but the key role for a manager/ leader is to develop and institutionalize reward systems where individuals feel appreciated. Annual feedback in work performance and salary discussions may be a part of this feedback – but it does not cover the needs completely.

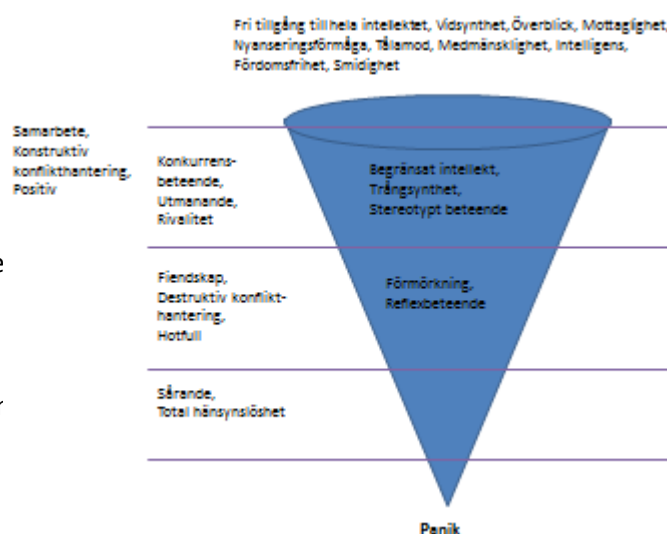
Johannes Siegrist³, a medical sociologist, points to the individual needs in clarity regarding expectation, degrees of freedom and support in the process.

Simply put – we may say that two factors will determine if we get sick or not: resources and strain on an individual’s “system”. If the **blue box** represents resources and the **yellow box** represents strain, the individual is fine – but if the **green box** is added (additional strain) it is easy to assume that the blue box no longer can “cover” the individual’s needs. This grossly simplified illustration may serve as a simple model for showing stress related illness.



For a short period of time most individuals can handle “additional stress” – assuming they have a buffer (and that other systems don’t require the buffer at the very same time). Building a **BUFFER** is therefore a key to work proactively address stress related illness before it is the case. This is referred to as creating **supportive factors** (purple box that adds to the blue box).

The stress cone – is an illustration that describes social stress at an organizational level. It offers a scale ranging from (top) patience, kindness, intelligence and non-judgmental behavior to (bottom) ruthless selfish behavior from individuals towards other individuals in the organization where the individual response range from constructive collaboration and positive conflict management (top) to strong discomfort and panic (stress) at the bottom



³ Article in English about **social health** from a medical perspective
 Johannes Siegrist (2010) Social Determinants of Health – contributions from European Health and Medical Sociology *Política y Sociedad*, 2011, Vol. 48 Núm. 2: 249-258 249
 doi: 10.5209/rev_POSO.2011.v48.n2.2 (available at:
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What are the legal obligations for an employer? (Work environment legislation, ch. 2, 3 and 6)
Much of the responsibility lies with the employer. It includes every day routines, organizational groups (liaison groups) and making surveys on a regular basis to “take the temperature” of how the stress level is perceived by employees in the organization and making various risk assessment.

The everyday routines may be delegated to departments and groups. The investigations include both social and physical work environment and they have to be done on an individual level. Supportive measures need to be tailored to the specific individual’s needs. Risk assessments have to be written documents as any state organization may be held accountable for showing the record for such investigations. An example of these kind of documents would be advisory meetings for PhD students – but it is NOT just PhD students that need to keep tab on stress levels – it refers to all individuals, and the employer is responsible for making these assessments (chapter 3).

Chapter 6 points to the need for **collaboration between employee and employer**. This is usually formalized in a liaison group that works with Structured work environment schemes (SAM⁴) aimed at pro-actively addressing potential stressors for individuals by:

Leading – investigating and following up on the current situation

Management- developing routines for work environment and documentation

Investigating and mapping risks and consequences – especially for sickness and accidents. Risks may also refer to organizational changes.

Take action- make sure the planned preventive measures are taken (and given priority in resource allocation)

Follow-up - assess the effects of action taken and re-assessing the situation

What are the legal obligations for an employee? (chapter 6)

The employee can be held accountable for work environment and stress too. He/ she is expected to:

- ✓ Keep an eye at risks and report those to the employer
- ✓ Participate in decisions concerning actions to minimize stress
- ✓ In general, contribute to a good work environment

The dialogue will be determined by the degree of trust and respect.

How do we follow up on stress levels in an organization?

Employer responsibilities in assessing the stress situation in an organization can be managed in a survey on a regular basis (omnibus). PreVent offers an online survey for making a stress inventory (<http://www.prevent.se/Stressenkatt/>) where each employee fills out a set of questions that serve as stress indicators. More information about stress is available on: <http://www.prevent.se/Amnesomrade/Stress/>

⁴ SAM Strukturerat Arbetsmiljöarbete – Monica Östman offers a class where this is presented in a very hands on and constructive way with templates and support systems.

The governmental agency, The Swedish Work Environment Authority (A , Arbetsmiljöverket), advocates various kinds of support... for example:

- Evaluative support – employer offers feedback, work mates offer feed forward...
- Informal support – in case of sickness (who does my job...?!)
- Informative support – *“we would not have half of the stress related problems we see today if the information was clearer, the work tempo was more moderate and the awareness of quality was higher...”* This is a matter of resource management – to ensure quality and meaning in what we do...

In spite of a stressful work environment – why do individuals stay on? These are the reasons given in most surveys:

- ✓ When I am noted and respected for what I do and who I am
- ✓ When I get to finalize things
- ✓ When I make a difference for somebody
- ✓ When I get to do something new – where I learn something
- ✓ When I am given degrees of freedom in how I execute a task
- ✓ When I feel social belonging to an organization (or a group)

It does not sound all that complicated and yet it is! In a complex world where most individuals have “several hats on their heads” they face a multitude of choices in their actions every day – and these decisions will have consequences for other individuals...

Ending this presentation (just like the oral presentation by Anitha Kiianlinna we will offer inspirational readings around the concept of **KASAM** that has been developed by Aaron Antonovsky. It builds on an understanding of human social needs of being a social part of something. It explains this need as:

Meaningful – motivation from within – which is an internal energy and “building block”

Understanding – information, interpretation of causal relationships

Management – finding alternative solutions, beliefs in taking actions towards finding solutions and being supported in taking actions towards finding solutions

Working in accordance with KASAM ideals has to be done systematically – it can’t be an *ad hoc* solution to a problem at one time. The whole model has a salutogenic origin (looking at desirable outcomes to create envisioned solutions).

We may not have grasped the answer to the rhetorical question in the heading of the seminar, about what constitutes the hen and the egg, but we got an understanding of that the answer may not be as simple as we would like it to be.

“A good work environment does not develop by itself or accidentally. It is hard work – with a long term perspective in mind.” Thank you for your inspiration, Anitha!

