

# Stress at Workplaces

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## ***Introduction***

Today, people talk about stress more than ever. This indicates that society has become complex and that mental issues have been neglected in the past.

As you know, the Mariners Act has been partially amended (amended in April 2022 and enforced in April 2023). The amendments mainly involve the introduction of the occupational physician system, partial modification of medical checkups, measures for overwork (face-to-face consultation and guidance for long work hours), and measures for mental health. I will not go into details here, but other sectors have already adopted the above. Therefore, this change constitutes part of the major trend of tackling stress in general, regardless of the type of industry or occupation. The medical institution where I belong is no exception, and it has implemented long overdue drastic remedies to address long work hours of physicians as part of their work style reform. I will not discuss their impact and pros and cons here, but I hope that you will recognize that the subject of stress is attracting attention in the current social trend.

## ***Different generations think of stress differently***

Now, what do you think of the elusive concept of stress? There may be few people who can clearly define stress because the simple word of “stress” means different things to different people. Some may argue that this is obvious because different people think in different ways. However, this argument is both right and wrong.

Today, Japan is experiencing an aging population, which means that the workforce is also getting older. As you know, the shipping industry is undergoing the same phenomenon. There is no instant solution to the issue of aging workforce, which may also constitute the social trend. However, from the perspective of addressing stress, it is also true that we are likely to face some obstacles. This is mainly attributed to how stress can mean different things, not only to different people, but also to different generations.

For example, I am sure those of you who are more senior (e.g., those aged 45 or older) have said (thought), “Things used to be harder,” “I wish they would stop calling such easy work

difficult," "We can no longer discipline young people these days," or "They give me headache by saying that everything is harassment."

It is rare to find someone who does not say (or think) so while working normally with younger generations. To be honest, I myself think so quite often (but not out loud). Although you may be able to dismiss this as something that can happen among different generations, we need to come to an agreement about measures for stress, regardless of generation.

### ***Everyone feels stressed***

I would like you to remember that everyone feels stressed, regardless of generation or personality, and that this may sometimes worsen and develop into depressive states.

I am not worried about those who think this is obvious, but I am concerned about those who think that it is up to individuals to cope with stress. I would like to remind you that anyone can fall into depressive states, which may or may not be diagnosed as depression by a doctor. If the expression "depressive state" sounds like an overstatement, you may call this condition "feeling down." If you continue feeling blue for a prolonged period of time, you may fall into a depressive state. (I myself experienced a couple of alarming episodes, which I will discuss later.)

When this happens, senior employees as mentioned above and those in senior positions play key roles. Their response significantly affects how the stress is addressed at the workplace. Since episodes of stress vary by individual, there is no magic bullet to cope with it. However, we can still take some measures.

### ***Characteristics of those prone to feeling stressed***

Before discussing these measures for coping with stress, let's test ourselves based on the following known characteristics of those prone to feeling stressed.

*They are people who are perfectionists, cannot say no, feel obliged to do something, insist others should do something, are sensitive to how others react, are too serious about everything, cannot properly relax, dwell over unpleasant experiences, and so on.*

### ***Specific symptoms of stress (mind, feeling, and mood)***

What symptoms do we experience when stress mounts and approaches the limit? Let's go over mental symptoms (feelings) first.

*You feel down, are unable to divert yourself, do not feel rested even after you have rested, are unable to perform what you do on a daily basis (feel overwhelmed), become cranky, feel annoyed by trivial things, feel unmotivated, are unable to focus, are not interested in anything, and so on.*

## **Specific symptoms of stress (physical)**

Next, let's go over physical symptoms.

*Stiff neck, headache, abdominal pain, stomachache, back ache, chest pain, difficulty breathing, fatigue, lack of appetite or excessive appetite, diarrhea, constipation, feeling cold or chill, constant tears, loss of sleep, excessive sleep, etc.*

## **Many people do not notice signs of stress**

The tricky thing is that we often do not identify these signs as signs of stress or realize that they are caused by stress. On the contrary, those who can quickly realize when they are stressed or in alarming conditions are less prone to accumulate much stress.

## **Effective measures at workplaces**

What effective measures can we take at workplaces?

The most important thing is having the same understanding about stress within the department (team). I would like to reiterate that everyone should have accurate knowledge about it (i.e., that anyone can feel stressed regardless of generation or rank and can become mentally and physically unwell, and that if such conditions worsen, they may not be able to perform their job).

Without the colleagues' understanding, no symptomatic therapy will help. Specifically, it will be counterproductive if the colleagues of a stressed individual are not understanding and criticize the individual for taking a leave of absence for what they think is trivial, because this may cause the individual to feel as if resting is stressful, which is supposed to be the most important thing. This is a common situation. I would especially like those in senior positions to keep this in mind.

Specific measures for coping with stress include the following.

*Sleeping well (get quality sleep), eating foods you like, meeting up with people you like (in particular, talking about non-work things), taking some quality time alone (proactively creating a facilitating environment for this), etc.*

## **Recommended solution: establish a system**

I personally recommend establishing a system. Each department should systematize measures for coping with stress and relaxing.

First, the supervisor should explain the importance of measures for coping with stress and solicit ideas for the system and methods. The team may suggest many different ideas: doing light exercises, leaving stressed individuals alone (rather than speaking to them) during breaks, taking a long leave, taking short breaks at work, playing games together, watching movies/TV shows together and sharing comments, posting one riddle per week (trying to solve it together), getting each member to post their favorite saying each week, making presentations about what they like doing (their interests) at the workplace, drawing pictures, doing Japanese calligraphy, making *haiku* poems, holding Othello contests, doing *tsume shogi* puzzles together, and so on. Anything is fine. What matters is that when someone puts forward their ideas, their supervisor, those in senior positions, and senior members should not reject them. Older members may not understand how such measures may help, but just give them a try even if they are long shots.

If no one comes up with any idea, the supervisor should suggest what they think is effective. This should draw some reactions, most of which will probably be negative (that is how things go in the world). If anyone makes a negative comment, ask them, "What do you think we should do then? I'm not too sure myself, either. Any good ideas?" What matters is to share information about establishing a system for coping with stress together.

Such systems may take a variety of forms and doing something together with the team itself may cause stress due to differences in whether or not they work onboard ship, how busy they are, and interpersonal relationships. However, the key is to bring their attention to things other than work. In addition to individuals relaxing from work, you should establish a system and methods for diversions. I believe that this is the responsibility of executives at offices and supervisors at local sites.

Obviously, it is important to implement ways for them to ask for help (hotline, etc.) when in need.

In any case, those prone to accumulating stress should keep persisting and enduring. As mentioned earlier, more senior members and others may think, "Are they stressed about such trivial things?" or "This wouldn't bother me," but the stressed individuals are really struggling. I would like you to understand that, and all employees should also become aware of that to improve the work environment, even if it is only slightly.

## ***My stress episodes***

Here, I would like to share two episodes of stress that almost caused me to have a nervous breakdown.

The first one occurred when my wife was hospitalized. Her condition itself was not very concerning and at first, I was secretly glad that I had more free time for myself. However, after spending time by myself at home (we did not have a child then), I gradually found it difficult to lift my mood no matter what I did. In particular, when I watched comedy shows on TV, I suddenly started feeling indescribable anxiety (for some unknown reason). At work, someone said that I sounded somehow tired, which prompted me to see a doctor. The doctor

told me I was in a depressive state due to stress. That was when I first realized I was feeling stressed.

The other episode occurred in the middle of a work day. During a meeting, my sight suddenly became dark and I had difficulty breathing. It was as if I could not breathe no matter how hard I tried, and I hurried outside to breathe in the outside air, which did not make me feel better (I now know that I was suffering hyperventilation syndrome). I simply panicked that I could not breathe, which made my fear worse. That was when my colleague noticed that something was wrong and called a doctor for an emergency visit.

In a nutshell, both symptoms (signs) were caused by stress. I had thought that this would never happen to me because I am an optimistic and carefree person, so I was very shocked to experience symptoms associated with stress. As for the second episode, I was surprised that I suffered these symptoms when I was not stressed or very busy at work. Indeed, I had been very busy at work and tense before the outbreak of the severe symptoms, but the symptoms appeared during a normal period of time when things were as peaceful as a calm sea. I hope my story has helped you understand the reason why I have been emphasizing that stress-related symptoms can happen to anyone, that such symptoms develop suddenly and unexpectedly, and that all employees need to understand this.

### ***What if your colleague takes a leave of absence due to stress?***

In such cases, do not rush and wait patiently. After they return, you need to accommodate their needs as much as possible in planning their workload after consulting with the occupational physician.

Once you fall into a depressive state, it takes time to get out of it. Even those who have seemingly recovered are worried that they may fall into a depressive state again (and they cannot say that out loud). Some may criticize such people, saying, "It is unfair that they are given special treatment while the rest of us are working normally," or "They are getting paid like the rest of us even though they are not doing their job properly." Such words will further hurt the stressed individual. What matters here is to obtain accurate knowledge about stress and establish a system for diversions in advance.

### ***Conclusion***

Finally, I would like to talk about psychosomatic and psychiatric care. Some people may hesitate to receive such care. I totally understand how they feel and it is true that some doctors may not be right for you. However, if your condition becomes serious (or you have identified warning signs yourself), seek help as soon as possible. My philosophy is that we should ultimately prioritize ourselves over work. You do not have to dedicate yourself to work by sacrificing your mental health and pushing yourself to the limit. If you really cannot take it anymore, take the courage and show the signs to others. I am sure your colleagues will help you.

Unfortunately, we see society, workplaces, and probably job responsibilities becoming more and more complex compared to how they used to be, and I believe this trend will continue for a while. We will never be able to eliminate stress. I believe that the quickest solution is to understand it correctly and establish a system to address it in advance. Let's all take care of our mind and body and stay healthy!