An Appraisal-Coping Model of Occupational Stress Outcomes: Distress and Eustress.

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Abstract

Occupational stress is a significant problem throughout the industrialised world. The prevalence of occupational stress is increasing and the negative consequences of stress for individual health and wellbeing are also acknowledged to be increasing. This attention to the negative aspects of stress is, however, one sided. Stress, if negotiated appropriately, can produce positive responses and outcomes (Nelson & Simmons, 2003). The present research returned to the original stress conceptualisation as proposed by Selye (1976) and addressed the positive response to the stress process, termed ‘eustress’.

The Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) was adapted by including eustress as the positive response to the stress process, in contrast to the negative response of distress. The model posits stress to be a process of transaction between an individual and their environment, and proposes two appraisal processes: cognitive appraisal of event meaning and appraisal of coping options. These aspects of stressor negotiation in turn determine the degree of eustress and distress experienced. Eustress and distress are further posited to be antecedents to positive and negative changes in long-term health, morale and social functioning.

One hundred and forty four employees from three New Zealand organizations completed a questionnaire that assessed cognitive appraisals and coping processes used to deal with a stressful event and state affective responses as representative of eustress and distress. Eustress was represented by the work-related affective states of high pleasure/high arousal and hope. The precursors of eustress were challenge appraisal, adaptive coping and increased motivation. A measure of distress and a model of precursors to distress were also proposed but require further research.
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