



Stress at Work

This Factsheet summarises what stress at work is, sources of stress from the work environment and sources of stress from work pressures. Stress at work is part of psychology of health (Edexcel specification), psychology and health (OCR) and physiological psychology (AQA).

What is stress?

We all know what feeling stressed is like but how can we define it?

- Stress occurs when a **demand** is placed on us physically and/or psychologically. Stress is the **response** to the demand. A demand is also called a '**stressor**'.
- Curriculum Press Factsheet 15 'Bodily response to stress' describes the physical changes that happen during stress.
- **Cox (1987)** said that we feel stress when the perceived demands are greater than the perceived ability to cope. The word 'perceived' shows that every person is different in what they see as a demand or ability to cope. So, we feel stressed when we do not feel able to cope due to lack of resources. For example, you may feel stressed when revising for an exam because you feel that you do not have enough time to revise all the information.

What is stress at work?

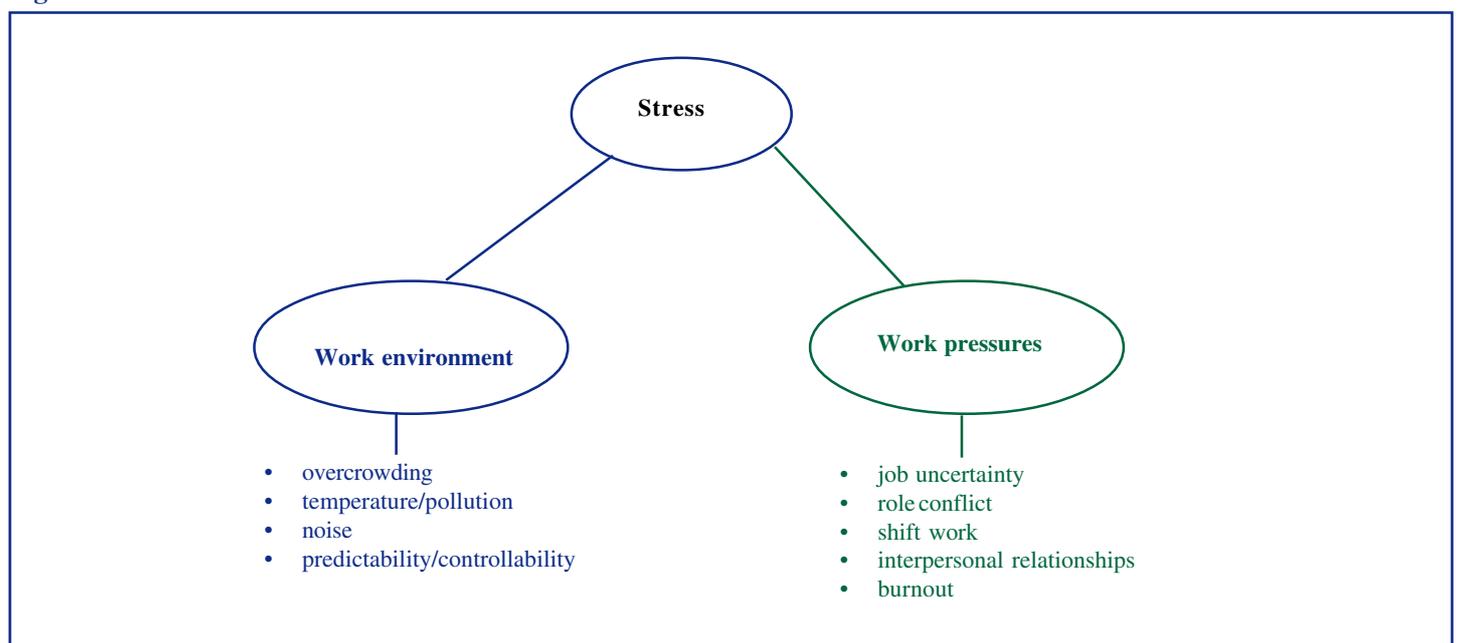
- Work is one **source** of stress. Sources of stress are factors that cause stress. There are many sources of stress, such as life events (e.g., divorce), daily hassles (e.g., losing things) and work-related stressors. In this factsheet we look at work-related stressors.
- Stress at work is a major factor contributing to ill health.



Exam Hint: Exam questions tend to ask you to describe one/two sources of stress in the workplace. Be prepared to describe one study in detail. Include the aims, procedure, findings and conclusions. Two studies are described in detail in this factsheet.

We can divide work stress into two areas; **(A) stress from the work environment** and **(B) stress from the pressures of work**. Fig 1 below shows which stressors fall into which category.

Fig 1 Stress at work



(A) Stress from the work environment**1. Overcrowding**

- Having too many people in the workspace (overcrowding) can increase feelings of stress.
- **Freedman, Heshka and Levy (1975)** examined whether urban living, which involves a large number of people living close together, was related to rates of illness. They found that overcrowding did affect the incidence of illness. The higher the density of people in an urban area, the more admissions to a psychiatric hospital occurred.
- However, overcrowding does not always feel stressful. For example, we do not tend to find crowding at football matches stressful.

2. Temperature and pollution

- Temperature may be a critical factor in stress at work.
- There is evidence that temperature is a stressor. For example, **Baron and Ransberger (1978)** showed that incidences of violence were related to high air temperatures by looking at cases of group violence and weather reports.
- Pollution can cause stress. For example, non-smokers find it unpleasant to work in a smoky place.

**3. Predictability and controllability**

- Lack of control in a job may cause stress.
- **Glass, Singer and Friedman (1969)** extended their study by also giving some participants the option to control the noise by pressing a button. Those with control were more persistent than those with no control. This suggests that a greater sense of control increases the individual's ability to cope, which then reduces stress.
- **Gardner (1978)** replicated the Glass et al. (1969) study but they gave half the participants a consent form to sign which gave them a sense of control. The other half of participants did not sign a form. The half with control did not experience stress, whereas the others did.
- **Langer and Rodin (1976)** examined people's health in an old people's home and looked at how health related to the loss of control they experience (see text box below).

Langer and Rodin (1976)

- One group of people in the old people's home were 'responsibility induced' as they were allowed to make decisions (e.g., whether to receive visitors, arrangement of own room, etc).
- The other group were 'traditional' as the carers made all choices for them (e.g., arranging their room for them).
- Nurses rated the participants' well-being. It was found that 71% of the 'traditional' group were seen as being more debilitated than before they study but that 93% of the 'responsibility' group were seen as improved.

A follow-up study looked at the mortality rates of the people in the study. Twice as many people in the 'traditional' group had died than in the 'responsibility' group. It is possible that the stress from not being in control affected their immune systems.

4. Noise

- Noise uses cognitive resources which leaves the person with fewer resources to do their work. The lack of resources can increase the feeling of not being able to cope, which produces stress.
- **Glass, Singer and Friedman (1969)** examined the effect of noise on stress (see text box).

**Glass, Singer and Friedman (1969)**

- Participants were 60 undergraduate students.
- First, participants completed cognitive tasks (e.g., word searches). The experimenters measured the participants' **galvanic skin response (GSR)** during these tasks.
- There were four conditions, plus a control (no noise) condition.

Conditions:

Timing of noise	Type of noise	
Unpredictable noise (at random intervals)	1. Loud noise	2. Soft noise
Predictable noise (at fixed intervals)	3. Loud noise	4. Soft noise

- Next, the participants tried to complete four puzzles. Two of the puzzles were unsolvable. The unsolvable puzzles were used to produce a feeling of frustration (stress). The length of time that participants *persisted* in trying to solve the puzzle reflected the amount of stress felt (participants would give up doing the puzzle quicker the more stressed they felt).
- They found that:
 - o The no noise condition produced the least errors and stress.
 - o Predictable noise produced less errors, higher persistence and lower GSR than the unpredictable noise.
 - o Unpredictable noise produced the greatest amount of stress (but even the predictable noise created some stress).
- They concluded that noise itself *is* a stressor.



(B) Stress from the pressures of work**1. Role conflict**

- Role conflict occurs when the demands of the job oppose the needs of the worker. For example, the company wants higher productivity but this means longer hours for the worker. The worker does not want to work longer hours as it will cause family conflict but she may lose her job if she does not accept the demands. This conflict causes stress.
- **Shirom (1989)** found an association between coronary heart disease (caused by hypertension from stress) and perceived role conflict. They found this for middle-management workers but not for 'shop-floor' workers.

2. Shift work

- Adjusting your body clock to different sleep patterns causes stress. Disrupted sleep patterns can also lead to major accidents.
- **Czeisler, Moore-Ede and Coleman (1982)** found that manual workers who did shift-work had more accidents, more long-term feelings of ill health and more **absenteeism**.

**3. Interpersonal relationships**

- The most common source of stress from work is not getting on with other workers (**Matteson and Ivancevich, 1982**).
- **Karasek, Schwartz and Theorell (1982)** studied Swedish workers and found that job satisfaction did relate to the amount of support they received from other workers.

**4. Burnout**

- Burnout is physical/emotional exhaustion caused by **chronic** levels of work stress.
- Burnout especially happens among human services professionals (e.g., teachers, nurses and the police).

5. Job uncertainty

- **Metcalfe and colleagues (2003)** examined the relationship between how often a person changed jobs and health-related behaviour and stress. They found that job flexibility (number of job changes and length of time in the job) was associated with risky health behaviour (smoking, alcohol consumption, etc). However, it did not affect physical health nor was it associated with stress.
- **Bordia and colleagues (2004)** looked at how 'restructuring' of organisations causes stress in employees. They surveyed 222 employees working in a hospital. The hospital was going to be restructured which involved moving to new premises and the redefinition of job roles. The employees rated how well the hospital communicated with them about the changes. They also rated how in control they felt and if they felt any psychological strain, etc. It was found that employees who rated the communication as poor were more likely to feel psychological strain, lack of control and therefore stress.

Glossary

Absenteeism: Taking time off work, being absent from work.

Chronic: Long-term.

Galvanic skin response: Measures the level of arousal of the autonomic nervous system, which indicates level of stress.

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Worksheet: Stress at Work

Name _____

1. Explain what stress is, including what a stressor is.

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2. What are the main sources of stress in general?

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3. Name two sources of stress from the work environment.

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4. Name two sources of stress from pressures of work.

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5. How might lack of control affect a person's level of stress?

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6. Explain, in your own words, what the aims, procedure, results and conclusions are of one study of stress at work.

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7. Does psychological evidence show that job uncertainty is a source of stress?

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