

“Pet at work”: A novel tool for managing stress levels of employees
– Prof. Purushottam Bung*

Key words: Pet at work, novel tool, managing stress

Abstract

Stress is an integral part of every human being. Without stress, life appears to be dull and boring; whereas too much of it can be dangerous. Han Selye, M.D., a pioneer researcher in ‘stress and stress management’ defines stress as “the non specific response of the body to any demand made on it (when external demands exceed resources)¹”. As the fast developing countries like India which are experiencing significant economic progress, the stress levels with which people work in general is also increasing significantly. This has lead to sharp rise in the stress related chronic health disorders (physiological and psychological) like; anxiety disorders, attention deficit, hyperactivity, essential hypertension, epilepsy, headache, insomnia, chronic muscular pain, etc.

The conventional stress management techniques/strategies like; aerobics, yoga, meditation, prayer, imagery, self hypnosis (Autogenic Training), biofeedback, long silent walk, soothing music, etc, have been proved successful yet incomplete. Getting a new friend, i.e. cats and dogs, have proved to be highly stress relieving. Pets provide excellent social support, stress relief and other health benefits – perhaps more than human beings.

Firms, especially, which are into service sector can think of keeping these new friends, i.e. cats and dogs (of selected breed after necessary training) in their work places so that employees can spend some good time with these pets (hugging, cuddling, stroking and playing) which has proved to be one of the most effective ‘stress busters’. It doesn’t cost much for the firms to maintain these pets at work places. Whereas benefits derived in terms of reduced stress levels of employees which ultimately make the employees more creative, focused, and optimistic is just amazing.

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I. Introduction:

Every profession on this earth involves stress as an inevitable tool of challenges and has become integral part of everyone's life. Stress as viewed by Olley (1999) is the physiological, psychological and behavioral response of an individual seeking to adopt and adjust to both the internal and external pressures. Dalloway (2007) describes stress as an automatic physical reaction to danger, demands or threat. Health Information publications (2005) define stress as the physical and emotional strain caused by our response to pressure from the outside world. Love and Irani (2007) view stress as the individual's inability to cope up with excessive workplace demand or job pressure. Hartig et al (2007) describe stress as a process of responding to an imbalance between demand and resources. The above definitions mean 'stress is a condition or a feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize'.

The implications of above definitions is that too much work related pressures are being placed upon employees today arising from; lack of breathing space between assignments or tasks, non availability of time to unwind, relax and recuperate, aspirations for greater achievement, overwork, emotional exhaustion, isolation, job insecurity, dealing with deadlines, pacing with new technologies, environment pollution, traffic congestion, competitive environment, etc.

Stress may tend to build up as the day progresses. This can be referred to as the 'stair case effect'. As reflected in figure1, if we do not have time to adapt to the stress then we go in to the next stress situation with some residual stress. This is similar to taking another step on a staircase. If we climb too high, the pressure builds. Short term relaxation techniques such as; yoga, meditation, biofeedback, self hypnosis, playing some sport, chatting with the friend, etc at different times during the day can prevent the stress from building to an unmanageable level.

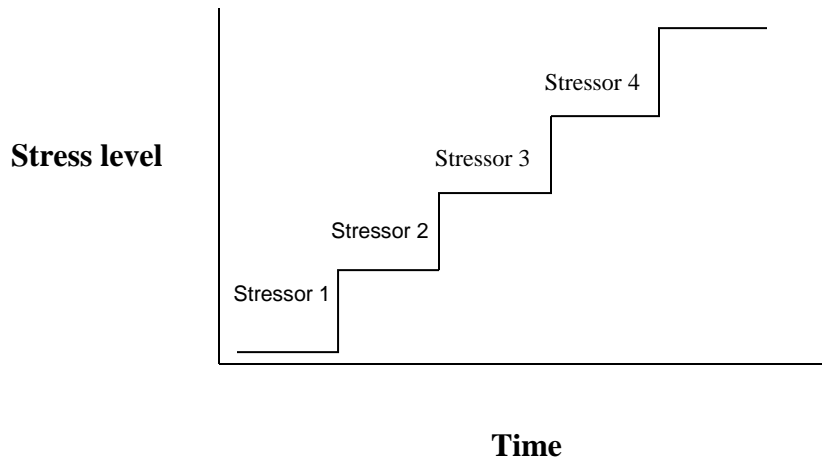


Fig 1. Stair case effect

If the employees ignore the stress levels with which they are working, it may lead to serious physiological or psychological health disorders like; anxiety disorders, fear, forgetfulness, rapid breathing, attention deficit, hyperactivity, essential hypertension, epilepsy, headache, insomnia, chronic muscular pain, etc. and he/she may become drug addict or start excessive consumption of alcohol or tobacco. The figure 2, shown below clarifies that up to some level (optimal point) stress in fact increases the performance level of employees and there after the performance starts declining.

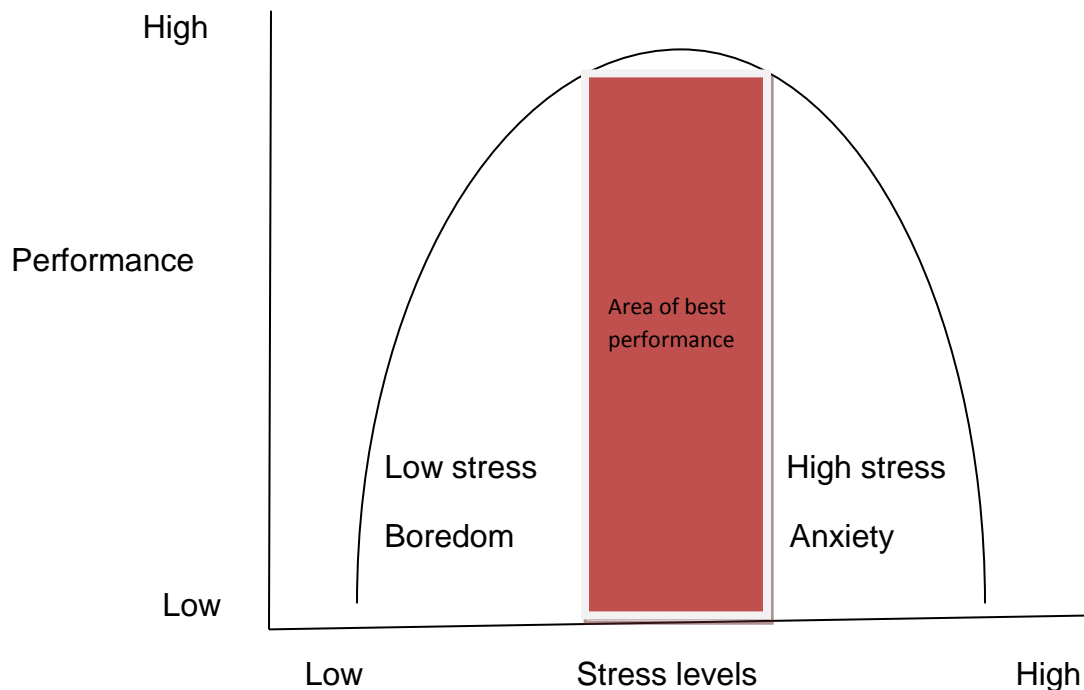


Fig 2: Relationship between Stress levels and performance (source: www.mindtools.com)

The challenge for organizations is to locate the area of best performance for each and every employee. Stress is something unique and personal to each of the employees. What is less stressful for one person may be more stressful to another. The key to stress reduction is identifying stress management techniques/strategies that fit one as an individual.

More and more employers are turning to effective stress management techniques/strategies to tackle the stress related issues or problems. Effective stress management can enable employees to improve their own response to stress (individual stress management) and also enable the organization to reduce workplace stressors (organizational stress management). Stress management aims at managing the stress levels to required levels for both the individual employee and the organization so that performance of the employee as well as the organization will be the best.

II. Widely used tools by the organizations to manage the stress

The most commonly used tools to manage the stress levels of employees include;

1. Tie up with different health clubs for the benefit of employees
2. Making workplace more natural with less isolation
3. Training employees on effective stress management techniques/strategies like;
 - a. Yoga
 - b. Meditation
 - c. Self hypnosis
 - d. Time management
 - e. Imagery
 - f. Playing sport of their choice
 - g. Aerobics
 - h. Problem solving techniques
4. Organizing meetings at natural outdoor locations like; beaches, river side places, etc.

5. Involving employees while taking important decisions and encouraging their participation.
6. 'Less monotony and more autonomy' i.e. making work less monotonous and giving more autonomy to the employees.
7. Conducting some fun at work activities every now and then to keep the employees spirit up.
8. Arranging small trips and get together parties for employees
9. Establishing full fledged employee recreation and relaxation centers.
10. Compulsory leave policy to stop accumulation of the stress.

III. Pet at work: The novel tool

The above listed techniques/strategies no doubt are the great techniques/strategies. But getting a new best friend can have many stress relieving and health benefits. While human friends provide great social support and come with some fabulous benefits, but they have some serious limitations as well. But the pet friends, i.e. cats and dogs, have proved to be highly stress relieving. In fact pets provide excellent social support, stress relief and other health benefits – perhaps more than human beings. This was proved very often that people who have pets at home were found to have lower blood pressure and heart rates than those who didn't have.

- ✓ *Pets encourage/motivate/instigate people to get out of stressful situations, play and exercise:* As exercise is good for stress management and overall health, keeping pets, i.e. dogs and cats (of good breed and after necessary training) at work places makes more sense. Firms can create 'pet zone' where-in they keep one or two dogs or cats for every 10 to 20 employees (ideal ratio could be 1:10, i.e. one pet for every 10 employees). Employees will be allowed to spend some good time with these pets whenever they think they are under stress.
- ✓ *Pets take us out from loneliness and provide unconditional love:* Pets can offer love and companionship. They are there when you need them irrespective for whether you reciprocate or not. They understand the mood of people and act accordingly. They are the best solution to tackle loneliness. Employees can hug,

cuddle, stroke and play with these pets, which has proved to be one of the most effective 'stress busters'.

- ✓ *Pets can combat stress sometimes better than people:* Pets are not only good listeners but also good mood readers. As often experienced by the pet owners, people actually experience less stress when their pets were with them than when a supportive friend or spouse was present. This is because "pets don't evaluate us, they just love us".

It is important to understand that owning pets (keeping pets within the organization premises) do mean additional work and responsibility, which may be stressful itself, sometimes. But looking at the benefits that the organization will derive in terms of reduced stress levels of employees which ultimately make the employees more creative, focused, and optimistic, cost and responsibility involved appears to be insignificant.

Economics of maintaining pet at work:

Cost of maintaining one pet for every 10 employee:

1. Cost of the pet itself (of good breed): Rs.10,000.00 approx.
2. Cost of training the pet for a year (including pet food, vaccination, other accessories, trainer fees, etc.): Rs.50,000.00 approx.
3. Cost related to renting of the additional premises to keep these pets within organization (minimum 500 sq ft): Rs.1,20,000.00 per year approx.
4. Remuneration to the pet owner (one who will take care of the pet like; feeding it, giving it a brush every day, giving it a hot water bath every week, taking it out for a walk daily, etc) @ Rs.5000 pm: Rs.60,000.00 approx
5. Miscellaneous: Rs.25,000.00 approx

All together keeping a pet involves expenditure of Rs. 2,65,000.00 every year. This means Rs.22080.00 per employee per year, i.e. Rs.2200.00 per employee per month. Looking at the salaries being paid to middle management employees today in the developing countries like India, the cost appears to be very insignificant.

Whereas the benefits that the organization will derive out of this whole exercise are just mind boggling, especially when the employees are bombarded with different challenges and work pressures every day. Some of the benefits include;

- ✓ Improved morale of the employees
- ✓ Improved focus of the employees
- ✓ Reduced stress levels of employees leading to higher productivity
- ✓ Improved creativity of employees
- ✓ Better work culture of employees
- ✓ Optimistic and positive thinking
- ✓ Less isolation which makes employees more social
- ✓ Less fearful, more aggressive and greater tolerance to ambiguities
- ✓ Strengthened relationship with the organization

Thus economically, it makes more sense to hug this novel idea.

Conclusion

The conventional stress management techniques/strategies like; aerobics, yoga, meditation, prayer, imagery, self hypnosis (Autogenic Training), biofeedback, long silent walk, soothing music, etc, have been proved successful yet incomplete. Getting a new friend, i.e. cats and dogs, have proved to be highly stress relieving. Pets provide excellent social support, stress relief and other health benefits – perhaps more than human beings.

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