

COMPARISON OF STRESS MANAGEMENT INTERVENTION

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KEYWORDS

Stress, Stress Management, Relaxation Therapy, Cognitive Appraisal with Relaxation Therapy

ABSTRACT

Environmental factors contribute to an individual's risk of developing stress. The research design comprised of 2 intervention groups Relaxation Therapy (RT) and Cognitive Appraisal with Relaxation Therapy (CA+RT) and a delayed treatment control group (stress management workshop group) to bring down stress levels in executives. The stress levels was measured using Stress Response Checklist where scores were tabulated on Somatic, Cognitive, Emotional, Behavioral and Total stress responses pre and post intervention. It was found that somatic stress levels reduced in the Relaxation Therapy (RT) groups whereas Somatic, Cognitive and Total Stress Levels reduced in the Cognitive Appraisal with Relaxation Therapy (CA+ RT)(Significance level $P < .05$). It was found Stress management workshop intervention (where IRT was taught to executives) brought about a similar reduction in the somatic and cognitive stress levels ($P < .05$) even though it was a one day workshop on comparison to the four week Relaxation Therapy and Cognitive Appraisal with Relaxation Therapy intervention.

INTRODUCTION

Stress isn't always harmful. In appropriate amounts it can help you perform under pressure and motivate you to do your best. But if it crosses the 'comfortable' limit, your mind and body pay the price. Stress is a normal physical response to events that make you feel threatened or upset your balance in some way. The stress response is the body's way of protecting you. When working properly, it helps you stay focused, energetic, and alert. What most people think of when they hear the word "stress" is actually distress. Eustress is the kind of stress people are usually talking about when they say that they put things off until the last minute because they think it helps them focus. Homeostasis is a concept central to the idea of stress. In biology, most biochemical processes strive to maintain equilibrium.

DISCUSSION

The present study was done to evaluate different stress management interventions in the reduction of stress, and to compare their relative effectiveness.

The sample chosen was a group of male middle-level executives, who are documented as being a stress prone group. The intervention was carried out in the actual work setting. The research design comprised of 2 intervention groups Relaxation Therapy (RT) and Cognitive Appraisal with Relaxation Therapy (CA+RT) and a delayed treatment control group (stress management workshop group) to bring down stress levels in executives.

The stress levels was measured using Stress Response Checklist where scores were tabulated on Somatic, Cognitive, Emotional, Behavioral and Total stress responses pre and post intervention.

The study showed that Jacobson' Progressive Muscular Relaxation (JPMR), as a relaxation technique was effective in significantly reducing the somatic stress symptoms. This finding was consistent with the results of previous research. A study by Peterson (1974), found relaxation training to be effective in reducing physiological arousal levels and stress levels as compared to a cognitive behavior skills training group. It was evident in the study that the Cognitive Appraisal module was effective in significantly reducing the stress symptoms, particularly the cognitive symptoms. The use of the Cognitive Appraisal module, in this group, revealed that amongst all the dimensions of appraisal; the dimension of control was the most dominant factor. Most executives reported that they wanted control over almost everything in their lives, even though it was not warranted, thereby increasing their stress levels. This finding is consistent with the large body of literature which has found that executives are higher on the Type A Behavior Pattern (TABP), comprising of dimensions of commitment, control and challenge (Kobasa, 1982). Thus, during the intervention, acceptance that certain things are beyond control and a realistic and accurate re-appraisal of situations and events helped the executives to reduce their stress levels.

In the workshop module, the Instant Relaxation Training (IRT) was used for reducing physiological arousal levels. This technique has been developed specially for time pressured groups such as executives, (Nagendra and Nagarathna, 1986).

In the present study, the workshop which included a combination of the Cognitive Appraisal module and the well established technique of Instant Relaxation Training (IRT), was found to be equally effective when compared to the other two modalities.

However, it must be borne in mind that great care was taken in planning the number and scheduling of sessions for the RT and CA & RT group, as the researcher was aware of the time pressure that these executives faced. The intervention was carried out 6 sessions spread over 4 weeks. The researcher found that many participants found it difficult to keep this commitment and often had to juggle around their hectic schedules. It is therefore, interesting to note that the workshop was as effective as the RT and the CA & RT modules. This has important practical implications, as executives as a group are highly mobile and time is always at a premium for them. It also explains the popularity of the workshop module with this group and it may well be a viable alternative in view of its cost and time effectiveness. An introduction to the Cognitive Appraisal module in the workshop group, may have facilitated the reduction of the cognitive stress symptoms, as was seen in CA & RT Group. In addition, one must bear in mind that the executives as a whole, were a well educated, professional group with an adequate coping repertoire at baseline assessment. Thus, a theoretical

understanding of the cognitive appraisal module, along with a group discussion, taking few examples from their daily lives, may have been sufficient to enable workshop group to implement the module to their advantage, thereby reducing their stress symptoms. Moreover, this group was highly motivated and had waited for one month to participate in the study. The role of expectancy effects therefore cannot be ruled out.

However, one note of caution here is the fact that the long term effectiveness of the workshop module needs to be compared with the other interventions. Particularly, as the participants of the workshop module felt that although they had benefited from the workshop module they would have preferred to learn a skill to help them in the long run.

A crucial point that the study highlighted was the fact that each technique seemed to effect a particular domain. For instance, Relaxation Training affected the somatic stress domain. The Cognitive Appraisal module affected the cognitive stress domain, which in turn would be likely to affect the emotional and behavioral symptoms of stress over time.

Therefore, while planning a stress management module for executives, a multidimensional input with a combination of relaxation and a cognitive appraisal component would prove to be more efficacious in the management of stress.

The study clearly brings out that stress is a complex variable with different individuals reacting differentially to the same or similar stressors. This highlights the role that appraisal plays in mediating the stress outcome and makes it imperative that the cognitive appraisal module be an inherent part of Stress Management Programs.

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