

ADVANCED PROJECT

Promoting Stress Management in the Workplace

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- F-11: Can design and produce a significant product that gives evidence of advanced competence.
- F-12: Can demonstrate knowledge of the physical and psychological stress response, and design a customized stress management program for employees to use in the workplace.

Abstract

The theme of this Advanced Project is exploration of occupational stress and stress management techniques in the workplace. There are several reasons stress is considered the “Silent Killer” and its prevalence throughout human civilization is a developing concern. Many are admittedly over-stressed in the workplace and studies have shown that stressful work environments can lead to employee health problems and negative attitudes while working (Näswall, Sverke, & Göransson, 2014). Stress is an international health issue as well, medical problems like hypertension and anxiety cost approximately ten thousand dollars per employee in the United States, and Canadian businesses lose over three and a half billion dollars each year (Burton, 2007). In the United Kingdom, productivity loss consumes over forty billion U.S. dollars per year (Bond, Flaxman, & Livheim, 2013). Influential leaders and public health researchers agree that organizational risk factors accompany distressed working conditions. Unfortunately, stress management remains an anomalous concept throughout western society and many people seem unable to manage their stress levels, despite it being a naturally occurring and unavoidable part of life. My examination of research articles on this topic led me to believe that observing employee limitations and behaviors firsthand might allow me to better understand the influences that lead to occupational stress. The purpose of this endeavor was to learn how to design a customized stress management program for employees by using an assessment of environmental stressors, health behavior limitations, and business culture.

Understanding Workplace Stress

Stigmas are sometimes associated with those whom admittedly feel emotionally burdened by their work. Consequently, overtaxed employees might become inclined to ignore their stress because of work ethic or fear that colleagues and supervisors will view them as a “weak link” or unproductive if they cannot handle their workload (Bakker, Holenderski, Kocielnik, Pechenizkiy, & Sidorova, 2012). Because of various societal expectations and normative behavior traits that are observable in the workplace, employees are capable of handling their stress in an unhealthy manner. Stress is particularly dangerous because prolonged exposure can lead to severe problems over time. Symptoms of physical, psychological, and social disorders vary, but the resulting damage can be severe and limitless. Both individual and public health complications are numerous and harmful, even the way stress manifests and spreads from person to person is part of the reason it is so hazardous. A single unhealthy reaction, such as aggressive behavior, can inflict harm on several lives almost instantly and the subsequent disturbances that erupt from one outburst can spread and develop into a variety of psychosomatic complications without warning (Koolhaas). In the workplace, an outburst can compromise all levels of business association so the entire team, office, division, and organizational structure are at risk.

By researching stress management in the workplace, I have attempted to identify the origins of stress and learn remediation techniques that staff members of a small business can incorporate with their daily activities. The focus of this project is on low impact behavior changes that can improve the quality of life for my target audience. As a student of health and wellness promotion in the workplace, I felt obliged to share my understanding of this phenomenon with the employees of Cynthia R. López, Attorney at Law. My intention was to learn more about their individual and collective experiences with occupational stress, and

empower them with a capacity for positive changes. It is hypothesized, that raising awareness will lead to changed perspectives on the issue; thereby compelling employees too feel more capable of improving their mental health and wellbeing. The purpose of this analysis paper is to discuss my project and reflect on my experiences thereof. The following literature reviews attempt to demonstrate and support my hypothesis.

Review of Literature

Worldwide Impact of Stress Related Occupational Health Hazards

Experts agree that risk factors associated with workplace conditions have engendered a public health problem. According to Chu and Dwyer (2002), stress related health concerns in the workplace are causing significant economic risk factors on an international scale:

Globally, mental health and work stress have become serious concerns in recent years as evidence reveals their huge impact on the workforce in terms of the number of people affected, costs to nations and to work organizations, and the many symptoms and associated health problems experienced by employees which are also producing detrimental consequences for the organization such as low productivity due to absenteeism and 'presenteeism' (low performance level at work. (p. 177)

This is quite an interesting statement, because stressors are unavoidable and they are presented in many forms outside of the workplace as well. The manner that each person experiences stress depends on many factors, such as their ability to cope, personality, available resources, and stimuli resulting from their social environment (Sanbonmatsu, Hill, Moore, Behrends, & Uchino, 2014). Because of these various influences, everyone is capable of handling stress differently.

Evolution of Stress

Emotions play a much larger role on physiology than people may realize. Throughout the course of natural history, it is theorized that humans developed cognitive survival instincts in order to overcome dangerous surroundings and threatening provocations (Porges, 2007). This self-preservation led to development of a neurological mechanism known as the autonomic nervous system (“ANS”), which is the primary controller of cognition and homeostasis (Buijss & Van Eden, 2000). The ANS, discovered in the second century A.D. by Galen of Pergamum, is an automatic switch located in the central brain that alternates between two gears, depending on the person’s state of mind and environmental surroundings. According to Ackerknecht (1974), the alternation is an elaborate neurological system that regulates physiological processes, as each gear triggers a specific array of body functions. These gears are also known as the sympathetic nervous system (“SNS”) *Fight or Flight Response*, and the parasympathetic nervous system (“PNS”) *Rest and Digest*.

The ANS balances out the body, engaging from one gear to the other so it can perform at its highest capacity. After a long day of fighting saber tooth tigers, the PNS activates so the body can relax and replenish its energy stores. If a band of raiders approaches the village, the SNS triggers so that everyone can run for safety or fight them off. If the body does not maintain a balance between both gears, the body will fail to perform adequately (Blakemore & Jennett, 2014). When a person encounters stress, their mind perceives fear and powerlessness, when this happens the SNS triggers a series of psychophysiological modifications intended for short burst frequency. These occurrences happen simultaneously throughout the entire body; heartbeat becomes rapid, breathing shallows, muscles tense up, attention narrows, the digestive system slows down, hair follicles stand upright, in addition to several other changes (Reeder and

Kramer). Although the SNS response is natural and intended for survival, society has evolved in such a way that many people suffer from over stimulation and perpetuated SNS activity.

Health Complications with Unregulated Stress Levels

A high volume work environment can create an uninterrupted state of emotional distress. Family traumas, sick relatives, or even moving can create perpetuated stress levels. An over productive SNS is the precursor to conditions like chronic stress, myalgia, cardio-pulmonary complications, and anxiety. Stress related illnesses develop when the human body is unable to control this response and regulate homeostasis (Guerry M. Peavy, et al., 2009). Even if an individual can escape the source of stress for a weekend or sabbatical, its impact will return when business carries on as usual. If the mind does not compel the body to relax and recharge on a frequency that matches the exposure to stress, the system will fail to perform optimally and it will eventually break down. Stress can be healthy of course, as it puts the body into high performance mode when necessary, much like a racecar engine responds to a nitrous oxide injection. A little every now and then in moderation is good for performance, but too much and too often without proper maintenance might cause the system to combust (metaphorically). Common symptoms of a human systemic breakdown include: inhibited mental performance, operational inefficiency, substance addiction, hypertension, and metabolic disorder (Chandola, Brunner, & Marmot, 2006).

Ripple Effects from Unmanaged Work Stress

The human stress response is a complex process of infinite neurotransmission that originates from an intense negative emotional response. The stress hormone, cortisol, is released from a very primitive area in the center of the brain and the outcome has been known to provoke physical aggression and even violence (Miller, Chen, & Zhou, 2007). Therefore, consequences

of unmanaged stress may extend well beyond the workplace if a person unintentionally remains charged with negative emotion after leaving for the day. An uncontrolled SNS response can cause a person to lash out at unsuspecting family members, friends, and complete strangers. Antagonistic misconduct like domestic abuse and commuter rage are a few examples of this behavior pattern. In some workplaces, occupational stress was so prevalent that employees resorted to violent outbursts toward their colleagues. In fact, the term “Going Postal” originated from a series of events where U.S. Postal Service employees opened gunfire at their stations because of job-related stress (Walter, 2012). To make matters worse, stress is naturally contagious. In a recent study, researchers discovered a relationship between elevated cortisol levels (the stress hormone) after observing another person’s stressed response. Their explanation for this phenomenon was that humans are naturally empathetic beings and speculated that it may be linked to prehistoric survival instincts (Engert, Plessow, Kirschbaum, & Singer, 2014).

According to a recent survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (2012), sixty-nine percent of American wage-earners suffer from stress related to their occupation, and almost half of them “admit they need to reduce the stressors in their lives.” The second statistic reveals something interesting about the perceptions of western society, because stressful encounters are typically unavoidable. Additionally, constant exposure to elevated stress levels often compel people to find a sense of normalcy in this behavior pattern, making them more susceptible to self-inflicted stress and over-reactive to non-threatening circumstances. Conditions like anxiety cause the mind to plague itself with incessant thoughts of worry, pessimism, negative imagery, and unrealistic expectations. It seems that a large percentage of the surveyed population may not realize that people have the ability to actively choose between being stressed or relaxed... despite exposure to stressors.

Overcoming Stress in the Workplace

Overcoming stress may not be as difficult as it seems. The idea of managing occupational stress may actually be more stressful than the practice itself. Management could be more or less a matter of learning how to practice personal awareness, cognition control, and self-management. The frequency of stressors does not necessarily determine a person's state of mind either, but rather their sense of peace may depend more upon their proclivity to take precaution and respond in a way that maneuvers around health risk behavior. Chronic stress, like many other preventable health issues, often intertwines and develops alongside collective psychosomatic dysfunctions. Therefore averting chronic stress can also help alleviate and even prevent symptoms of many other health problems. When a person chooses to adopt self-awareness and modified health behavior, they are actively preventing future health complications (Bolnick, Millard, & Dugas, 2013). There are many theories about why the public seems to lack an inclination for proactive behavior, one being the influences observed in the workplace.

Identifying Behavioral Influences in the Workplace

A group of researchers examined the effect of behavior influences in the workplace by using the Jackson Return Potential Model ("JRPM") to assess the intensity of normative power, or the influence of collective approval versus disapproval, for an assortment of behaviors. They did this by placing a scale of perceptions to measure the perceived values for a variety of health related activities such as tobacco use, nutrition, and exposure to occupational hazards. The researchers then evaluated several worksites to assess the aggregate perceptions of each subject group alongside individual employees' willingness to adopt healthier related behaviors. They found that each workplace has its own pattern of normative powers and associated willingness to adopt change, and concluded that a relationship might exist between the perceptions of

employees (i.e. what they consider adoptable behaviors) and the influences derived from their work environment or occupation community (Linnan, 2005).

The relationship between normative power and health behavior may help explain how influences within a workplace can affect the self-efficacy of personnel health behavior. Because of this indication, perhaps evaluating the physical and nonphysical workplace might be one way to identify stressors and potential opportunities for modified behavior patterns. It might also lead to a better understanding of the influences that directly affect each employee; thus making it easier to tailor innovative methods that reduce, or at the very least help employees navigate around harmful behavior patterns. Additionally, the staff will need to have enough assurance and support from their employer to have confidence that they can change.

Health Beliefs

In 1974, Marshall H. Becker created the *Health Belief Model* to explain the motivations that lead to performance of a desired healthy behavior. According to the model, it is possible to predict whether someone will pursue health-related behaviors by accounting for their personal beliefs, influences, and attitude. Environmental and socio-economic factors can also have a contributing impact on a person's health belief. Many health promoters incorporate this model as the level of difficulty and labor required to carry out a desired behavior must be equal or outweighed by the value of incentive for carrying out a desired behavior. In other words, it must be worth their time and effort to adopt changes. In the workplace, performance cannot compromise job security; therefore, accessibility to opportunities and resources for performance of the desired behavior will further determine its likelihood of successful adoption (Becker, 1974). Employee engagement is a fundamental element to making sustainable changes to the workplace culture, but the habitat must be equipped with resources and allow opportunities for

employees to participate in the first place. Healthy living is an organic process, it is holistic in development, it is a slow progression, and it is never-ending. For every desirable behavior, several underlying boundaries potentially deter a person from becoming healthier.

Summary of Background Research Findings

In order to combat an issue as complex as stress, perhaps the best first step is to raise awareness of its true scientific nature. This might provide some new insight and lead the employees toward a newfound willingness to change. Presenting the nature of stressors and common symptoms of stress through an informal group dialogue may also help establish a better understanding for the entire business culture. By learning how to recognize their symptoms, the target audience might even have the capacity to respond with compassionate awareness in the future. Finally, assessing normative behavior patterns, influences, and perceived limitations might help determine approaches that are most feasible; as tailoring the best tools and techniques for each employee will require an understanding of the impact that it has on productivity.

Addressing Occupational Stress in a Small Business

Introduction to the Business

The office of Cynthia R. López, Attorney at Law, is a small firm compared to some of the competing immigration practices in El Paso, Texas. However, Ms. López opened her practice in March 2011, just three years after graduation from law school. Currently, her practice comprises the professional skills of one attorney, a paralegal, a legal assistant, and an administrative assistant. Although it is a small business, Cynthia R. López serves clients nationwide and every member of Ms. López's staff is dedicated to making sure that each client has the best possible experience throughout their grueling path towards obtaining a legal right to live in the United States. According to Ms. López and her staff, the immigration process is lengthy and often it is

tremendously stressful for clients and their families. The anxiety that develops from fear of deportation is unimaginable. Most of the time, the client is held in a detention center while stressed out family members or close friends sort through the minutiae and paperwork with legal consult. In some cases, the detained client is the family's primary source of income, meaning that each day they are detained the family is struggling to survive financially. Cynthia's team handles these cases on a daily basis, some of the stories that clients share are heart wrenching. In addition, many of Ms. López's clients are refugees from countries bombarded with gang violence, war, and drug cartels. It is a typical occurrence for any member of her staff to learn that a client, regardless of age or gender, faces imminent death or violent horrors if forced to return to their home country. The office is always restocking their surplus of tissue boxes because it is rather common for a client to break down in tears during a consultation.

Employee Stress Behaviors at Cynthia R. López, Attorney at Law

Most of Ms. López's workday involves a commuting route between the office, detention centers, and courtrooms. When Ms. López is unable to drive to the distant Otero County Processing Center, one of her assistants will make the two-hour trip on her behalf. Her office staff routinely handles a high volume workload, juggling between intake forms, petitions, billing, and phone calls. Consequently, opportunities to break away from tasks are limited and rare. When discussing personal associations with stress, a recurring pattern of behaviors and stressors seemed to present itself with Cynthia and her team.

During higher volume workdays, tension in the office becomes more apparent, particularly when colleagues interact with stressed clients. They reported a tendency to bicker more frequently during such occasions, and admittedly raise their voices in an aggressive manner towards one another or even with clients. Physical symptoms of chronic stress were also shared,

such as body wide aches, muscle tension, headaches, fatigue, and lingering colds. One employee shared recurring experiences with anxiety, suspiciousness, and worrying. Clients have even complained to Ms. López, that a staff member was rude to them. Rudeness might be indicative of behavioral stress signals, such as aggressiveness, short temperaments, or irritability.

Designing Interventions for an Immigration Law Practice

Assessment of the Work Habitat

I applied my understanding of the JRPM and Health Belief Model to Cynthia R. López's office by focusing on indications of normative behavior patterns and existing health beliefs in their work environment. Before creating my presentation, I visited the office in El Paso and casually discussed the topic of stress with Ms. López and her staff. When asked about their current methods of coping with stress, one of the employees mentioned leaving for lunch as their way of unwinding. They also shared experiences where staff members would go on a walk around the block when faced with particularly trying situation. While discussing workplace stressors with Ms. López's personnel, I made certain connections between their experiences and my researched studies. For example, the fact that employee stress levels in the environment become elevated when a client comes in with an upsetting story or antagonistic behaviors.

I noticed that some behaviors observed by employees following exposure to stressful clients seemed to have elevated their overall stress levels even further; examples include curt responses, rudeness, and raised voice levels. When employees are stressed, their mindsets carry over to the next incoming client and antagonistic behaviors result in elevated levels being perpetually reinforced. As the condition worsens subsequent behaviors throughout the remaining duration of their workday creates a cycle of emotional tension and anxiety.

Everyone including Ms. López agreed to feeling stressed because of the incessant phone calls. Although Ms. López does not typically answer the phone when it rings, she found the frequent calls quite distracting. Her assistants on the other hand are obligated to answer the phone whenever it rings, so they must physically break away from their tasks in order to respond to incoming callers. While discussing the topic of constant phone ringing, I encountered the experience of this disruption firsthand. The volume of the phone ringing was in fact quite loud, and the frequency was distracting. *Noise stress* is term used to describe an experience of anxiety in response to high levels of background noise (Miller & Spence, 2013). Because the business revolves around responding to the phone, interventions that require walking away from the workstation are not possible.

Limitations from Performing Desired Health Behavior

I learned that employees are on the road periodically throughout the day, so stress may erupt while they are driving. Being in the car during onset of stress will limit the amount of physical activity that may be done counter its effects. In addition, Ms. López personally appears in court on behalf of her clients and visitors frequently come into the office for appointments, consequently employee accessibility to stress relief gadgetry like self-massage tools is limited in consideration of necessity for business professionalism. Using concepts from the JPRM, I inquired about the nature of typical office activities at Cynthia R. López and attempted to determine whether the employees had any willingness to adopt certain behavior changes over others. One noteworthy concern that everyone seemed to share was that there was a lot of work that needed to be completed and not enough human bandwidth to carry out necessary tasks.

I concluded that the most effective interventions would need to centralize around behaviors that are not obvious to clients and outside parties. Naturally, performance of modified

behaviors also cannot compromise productivity. In consideration of the limitations and boundaries described above, I determined that perhaps the staff of Cynthia R. López might consider adopting low impact approaches that incorporate breath and mindful contemplative exercises to manage their stress.

Potential Interventions for Cynthia R. López, Attorney At Law

Exercises to Regulate Breath

Respiration is one of the body's most basic physiological functions. The rate of respiration is also an indicator for current mood as emotions closely intertwine with cardiopulmonary activities. Shortened shallow breaths are typically indicative of stress because of the SNS function, whereas a slow deep rhythmic pattern indicates relaxation because it forces the body to switch over to the PNS (Sawada, 2001). By mindfully regulating breath, it is possible to decrease adrenaline levels and switch off the Fight or Flight response with very little effort. There are many approaches to modifying a breathing pattern. One of the more popular methods incorporates Ayurvedic healing practices that are more commonly known as Yogi breathing. These techniques can be done in any setting and some can be performed covertly, meaning it is undetectable to others nearby.

One such example is called *Sama Vritti* or "Equal Breathing" (Shakeshaft, 2012). The goal is to focus on the amount of time it takes for air to flow in and out of the body through the nose. The practitioner begins by slowly breathing into the diaphragm for a count of four, holds the breath for a count of four, then exhales slowly for a count of four until all of the air has pushed out of their lungs. As they become more advanced, the yogi can increase the amount of time with this routine, moving up to a five count or even ten count if possible. By transforming short and shallow respiration into long and deep breaths, a person can actively engage their body

and mind to reset at any time. Modifying a breathing pattern can become even more effective if the person is able to develop self-awareness and witness an opportunity to cultivate mindfulness and compassion.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

Many researchers have concluded that Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (“MBSR”) is an effective approach to reducing symptoms of chronic stress as well as other mental health conditions like Social Anxiety disorder (“SAD”) and even physiological disorders like chronic myalgia. MBSR involves a collection of mindfulness exercises, including various meditation forms, self-talk, quiet contemplation, and yoga. It is believed that MBSR may help individuals reduce their symptoms by developing abilities to transform and regulate their emotions. This can be accomplished by cultivating awareness of the way emotions manifest, when and how long they occur, and the perceived experiences that are subsequently expressed (Goldin & Gross, 2010). The practice of MBSR has even been adapted for adolescents in a program called Learning to BREATHE, integrating the themes into a program that is shorter and more accessible to students. The primary objective of MBSR and Learning to BREATHE is to teach social and emotional intelligence. This potentially leads to developed self-awareness and self-management. First, they are taught how to recognize their emotions, personal values, individual strengths, and limitations. Then they learn how to manage said emotions and subsequent behaviors in order to achieve their goals. The end result typically leads to a cultivated capacity for empathy, relationship building, and responsible decision making (Broderick, 2013).

Mindful Movement

Another very simple yet effective approach to raising peace of mind is a series of light impact exercises developed by a Vietnamese Buddhist monk named Thich Nhat Hanh, at his

Plum Village Monastery in the French countryside in 1998. He coined the term *Mindful Movement* to describe these “meditations in motion” as they invoke a sense of mind and body awareness and presence. The ten movements are based on elements of yoga and tai chi, to be performed in conjunction with deep diaphragmatic breaths. The exercises were originally designed as a way to take a break from meditation, however many in the western world have realized that they can also be used for taking a break from their workloads as well (Nhat Hanh, Holland, & Pruniers, 1998). Some individuals choose to do one movement each day, some find it more useful to go through the entire routine, and some simply have them up on display to use whenever they are feeling in need of a mental break. The benefit of Mindful Movement is that almost anyone can do these exercises, regardless of fitness level.

By teaching the staff compassionate self-awareness, breathing techniques, and Mindful Movement, each employee might have more capacity for change through modified perspectives and personal empowerment. Because equal breathing requires absolutely no tools, devices, or accommodations; performance of the techniques can be done in just about any setting, including the courtroom. Reinforcing this tool with MBSR training might also help the employees to establish competencies that help improve their perceptions of stressors in all aspects of their lives, including personal affairs and workplace incidents. This may even help reduce the risk of transferring home stressors to the office environment.

Designing a Workplace Stress Presentation

Purpose of the Presentation

I wanted to provide the staff of Cynthia R. López, Attorney at Law, with a simple guide to overcoming stress on a daily basis. Because this is a new concept for them, I knew that it would require an introduction to the topic and a generalized guideline to execute on their own. I

also wanted them to have something to easily reference if they needed to refresh their understanding. I began by illustrating the following steps for practical application: learn your stressors, recognize stress before and when it erupts, identify your triggers and responses, check in with yourself periodically, and adopt a management tool or technique that works best for you. There are so many tools and resources available online and the variety of methods currently in practice is endless. Further, no one method is the best, some just happen to be more accessible or popular. In order to provide the staff with an abundance of useful material in a short time period, I detailed my steps along with information about the nature of this phenomenon, and designed my slides so they would have an opportunity to learn more about my potential interventions in addition to a small variety of other possible methods. The primary goal of this seminar was to teach the employees how to recognize stress in order to be more aware of the symptoms and associated risk factors. I also wanted to teach them about mindfulness so they could approach stress more proactively in the future. My learning objective was to obtain a better understanding of their personal associations with stress.

In addition to the interventions that I later narrowed down for their workplace, I discussed the benefits of other tools that could be of use on their own if desired such as art, exercise, self-talk, and stretching. The overall business goal of this project was to improve the quality of life for Ms. López and her employees. During the presentation, I illustrated the nature of stress and communicated the importance of modifying stress behaviors. In doing so, I hope they will eventually find an increase in productivity, improved relationships in the office, and more collaborative communications.

Presentation Day

Ms. López arranged for the business to close during the latter half of the day so that I could present without disruption. The phone continued to ring of course, but Ms. López hired a consultant to answer any incoming calls. The employees participated in an open dialogue and I used this as an opportunity to assess their personal associations with stress. Our group discussions brought about some shared experiences and observations. For example, they mentioned an issue with occasional arguments between coworkers and clients. I took note of this behavior, as a reduction in the frequency or intensity of argumentative behavior might be indicative of a successful outcome. I acquired valuable information about the workspace limitations during this time. The casual nature of our interaction also allowed me the opportunity to identify specific reasons why employees may not have considered stress management before, as they confirmed my hypothesis that they were unaware of the fact that stress was so intertwined with their physical health. They reported a newfound awareness that activities like meditation and exercise were actually possible. Their previous understanding was that stress management required a significant investment of time and energy.

Expectations

Other than time required for attendance in my seminar, employee productivity should not have been negatively impacted. As they do not need to step away from their workstations or break away in order to use a tool while in the office. Mindful movements might be the only exception, but only if they felt uncomfortable completing exercises at their workstations. MBSR is a tool that incorporates cognitive processing and it evolves over time into a habitual practice of observing stressful encounters with more compassionate awareness. Therefore, it is entirely reliant on a person's capacity to think mindfully of their present moment and cultivate a sense of individual purpose. Equal breathing is an activity that centralizes on a person's natural ability to

breathe. It does not require high impact physical activity and employees can practice the technique from just about any anatomical body position. Finally, Mindful Movement exercises are low impact, require very little time, and they are simple. As such, physical fitness levels, environments, and daily routines should not deter an employee's ability to carry out any of the suggested techniques.

The benefit that I aimed to sell to Cynthia R. López's office was an easily modifiable, yet systematic approach to reduce their stress levels. With Ms. López's consent, I delivered a variety of suggestions through a series of presentation slides and open dialogue. In addition to the overview, I introduced equal breath and Mindfulness Meditation exercises to provide a more practical understanding. Ms. López informed her office that attendance was mandatory and lunch was catered by the firm as an added incentive, so everyone in the office was present and accounted for. After my presentation, I advised Ms. López of modifying the phone volume or tone as well.

Outcomes from the Intervention

The initial responses were positive and I am very pleased to say that my presentation delivered the message that I had hoped to convey. Ms. López's participation and encouragement also conveyed a message from the employer that stress management is worth the time, effort, and consideration of the personnel. Based on my understanding of the Health Belief Model, I have reason to believe that Ms. López's endorsement generated a positive influence on her employees' willingness to adopt healthier stress behaviors. The group seemed very receptive to my suggestions of adopting both MBSR and equal breathing into their daily routines. A couple of the employees noted that they did not realize stress was so complex. During a later visit to the office, I learned the employees placed a copy of the Mindful Movement exercises on the refrigerator in

their break room. I found this small gesture very encouraging as it told me they found a neutral location to practice the exercises without major disruption from clients and outside business contacts. It also told me they used their own creativity to incorporate mindfulness into their workplace, because I did not suggest placing the instructions in a clearly visible location.

Follow Up

I checked in on Cynthia R. López's office by calling in to ask some generalized questions about the environment. I was interested to see if they perceived stressful encounters differently in their workplace. Ms. López relayed my inquiry to her staff and they communicated to me through subsequent interactions as well. Although they all seem to agree that my presentation made them more able to recognize stress when it erupted, their ability to adopt equal breathing on demand was rather limited because they often forgot to practice this technique. The main issue was that they simply forgot about the breathing technique and mindfulness went out the window when employees faced multiple stressors at the same time. One employee mentioned that it is sometimes difficult to remember mindfulness and equal breathing when the phone is ringing off the hook and there is a client crying in the office. Nonetheless, staff members do attempt to practice equal breathing when they happen to remember it on occasion, particularly because it is not blatantly obvious to everyone else.

I was pleased to learn they have all become somewhat more aware of their breathing patterns, particularly when dealing with an emotionally activated circumstance. In addition, merely discussing their stressors has helped them mentally prepare for recurring encounters. One staff member noted how in the first meeting, she thought about how stressed she gets when one of her colleagues is rude. Having that realization made her more able to handle the other person's behavior with compassionate awareness, and it did not bother her as much as it had before. Ms.

López also shared some personal observations of the office culture after my presentation. Staff members do continue to argue from time to time, the frequency of argumentative behaviors has decreased but the intensity has risen. Although employees do not argue as often as they had before, their voices and degree of emotional tension seems to be more elevated. If given the opportunity to continue my study of this group, I would like to learn more about this phenomenon and work more closely with the group to see if it is possible to establish a greater sense of camaraderie.

Setbacks and Silver Linings

Unfortunately, clients have still complained about rude employees, after discussing the issue with her staff, Ms. López has found that disagreements have frequently been the result of a client being hyper irritable and rude to the employee as a result of their own misunderstanding. In cases such as these, Ms. López has sided with her employee. However, admits that she may readdress the problem in the near future if it becomes more of an apparent issue. Per my suggestion, the office has lowered the volume of their phone, which according to the office has yielded a significant improvement to the environmental stressors. I asked everyone if this change has made any difference and they all responded positively. It was surprising how such a small modification to the work environment turned out to make the greatest improvement to the workplace stress levels. Although my suggestion was minor in my own mind, it was unexpectedly the most successful intervention.

When asked if the employees are happier than they were before my presentation and study of their environment, the responses I received were somewhat obscure. Although the reduced phone volume has definitely made the employees feel more at ease, the constant ringing is still bothersome. I suggested the idea of changing the ringtone to something more pleasant

sounding and Ms. López has looked into phones with other ringtones. Unfortunately, at this time it is not cost effective as the current phones are somewhat new and in good condition. The employees shared their feelings about whether or not they believe they have more control over their stress levels. All but one employee had a positive response. Interestingly, the employee that still felt stress was beyond her control, seemed to have the most obvious stress related behaviors; particularly when the phone was ringing off the hook.

Another staff member mentioned she would feel more in control of her stress if Ms. López brought on another office administrator. Ms. López has taken this comment graciously and has added a part-time employee to her team. This may also be the result of a significant workload increase after the recent executive order delivered by President Obama on immigration. Because of the recent change, undocumented immigrants who have resided in the United States for at least five years will now have the opportunity to receive work permits. The change has also spared many people from a looming threat of deportation. In addition, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program has been expanded for immigrants older than 30. The executive order should affect approximately 4 million undocumented people, and each one of them needs guidance through the legal system (Ehrenfreund, 2014). Needless to say, the impact on Cynthia R. López and her staff has just increased their amount of work quite significantly.

Summary

This experience has taught me a lot about the multiple disciplines related to stress. I have learned that although the problem can be improved with individual self-awareness, it also requires an understanding the environmental and societal influences on human psyche. After observing the effectiveness of lowering their telephone volume, I realized that reducing stress

can be as easy as making a small change to the habitat and that studying my target audience in their workspace is the most effective way to identify occupational stressors, physical and nonphysical limitations, and potential boundaries to behavior modification. I have come to realize that stress in the workplace is inevitable, it may even be necessary, so teaching people how to manage their own wellbeing without compromising productivity is just one step towards creating a comprehensive solution.

Directions for Future Research

If I were to conduct this project differently I would elect to do so with more resources. I feel the presentation has provided them with an awareness of the problem, but it might be more effective to give them a thorough MBSR course, as it is more comprehensive. I would also be interested to see if it is possible to work with other known methods of stress reduction, such as having a massage therapist come by once a month or placing stress relief activities in the break room to see if they are useful. Although the experience has been very informative, future studies might benefit from the use of biometrics sensors to measure the physiological changes like respiration, body temperature, and heart rate. In doing so, this would provide more quantitative data. I feel the personnel of Cynthia R. López, Attorney at Law, are very receptive to positive changes in their work environment because they all had personal experiences with the problem. It is apparent to me that Ms. López cares for her team and she values their wellbeing. It is also difficult to focus on her own work at hand when the office is emotionally activated. Before this project, I did not realize how stressful business leadership positions are, particularly when stress levels in the office are heightened. This realization has broadened my understanding of the problem. The most profound lesson I have received in this project has been learning that stress can be directed up the hierarchy as well as down the chain of command.

Conclusion

Although the staff members have been empowered with the understanding that stress is manageable, they will need to learn how to practice their newly learned techniques on their own. To have an innate capacity for managing stress levels on their own, I feel they will also need to adopt habitual behavior patterns outside of the office. In addition, their modified behavior might be encouraged by group activities that are aimed to reduce stress. Some businesses carry out a morning or afternoon exercise to reset everyone's mindset for instance. Additional interventions to boost camaraderie may help reduce the frequency of employee bickering, perhaps team building exercises might be worth consideration. Ms. López has taken my suggestions with value and assured me that she will consider other interventions in the future. I believe my project has generated positive results, but managing stress levels in the workplace will need to be a continuous process.

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