Problem of Stress and Coping with Stress in Paramedic Culture: Analytical Essay

What is Stress?

Before being applied as a human condition, 'stress' was used as a Physic term to describe enough tension on an object to break it.

The term 'stress' first became popular by Hans Selye in reference to a human condition.

Selye (1956) suggests that stress is when the body is faced with a demand to adapt, producing pain or pleasure, it triggers a nonspecific response of the body.

Selye (1956) observed that the physiological response or arousal of the body was very similar for good or bad situations, suggesting that the body does not detect a difference between good and bad stress.

Distress – reacting negatively to a stressor which is expressed through adverse psychological states (Nelson and Simmons, 2011)

Eustress – " a positive psychological response to a stressor, as indicated by the presence of positive psychological states" (Nelson and Simmons, 2011).

A more recent definition suggests stress is not just the inability to perceived threat physically but also mentally, emotionally, and to spiritual well-being resulting in physiological responses and adaptations (Chopra, 2000). Symptoms of stress in the workplace

Some signs of stress in the workplace are an increase in sick leave, reduction in performance, complaints, and arguments. An employee may change the way they feel, for example being withdrawn, losing motivation and confidence (Health and Safety Executive, 2010).

Employees may also experience a personal cost due to feeling stressed; this can be implications on management, personal motivation, and their commitment to work (Jenner, 2007), as well as financial consequences and impacting on family life (Regehr, 2005).

Constant exposure to stressors may eventually lead to overactivity of the autonomic nervous system, causing various maladaptive outcomes; for example, the development of reduced mental health, cardiovascular diseases, metabolic syndrome, and obesity (Backé, 2009).

Causes of stress for Paramedics

Occupational stress is described as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them' (Health and Safety Executive, 2010).

In general, occupational stress is just one factor of stress on an individual. The nature of the role of a Paramedic can cause the occupation to be stressful, such as the aim for a Paramedic

is to be able to 'clear' within 15 minutes from patient handover so they are ready to attend the next patient (Gatling and Ansell, 2008).

The nature of the job involving critical incidents can affect, in a harmful way, a Paramedic's mental health and emotional well-being (Bennett et al., 2004).

However, Jenner (2007) suggests that exposure to potentially stressful incidents does not cause some paramedics to have a stressful reaction; this is very much due to individual differences between the paramedics, for example, past experiences, personality, their perception of stress and their own coping strategies.

One study, where a small group of British Paramedics were surveyed to explore resilience in Paramedics, through data analysis found four core themes each with sub-themes. One theme was 'Workload pressures', including health-service reforms, such as dissatisfaction of single response Paramedics being delayed by two-person ambulances due to limited numbers. Another impact was health and social care systems where Paramedics must respond to non-medical emergency calls that are more social-based than medical issues. A third pressure was patient experiences provoking comforting or distressing past or family memories which can impact on a Paramedic's mood (Clompus et al., 2015).

Coping with stress

A survey conducted by the organization, Mind (2014), signified emergency service workers were at a much higher risk of developing poor mental health and stress. They also found that 43% of workers within the emergency services had taken time off work to deal with issues relating to mental health (Clompus et al., 2015).

Clompus et al. (2015) found a theme of 'Coping and resilience' where Paramedics use both formal and informal support methods. Support from management was dependent on the Paramedic's personal circumstances. The use of a peer-networks was used with everyday pressures, but many kept some information to themselves. Humour was also used as a distraction technique. The paramedics also found detaching themselves from the situation whilst they dealt with the patient would help manage emotions. 'External Support' from friends and family would benefit some participants, however, others would like to separate work and family life. Input from outside agencies is very dependent on the individual.

Stress in other cultures

Gayton and Lovell (2012) suggest that paramedic culture is surrounded by high pressures, however, that does not guarantee Paramedics face more pressure than the general population.

This graph represents that it is not just healthcare workers that experience stress and, in this case, 'Public administration and defense' workers have the highest rates of stress per 100,000 workers.