

CHAPTER 3

STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

3.1 STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE - DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONAL SERVICES

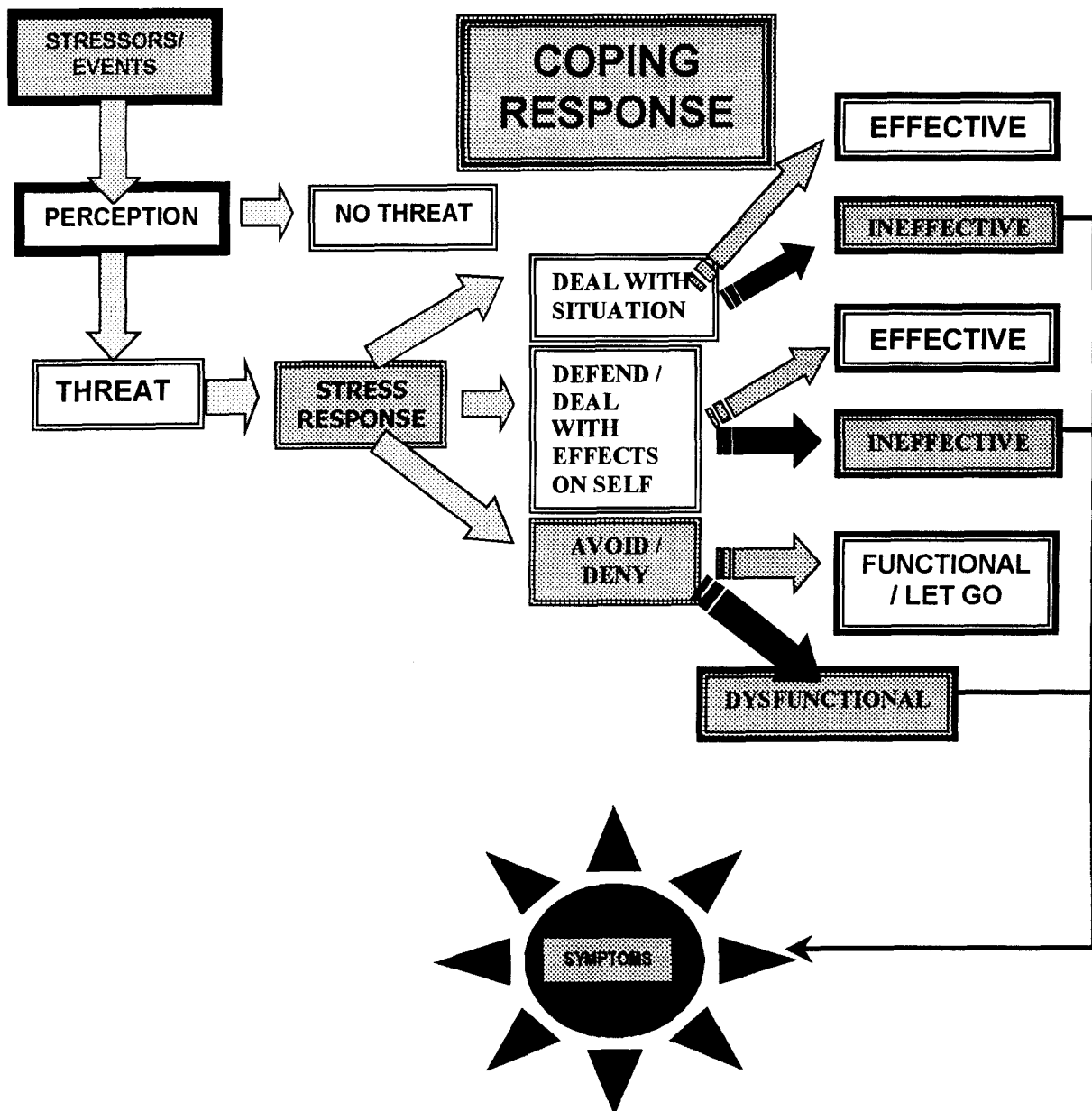
Dr Sol, (Gushue, 1996) a medical doctor focused on ways to reduce stress and said that monumental change in the workplace is affecting the well-being of workers - particularly those in areas where extended hours have to be worked trying to get the job done. Organisations are downsizing but not re-engineering the work (Gushue, 1996).

The Department of Correctional Services has undergone phenomenal change since 1994. In as much as many new changes have been made; very little has been done to re-engineer the work. There has been a lot of change but the work to be completed by fewer employees has stayed about the same. There is also an accelerated pace of technological change which coupled by a lack of management skills by supervisors often leads to employees taking increasing amounts of time off from work. The pressure for continual innovation and adaptation and the changing demographics of the work force leads to an increase in the rate of stress related disorders and many believe that they cannot do much to overcome its negative effects.

People differ in the ways they perceive stress as well as in the ways they cope. Some may perceive the same demand as a challenge while others may see it as a sign of personal failure. Work stress therefore arises from a mixture of different working conditions, individual perceptions of how stressful they are and individual abilities to respond to them (Kornitzer and Kittel, 1986). Stress often manifests itself in job stress disability claims,

substance abuse, low morale, aggression, absenteeism and in severe cases - suicide and premature death. A variety of interventions have been initiated by organisations aimed at stress management. Their aim is towards assisting personnel to manage stress as well as to rehabilitate those with severe problems. Each of these symptoms cost the individual and the organization. Scott and Jaffe (1991) use the following model to explain the stress cycle.

DIAGRAM 4: MODEL OF STRESS CYCLE



Stressors/events can either pose a threat or not. This is dependent on an individual perception of the event. This leads to a coping response where the individual deals with the situation, deals with effects on himself/herself or avoids the situation. These coping responses can be either effective or ineffective which are evident in particular symptoms (Scott and Jaffe, 1991).

O'Donnel, (1994) defines dysfunctional stress as stress arising from an adverse emotional and physical reaction to any source of pressure in the environment. These reactions affect both personal health and organisational effectiveness.

Department of Correctional Services employees are increasingly finding it difficult to manage the physical, mental and emotional stress in the workplace. Supervisors and managers are also unaware of or not sensitive to their role in creating stress-related difficulties. Within the Department there are many common occupational stresses, such as unfavourable working conditions, frustrating demands of managers and prisoners, changing expectations in the workplace, unskilled and autocratic supervisors, and an increased demand for productivity and profitability. These have both a direct and indirect impact on health and productivity. Stress related illnesses, poor morale and productivity and a lack of innovation and commitment are becoming more prevalent.

3.2 THE EVOLVING WORKING ENVIRONMENT WITHIN THE DCS.

Mergers, acquisitions, privatisation, and reductions in work forces have contributed to an era of change in the workplace. Prior to 1996 the Department of Correctional Services was a Military organisation with a specific work ethic. With demilitarization, employees were forced to reorganise or change how they worked. The traditional workplace with

clearly defined procedures and practices was transformed almost overnight. Job security and a clearly defined and predictable career path have been replaced by a continually changing structure where survival depends on adaptation. The workplace today demands a continuous updating of skills, policies and procedures.

Beehr and Schuler (1982) indicate that stress in the workplace revolves around four major considerations:

- ⊗ The health of employees
- ⊗ Organisational effectiveness
- ⊗ Financial implications, and
- ⊗ Legal compliance and worker compensation.

High levels of stress have been shown to reduce both the quantity and quality of work produced. Employees also tend to be more dissatisfied with their jobs, leading to absenteeism and low morale. There is also an increase in conflicts in the workplace and grievances, accidents, strikes, sabotage and burnout becomes prevalent (Schuler, 1980). Distrust, disrespect and animosity often mark worker relations. Parasurman and Alutton (1978) found that high-level management jobs involve stress from time pressures, too many meetings or difficulty in attaining productivity standards, role ambiguity and a lack of clarity or clear directives. Tension is often created and feelings of futility with an inability to cope in the organisational environment are also prevalent.

The "new performance contracts" which has been introduced is a relatively new concept in the DCS. It is an additional source of stress in the Department of Correctional Services. Employees entering the Department a generation ago had expectations of lifetime employment, predictable promotion and career paths and a stable job. All of these have

been frustrated by a shifting workplace that faces continual threats to its survival as a Public Service Department. The DCS has changed its management several times over the past few years and this has caused instability within the department. Technological advances have also caused a great deal of stress especially for older employees.

3.3 WORKERS PERCEPTION OF STRESS WITHIN THE DCS.

Stress among employees within the Department of Correctional Services is increasing and is close to the top of the list of problems experienced by employees. Beehr and Newman (1978:670) defined work stress as "a situation wherein job-related factors interact with a worker to change (i.e., disrupt or enhance) his or her psychological and/or physiological condition such that the person (i.e., mind-body) is forced to deviate from normal functioning." What underlies this definition is that there are environmental stressors and that when the individual and the environment are incompatible, stress results (Busser, 1990).

Employees within the Department of Correctional Services have indicated that a lack of clarity exists regarding the performance of their duties leading to role ambiguity. New appointees sometimes have inadequate information about the job to be performed. This can lead to feelings of futility and underutilization of human resources, which is particularly stressful. Ivanicevich and Matteson (1980) suggest that the personal consequences of occupational stress include coronary heart disease, arthritis, ulcers, allergies, headaches, depression and anxiety. Workers often manifest these problems in low productivity, absenteeism and turnover.

Some of the factors that contribute to work stress as perceived by employees of the Department of Correctional Services include:

- Prior to 1998 no support system existed for employees. Psychologists, Social Workers and Chaplains employed by the Department were utilized for prisoners only.**
- Custodial services place a lot of strain on employees.**
- Constant conflict between unions and management.**
- Uncertainty and insecurity caused by new policies.**
- Lack of training.**
- Corruption, favouritism and nepotism.**
- Poor communication.**
- Overcrowded prisons and staff shortages.**
- Routine work in isolated environments.**
- Constant fear for personal safety.**
- Autocratic management.**
- Lack of understanding of cultural diversity.**
- Gangsterism and violence in prisons.**
- Lack of financial management skills.**
- Poorly administered incentive system.**
- Transformation and racial tension.**

(National EAP report: May 1999)

Harris and Dervey (1984) and Cooper and Marshall (1976) indicate some factors that increase work stress and also reinforce some of the concerns raised above.

Control factors related to workers perception of stress.

- ☉ **Work that does not allow the employee to participate in decisions about the work process.**
- ☉ **Lack of information or communication about events or to anticipate them.**

Overload factors related to workers perception of stress.

- ⊗ Understaffing leading to work overload, time pressures and increasing responsibility.
- ⊗ Jobs that require more or less skill that an employee has. (Newly appointed managers in the Department of Correctional Services.)

Emotional Demand Factors related to workers perception of stress.

- ⊗ Jobs that place an individual between two groups - e.g., between management and employees (supervisors) or between management and clients (crime ridden community in South Africa).
- ⊗ Unfair or negative supervisor - worker relationships (source of conflict in the Department of Correctional Services). No clear pathways for resolution. (History of problems with application of Grievance procedure in the Department of Correctional Services.)

Change and Ambiguity factors related to workers perception of stress.

- ⊗ Changes in work demands especially when the nature of the changes is ambiguous. (Restructuring in the Department of Correctional Services.)
- ⊗ Being evaluated, with lack of clarity about expectations and standards. (Ineffective implementation of performance appraisal and incentive scheme in the Department of Correctional Services.)

Security and Work future factors related to workers perception of stress.

- ⊗ Unclear career development path or opportunity for growth or advancement. (Unclear career paths in the Department of Correctional Services and uncertainty with reference to restructuring.)

Social Support factors related to workers perception of stress.

- ☉ Lack of social support or positive reinforcement.

The factors listed above are common to nearly all organisations and are certainly common to the Department of Correctional Services. In a changing work environment employees are faced with increasing demands but little opportunity for control or support. Employee participation in the workplace has changed from diminished participation in the past to an active role and involvement in the workplace. Some employees are rigid and less flexible and find it difficult to change how they work and as a result they get more brittle, apathetic and worn down. This leads to low morale, illness, lost productivity, and rigidity of response - the precursors to work burnout (O' Donnell, M.P (1994). Organisations that offer greater self-determination and less division of labour leads to better employees with less disfunctional stress, greater satisfaction, more effective work and greater health. Scott and Jaffe (1991) *state that empowerment is not just a programme, it is a process of changing mind - sets about accountability and self-responsibility, changing relationships to enhance communication and feedback, and changing structures (policies, practices and incentives) so that people have more authority to go with the increased responsibility. This will lead to effective stress management.*

In a briefing session and media conference (14 June 2000) the Minister of Correctional Services, Mr. Ben Skosana reiterated the problems experienced by employees in the Department of Correctional Services. He stated in his address: "it is on the basis of overcrowding in prison that the identification of prisoners during the normal working hours makes it extremely difficult for officials of the Department to execute their duties

properly and this results in late arrivals at magistrates courts and thus delaying the judicial process.”

Overcrowding has its fair share of problems for officials of the Department. This has already resulted in victimisation and conflict among officials, which have reached alarming proportions. As a result prisons have become **stressful environments to work in**. Prisoners are by nature not easy people and they can also be very demanding and where they are, there is always the presence of real danger. I think the time has come for us to assess the possibility of developing coherent and rigorous strategies to **establish stress clinics** for officials of my Department. **They need to be mentally healthy in order to ensure that the vision of the Department is accomplished.**

3.4 CONCLUSION

The previous three chapters have attempted to place concepts in their proper perspective as well as to elaborate on conditions within the Department of Correctional Services. It is evident from the research presented so far that work within the DCS is stressful and that pressure and demands for improved performance will be on the increase. The chapters that follow will include the research on stress conducted within the DCS.