CHAPTER 6

6 EMPIRICAL PROCEDURES AND FINDINGS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Corporate employees have to function and perform in an environment where stressful situations occur regularly. Within the working environment aspects such as change, corporate culture, deadlines and interpersonal problems with colleagues can cause stress in the lives of corporate employees. Apart from the stress that employees experience within the working environment, they also function within other systems such as their families and social groups, where certain demands are also made on them. Therefore, corporate employees may experience stress in the working environment and/or in other areas of their lives that can have an effect on their health and their work.

The research has been conducted within the corporate environment. A stress management programme was presented to corporate employees to establish whether it would have an effect on their stress levels and whether play therapy mediums can be used successfully with corporate employees during a training programme, to reduce their stress levels and to improve their awareness of the causes of stress in their lives and their reactions to stressors in their environment. The research was divided into two phases, namely phase one which was the qualitative research and phase two, which was the quantitative research.

This chapter will reflect briefly on the aim and objectives of the study, the pilot study, the

hypothesis, the research approach, type of research and the research design. Thereafter, the information gained from the qualitative study which was done by means of semi-structured interviews that were held with all the participants, will be discussed. The information gained from the quantitative part of the study, which consisted of a pre- and a post-test, will then be discussed in detail.

6.2 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

To understand the research findings, it is essential that the aim and the objectives of the study are revisited.

6.2.1 Aim of the Study

The aim of the study was stated as follows:

To use play therapy mediums in a stress management programme to enable corporate employees to become aware of and to manage their stress levels.

The findings that were gained from the pre and post-test indicate that this aim was achieved. The pre-test indicated that the stress levels of the corporate employees were very high. The stress management programme was presented to the corporate employees and play therapy mediums were used successfully throughout the programme. Thereafter, a post-test was conducted and it indicated that there was a positive change in the stress levels of the employees. The empirical results indicate a significant difference between the pre and the post-test findings.

6.2.2 Objectives

- To conduct a literature study regarding stress management, play therapy mediums and corporate employees.

- To design a stress management programme using play therapy mediums to facilitate greater awareness amongst corporate employees regarding the effects of stress on their daily functioning, their health and job performance.

- To implement a stress management programme that will enable employees to manage their stress levels more effectively.

- To evaluate a stress management programme for corporate employees.

- To formulate conclusions and recommendations which will be based on the empirical findings obtained from the study.

6.3 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question was formulated as follows:

Will the use of play therapy mediums in a stress management programme for corporate employees have a positive effect on their stress levels?

6.4 HYPOTHESIS

The following hypotheses were compiled, guided by the expectations regarding the outcome of the research study:

After participation in the stress management programme the corporate employees:

- Will be aware of what stress is.

- Will become aware of the effect of stress on their lives.

- Will become aware of what causes stress in their lives.

- Will be able to use the play therapy mediums as a stress release.

- Will be able to make use of the stress management techniques to alleviate stress in their lives.

- Will be able to take responsibility for their lifestyle.

- Will be able to make choices regarding their future reactions to stressors in their lives.

- Will be able to compile a, personal stress management programme.

- Will be more productive and motivated employees to the benefit if the organisation.

6.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

The qualitative and quantitative research methods were used during the research study. According to Schurinck in De Vos (1998:241-243) the following applies to the quantitative and qualitative approaches:

> *…the main aim of the quantitative approach is to measure the social world objectively, to test the hypothesis and to predict and control human behaviour. The qualitative approach is more interpretive and holistic in nature with its main aim to understand social life and the meaning that people attach to everyday life situations.*

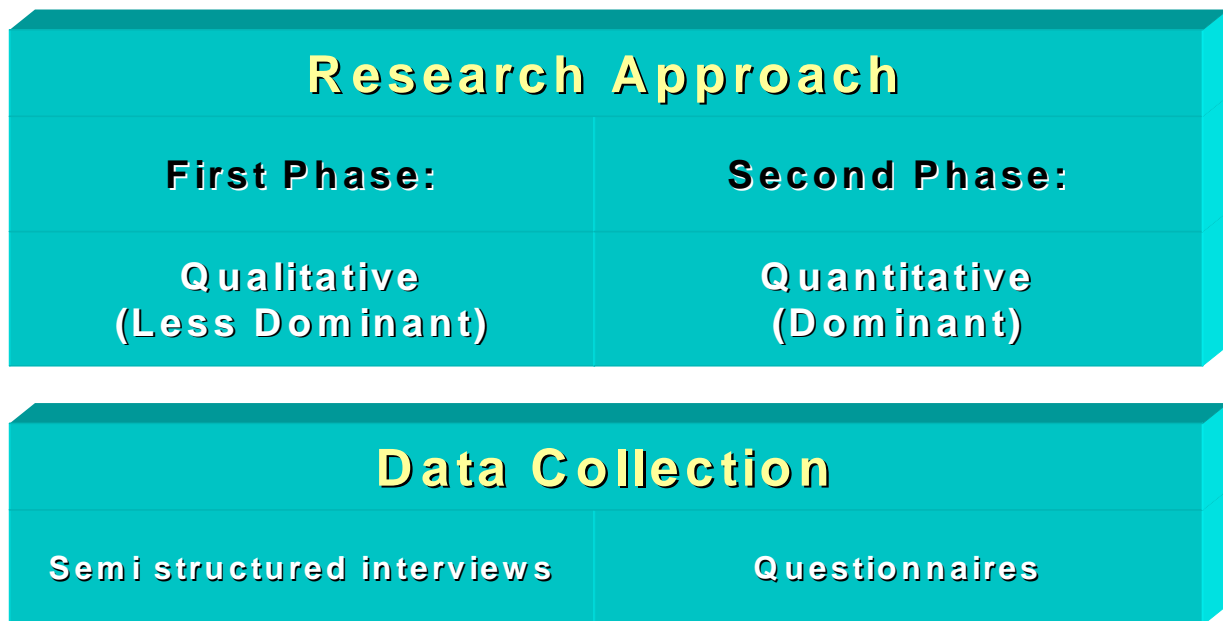Figure 6.1 illustrates the Research Approach that was used in the study.

Figure 6.1 Research Approach

The two research approaches were used in conjunction with one another. The qualitative approach consisted of semi-structured interviews that were held with the participants two weeks before the stress management training. The quantitative approach included the pre and the post tests that were completed by the respondents before and after the intervention (stress management programme) took place. The two approaches complement each other and information gained from each approach portrays a more complete picture of the research findings.

6.6 TYPE OF RESEARCH

6.6.1 Applied Research

Two types of research were utilised during the course of the research. The first type was applied research which can also be described as knowledge development, knowledge utilisation and/or intervention design and development (De Vos, 1998:69 - 70).

The focus in this study was to gain, develop and utilise knowledge within the corporate environment with regard to stress management and to use play therapy mediums as part of the stress management programme. The knowledge base of the participating employees was increased by giving them information about stress and how it can affect an individual and these employees could use their improved knowledge base to make changes in their lives and to compile a personal stress management programme.

6.6.2 Intervention Research

Intervention research is explained by Schilling in De Vos (2002:396) as an action undertaken by a professional person to improve the functioning of an individual or group:

> *…to enhance the functioning or maintain the functioning and well-being of an individual, family, group, community or population.*

A stress management programme was developed that was introduced to a group of

employees from a corporate environment. This stress management programme served as an intervention because it could enhance the functioning of the corporate employees with regard to their stress levels and also their general functioning within the organisation and in their personal lives. Before the stress management programme was presented, the stress levels of the group were ascertained using a questionnaire and after the completion of the programme, a post-test was done. The pre and post-test results were compared to evaluate the effect of the programme.

6.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

The researcher made use of the quasi-experimental design for the study. The one group pre-test/post-test design was used to guide the study and included the following steps (Bailey, 1994:224):

- **The selection of subjects.**

    The study was aimed at individuals from the corporate environment. The researcher identified corporate organisations as possible research areas and gained permission to present a stress management programme to a sample of their employees.

- **Selection of the experimental environment.**

    Contact was made with a number of corporate organisations where the research could be done. These organisations expressed the need for stress management for their employees. Some of the organisations that were contacted had their own employee assistance programmes in place and they did not want a stress management programme to be presented to their employees. Two organisations

were identified – one for the pilot study and another for the actual research.

- **Pre-test**

  A questionnaire was handed to each of the participating employees for completion before the stress management programme was presented to them. The questionnaire was found to be appropriate because it is short (which was helpful because the employees working in the corporate environment do not have a lot of time to spare to complete long questionnaires) and yet it addressed some important issues regarding stress.

- **Administering of the experimental stimulus**

  A stress management programme which included play therapy mediums was presented to the corporate employees. The programme was divided into four sessions and was presented to the employees over a period of two weeks.

- **Post-test**

  A post-test was conducted after the programme was presented to the employees, to ascertain whether the stress management programme had an effect on the stress levels of the participating employees.

6.8 PILOT STUDY

Background knowledge regarding the study was gathered before the study was initiated. The researcher conducted a thorough pilot study by including the following aspects: a literature study, consultation with experts, feasibility study and the testing of the

questionnaires.

6.8.1 Literature Study

An extensive literature study was conducted to enable the researcher to be informed regarding the field of research. The literature review focused on the following aspects:

- Stress: Defining stress, where it originates from, what the effect of stress is and relevant stress management programmes.

- Corporate environment: How is the corporate environment structured? Who forms part of the corporate environment? What is the effect of the work place on the corporate employee? How (if at all) do management levels affect the corporate employees?

- Play therapy mediums: Defining play therapy mediums. How will play therapy mediums be used in a stress management programme? The use of play therapy mediums in working with adults.

- The Gestalt Theory: The theoretical framework that will form the basis of the study.

The literature study is ongoing. During the course of the research new literature was published and at later stages older literature was discovered, which was not accessible at the beginning of the study. Therefore, the knowledge base with regard to stress in the corporate environment is ever growing and increasing, which relates to the relevancy of stress as a field of study, as a problem within our society and specifically in the corporate environment.

6.8.2   Consultation with Experts

The researcher consulted with experts who have experience within this field of study or within fields of study related to stress within the corporate environment. These experts contributed in different ways and to a different extent to the research, but they all had valuable expertise that assisted in establishing a broader knowledge base for the study (refer to chapter 1).

6.8.3   Feasibility Study

A South African banking organisation, namely ABSA bank, expressed the need for a stress management programme to be presented to their employees. Permission was gained form the organisations' Human Resource Department to conduct the research with a group of the organisation's employees.

During the research process the researcher became aware of the fact that this type of training (soft skills) is not a priority within all organisations. Employees are exposed to more courses with regard to their technical skills and abilities than to courses that will enhance their interpersonal relationships.

6.8.4   Testing of Questionnaires and Measuring Instruments

The questionnaire that was used for the study was a published questionnaire (Burn & Payment, 2000:159-160). During the pilot study ten corporate employees underwent the same stress management training programme that was used during the actual training. These employees completed the questionnaire before and after a two-day stress management training programme. The employees seemed reluctant to

complete the post-test as they had not made any adjustments to their stress management styles at that stage. They expressed a need to internalise the information and then to complete the questionnaire. Therefore, the research was done over four days that did not run consecutively. The use of the questionnaires during the pilot study guided the researcher to make adjustments regarding the time frame of the presentation during the actual research.

6.9 RESEARCH PROCESS

The next section of the chapter will describe the population and sampling method, and illustrate the research findings in the following sequence:

- Population and Sampling Method.

- Data Collection.

  o Findings of the Qualitative Research.

  o Findings of the Quantitative Research.

    ❖ Results of the Stress Questionnaire.

    ❖ Results of the Burnout Questionnaire.

- The Intervention: Stress Management Programme.

  o Evaluation of the Play Therapy Mediums.

6.9.1   Population and Sampling Method

Probability sampling was used and more specifically simple random sampling for the purpose of this study. Simple random sampling is explained by Strydom and Venter (2002:204) as follows:

In this situation each individual case in the population theoretically has an equal chance to be selected for the sample.

The researcher conducted a meeting with the Human Resources Department of ABSA, Midrand, to explain the extent of the research and what resources (such as a venue) would be required. The Human Resource Department of ABSA bank identified the IT department of the organisation as a very stressful working environment and, therefore, the IT department became the universe from which the sample was taken. Three project teams were working under a great amount of pressure with upcoming deadlines and the employees of these teams were identified as possible candidates for the training. These three teams formed the population from which the sample was taken. An invitation was sent out to all the members of these teams (which consisted of about sixty-five people) to take part in the training. Twelve employees replied that they would like to take part in the stress management training. A group size of between ten and sixteen people is ideal for stress management training because it is large enough for adequate group interaction to take place, but it also allows for personal attention from the social worker to each employee. The sample is illustrated as follows:
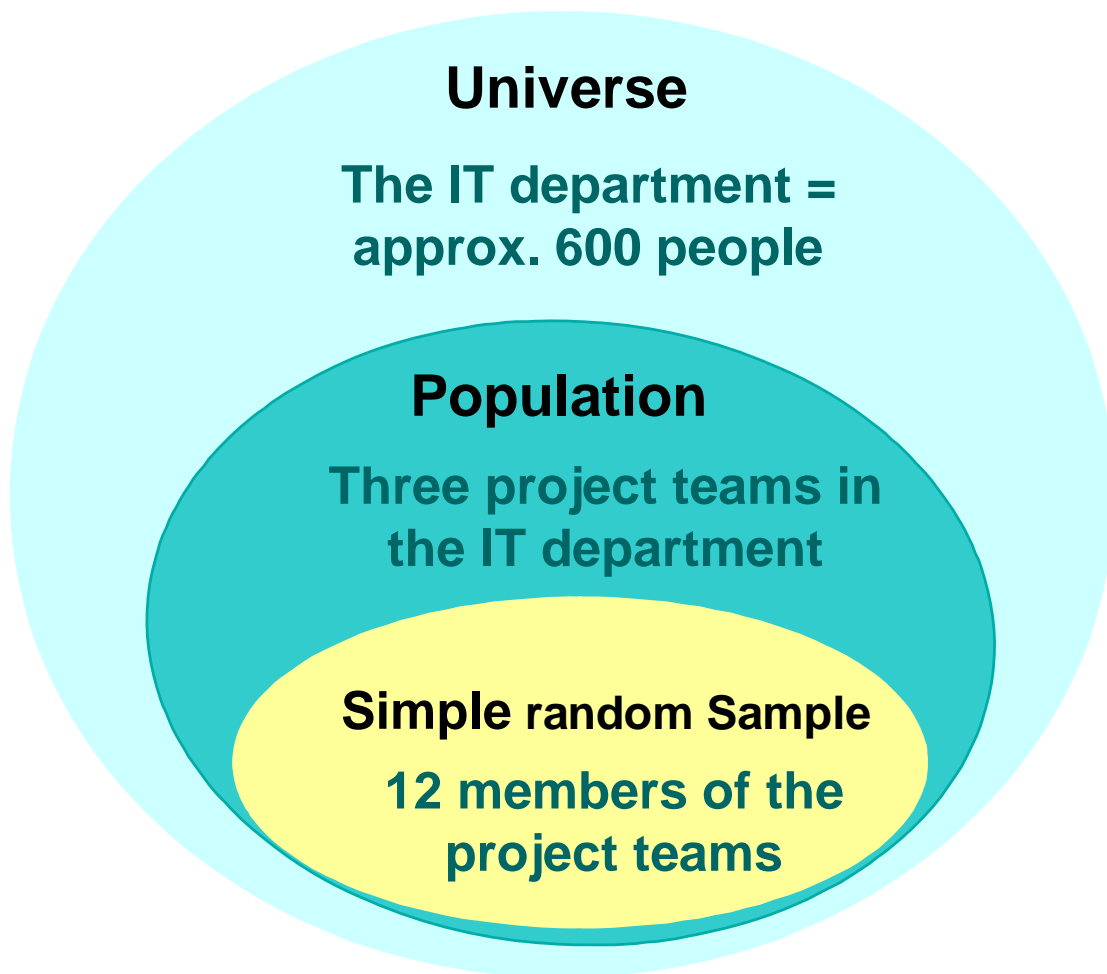
Figure 6.2 Sampling Process

Therefore, the sample for the research consisted of twelve employees from the organisations' IT department. The twelve participants were from different hierarchal levels, there were five males and seven females and the group was representative of different age groups and different races.

6.9.2   Data Collection

The following data collection methods were used for the research:

6.9.2.1   General Findings of the Qualitative Research

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participating employees, approximately a week before the stress management programme was presented. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to ascertain what the participating employees knew about stress and the effect thereof before the training was done. Furthermore, the researcher was interested to find out whether there were any specific needs that should be addressed throughout the training.

The themes and questions listed below were addressed during the semi-structured interviews. The findings of the qualitative research are given according to the responses of the employees who took part in the study.

- **Defining stress**

  o **What is stress?**

    Some of the corporate employees defined stress as follows:

    ❖ Stress is a form of anxiety and it is usually caused by frequent changes in one's lifestyle.

    ❖ Stress is problems from many sources, for example work, family and finances.

    ❖ Mental or emotional tension causes a change in one's state – for better or for worse.

    ❖ Stress is about constantly worrying about certain factors, such as losing your job, finances, children relatives. Stress is something that makes you worry.

❖ Stress is what one experiences as one tries to adjust to the environment. It creates positive and negative feelings.

❖ It is something that happens in one's life that was not planed for or that one did not foresee. One is then out of one's comfort zone.

❖ It is because of happenings that are out of the ordinary.

The ideas that the employees had with regard to stress all related to some or other aspect of stress, for example, the finances and concerns about work would be stressors and the physical reaction to stress would relate to the effect of stress on the individual. The way in which these definitions differ can actually be compared   to numerous different definitions that are found in theory. Looker and Gregson (2003:25) define stress as follows:

It is a mismatch between perceived demands and the perceived ability to cope. It is the balance between how we view demands and how we think we can cope with those demands that determines whether we feel no stress, distressed or eustressed.

According to Auerbach and Gramling (1998:3) stress can be defined as follows:

It is usually used to denote a set of changes that people undergo in situations that they appraise as threatening to their well being. These changes involve physiological arousal, subjective feelings of discomfort and overt behaviours.

During the first module of the stress management programme the employees were invited to draw stress and this led to a discussion regarding what stress is

and how the sources of stress and the reaction to stress differs from stress.

o   **Is stress positive or negative?**

All but one of the participants said that stress can be negative and positive.

One of the respondents mentioned that stress could help or hinder a person, depending on the situation.

Another said it is only **negative**: It impacts your health, your personal well being, your interaction with other people, causes anxiety, negative thoughts and unhappy feelings and can ultimately lead to depression.

The other respondents said that negative stress can cause destruction; negative stress occurs when there is a goal that needs to be achieved but the goal is unrealistic; negative stress results in mental and physical collapse; negative stress can result in feelings of rejection, anger and depression.

Negative stress is also called distress and it is described by Looker and Gregson (2003:27) as follows:

Having too much to do in too little time; dealing with complex tasks without adequate training; promotion into a job for which we are not suited; having too many bills to pay and not enough income; worrying how we will manage if we lose our job; having domestic problems at the same time as changes at work. These are a few

271

examples of the kinds of demands that can lead to distress.

Positive stress can result in new ideas and it can bring about improved performance. When a person is under pressure a person can think of alternative solutions for problems and innovating new ideas. A person may be more careful or pro-active because of positive stress. Positive stress leads to a person working harder and thus positive stress can help you achieve.

Cohen, *et al* (2001:190) agree that some stress is necessary for an employee to function at his/her full potential.

Moderate amounts of experienced stress generate focus and mobilise a person's resources. Performance is actually enhanced under moderate amounts of stress.

- **Causes of stress in the life of an employee**

The questions in this theme were the following:

o **What causes stress in your life?**

In general, the answers included the following:

Normal everyday situations, always striving to be the best, money, work, it can be summarised as everything, driving, job dissatisfaction, the unknown, lack of control, living up to other people's expectation.

It became clear to the researcher that the employees participating in this programme, seemed to set very high standards for themselves. They drive themselves and some of these characteristics match the Type A personality quite strongly. According to Looker and Gregson (2003:169), the image of the type A personality has changed. They describe it as follows:

So the popular image of the Type A individual who is ambitious, highly competitive, aggressive, hard-driving, a high achiever and therefore highly successful is not altogether true. The more relaxed, calmer, unhurried but still ambitious Type B individual proves to be just as successful, or more so, in the long run.

o **Do you experience stress within your working environment? Explain.**

Without exception all of the employees answered that they do experience stress in their working environment. Examples of the factors that cause stress in the working environment were strict deadlines, long working hours, unrealistic user expectations, conflict in the working environment, matching performance with career expectations, balancing home and work demands.

o **What causes stress in your home life?**

In general, the answers included the following:

Conflicting career ambitions between husband and wife, family demands, difficult children, financial pressure, family conflict, lack of communication, traditional role expectations, balancing home and work demands.

Communication can play a major role in eliminating the above mentioned sources of stress in the home life. Brehm (1998:158) suggests the following about communication:

Positive social support is an important stress buffer. Good communication skills help you create a support network of friends and acquaintances and give you the communication tools you need to access this support…. But this support can be more or less helpful depending on how you communicate.

• **The effects of stress physically, emotionally and psychologically**

o **How does stress affect you in the following areas?**

❖ **Emotionally:** The answers to this question differed from person to person, and varied from no emotional reaction to extreme emotional expression like crying, swearing, loneliness, distrust in others, anger

and depression.

❖ **Physically:** The answers to this question included the following: muscle pain, flu-like symptoms, headaches, backaches, lack of sleep, loss of appetite, throat contraction.

❖ **Psychologically:** The answers to this question included the following: depression, hyper activity, lack of concentration, withdrawal, anxiety attacks.

It is important for the employees to be aware of how stress affects their bodies because if they do not realise how stress is affecting them, they will not realise what the long term effects of stress can be on their health, their emotional functioning and their psychological functioning.

Looker and Gregson (2003:75) give an example of the effect of stress on a person's health:

Eating whilst the digestive system is partially shut down during stress can lead to a number of problems such as indigestion, nausea and diarrhoea. In addition, many of the body's healing processes are affected.

Brehm (1998:55) states that stress and mental health are closely linked:

All of us are striving to move toward the optimal mental health end of the continuum; stress management helps with the journey….. Stress interacts with mental health and contributes to several psychological disorders.

She also states that emotions need to be communicated to avoid them becoming a negative force in a person's life.

Poor Communication often leads to anger, isolation, loneliness, and depression. These emotions are frequently the result of misunderstanding (Brehm, 1998:159).

- **The effects of life events**

During the semi structured interviews the employees were asked about major life events that took place in their lives during the past year. Four of the employees had major events that happened in their lives during the past year. These events were divorce, window smashing and handbag grabbing, a daughter who tried to commit suicide three times during the past year and a husband who was retrenched and has been looking for work for the past six months. These life events can cause higher stress levels.

- **The use of stress management techniques.**

  o **What do you do to manage your stress levels?**

    Most of the employees indicated that they do not do anything specific to address or manage their stress levels. One of the employees is a marathon runner and she indicated that she uses running to de-stress. Another employee indicated that he prays more when under stressful conditions, and that this lowers his stress levels.

o **Do you think you can improve on your stress management techniques?**

All the employees said that they would like to improve on their stress management techniques, but they do not know what these techniques entail and how to implement them.

Few people realise they can actually improve their stress levels just by changing their lifestyle habits such as their diets, the amount that they exercise and the amount of rest that they get:

There are a number of ways in which you can alter your lifestyle to build up your resistance to stress. If you are healthy and fit you will feel good about yourself: your self esteem will be high, and your irritability, anger and hostility levels low (Looker & Gregson, 2003:146).

Furthermore, employees need to take responsibility for their own stress levels by implementing stress management techniques. Burns (2003:79) states the following about stress management:

The goal of stress management is not to eliminate the stress response, but to determine and control individual optimum stress levels – that is, where stress will work for you and not against you

Some of the stress management techniques were discussed in the stress management programme and there was a significant improvement in most of the employee's use of stress management techniques such as relaxation and

time management. This will be discussed in more detail, when the results from quantitative research are discussed in this chapter.

6.9.2.2   General findings of the Quantitative Research

- **Questionnaires**

During this part of the research each of the twelve employees were given a questionnaire (pre-test) to complete. The purpose thereof was to ascertain what their stress levels were, before the stress management programme was presented to them. The stress management programme was then presented to the corporate employees over four sessions, and thereafter they completed the same questionnaire as the post-test. A comparison could then be made regarding the pre and post-test scores, to ascertain whether the intervention that took place had an effect on their stress levels.

The following graph (Figure 6.3) illustrates per questions what the pre and post-test results were.
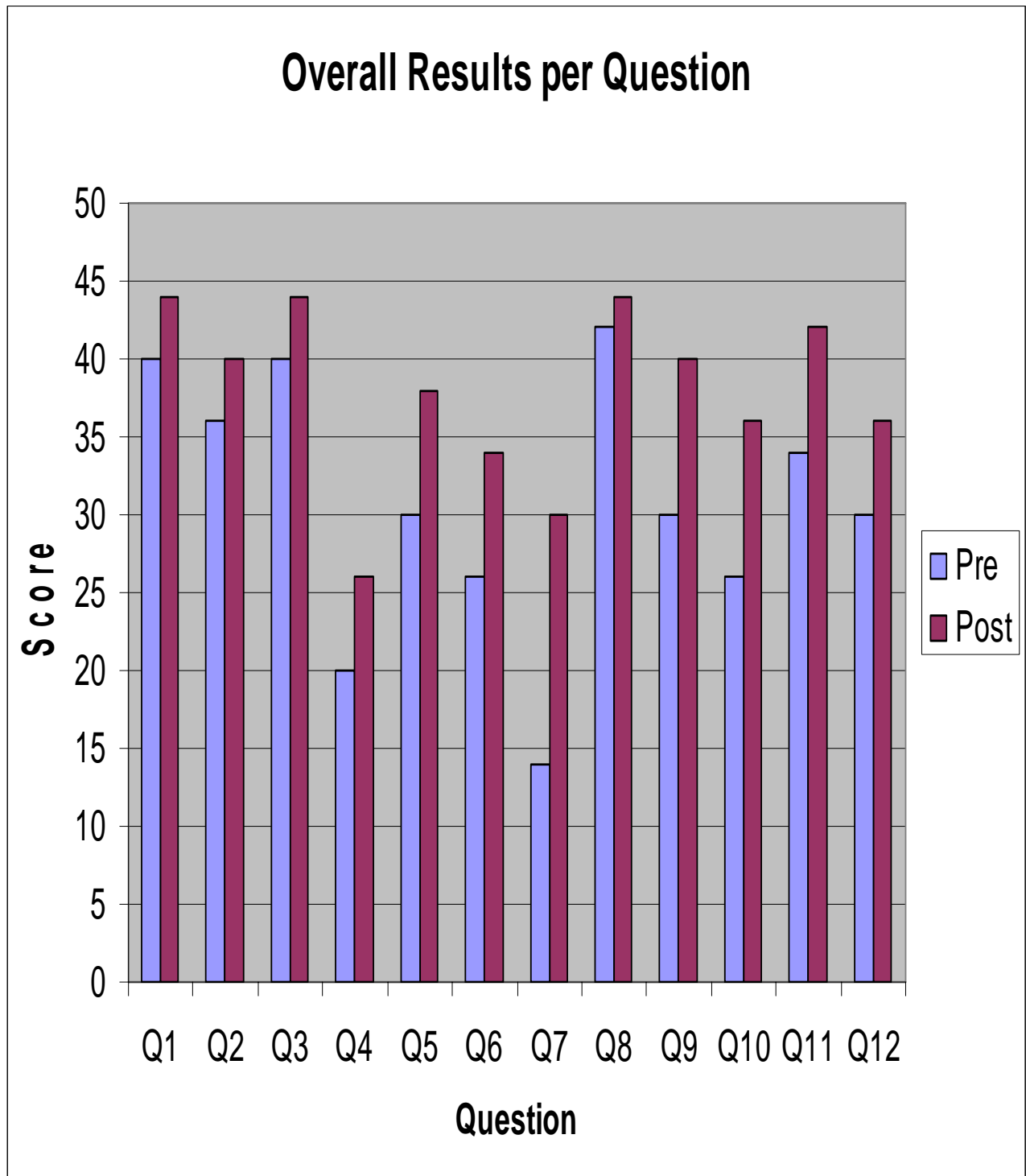
Overall Results per Question

Figure 6.3 Results of the Stress Questionnaire

The employees were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5 where 5 is always, 3 is usually and 1 is seldom. A score of 50-60 indicated that the employee is taking the right measures to manage stress levels in his/her life. If the score is between 36 and 49, the employee is taking steps to manage his/her

stress levels but there is more that he/she can do and he/she has to rethink their priorities. If the employee's score is 35 and lower, it is pointing towards health problems and relationship problems at home and at work. These employee's stress levels are too high and they need to make adjustments in their lifestyles (Burn & Payment, 2000:159–160). Therefore, when looking at Fig. 6.3, **an increase in the scores of the post-test indicates a decrease in the stress levels** of the employees, per question. The pre and post-test results were as follows:

- **Question (1): "I manage my time effectively".**

Time management is an important part of effective stress management. According to Brehm (1998:132), time management helps employees to set priorities and work towards those priorities:

> *Good organisation in your daily life helps you manage multiple priorities with greater ease.*

The employees who were a part of this population (thus the three IT project teams) are all high performing individuals who work with definite deadlines. These individuals have to have time management skills in place to be able to manage the deadlines that form part of the job.

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**
  The total score for the group was 40, which is an average score of 3,33 per individual.

o **Post-test**

The total score for the group was 44, which is an average score of 3,66 per individual.

There was a 10% increase in the results for this question, which indicate that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall improvement in the employees' time management skills.

- **Question (2): "I use assertive statements to protect my right to say "no" to others".**

Employees often find it difficult to be assertive in a working environment because they feel they need to be able to do all the work that comes their way. According to Looker and Gregson (2003:183), assertiveness is a resource that the employee can make use of in stress management:

Being assertive is the most effective way of increasing your coping resources. Assertiveness is a way of communicating effectively. It means to say what you feel, think and want.

The employees were all assertive to some degree before they were exposed to the stress management programme, but there was definite room for improvement. During the training it became apparent that the employees saw assertiveness as a negative aspect where one employee is aggressive towards the other employee to get his/her own way. This way of thinking had to be reframed so that the employees could realise that it has to do with

281

communicating your thoughts and feelings effectively and with respect towards the other individual.

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 36, which is an average score of 3 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 40, which is an average score of 3,66 per individual.

There was an 11,11% increase in the results for this question, which indicate that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall improvement in the assertiveness skills of the employees.

- **Question (3): "I regularly show my feelings to someone close to me."**

The body of a human being reacts to emotions in a certain way. The levels of noradrenaline and adrenaline present in the employee's body can be related to the feeling that the employee is experiencing at that specific time (Looker & Gregson, 2003:54). When the employee experiences negative feelings over a long period of time, the body starts to experience physical reactions that could be to the detriment of his/her health.

Within the working environment employees are often not allowed to show their emotions. They have to cope with the pressure of the job or they have to leave.

The perception is often *if the job is too stressful find another* (Grobler & Hiemstra, 1998:19). This outlook often inhibits the employees from sharing emotions with the people around them.

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 40, which is an average score of 3.33 per individual.

o **Post-test**

The total score for the group was 44, which is an average score of 3.66 per individual.

There was a 10% increase in the results for this question, which indicate that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall improvement in their emotional expression.

- **Question (4): "I do volunteer work that is meaningful".**

Because of the high demands of the working environment, many corporate employees focus on "surviving" and doing what they **must** do. They do not think that they have the time to reach out to anybody else. In the process they do not experience the joy of helping. Brehm (1998:242) formulates it as follows:

> *One of the most often overlooked sources of pleasure is helping others. When we are in dire straits, sometimes the last thing we think we have energy for is giving, but giving often gives energy back to us with interest.*

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 20, which is an average score of 1,67 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 26, which is an average score of 2,17 per individual.

There was a 30% increase in the results for this question, which indicate that after the stress management programme was presented to the corporate employees, there was an overall improvement in getting involved in changing the focus from themselves to other people with needs.

- **Question (5): "I eat a balanced diet with lots of fresh fruit and vegetables."**

The corporate employee is often more inclined to do the work that needs to be done than to take time to eat healthy meals during the day. Nutrition is one of the body's best defence mechanisms against the effects of stress. Brehm (1998:183) explain it as follows:

Good nutrition and eating habits contribute significantly to good health and stress resistance. They are especially important in high-stress times, but these may be the times when we are least likely to eat well

The results of this question were as follows:

- o **Pre-test:**

  The total score for the group was 30, which is an average score of 2,5 per individual.

- o **Post-test:**

  The total score for the group was 38, which is an average score of 3,67 per individual.

There was a 26,67% increase in the results for this question, which indicates that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall improvement in their diets.

- **Question (6): "I do exercise at least three times a week."**

No stress management programme is complete if exercise is not included in that programme (Kantor, *et al* 1997:16). The corporate employees need to make positive changes in their lives to ensure that stress does not affect them in a detrimental way. Williams (1994:73) refers to exercise as a way of building resistance against stress. It is a resource that can be used by corporate employees.

The results of this question were as follows:

- o **Pre-test:**

  The total score for the group was 26, which is an average score of 2,17 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 34, which is an average score of 2,83 per individual.

There was a 30,77% increase in the results for this question, which indicates that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall increase in the amount of time they spent exercising.

- **Question (7): "I practice relaxation techniques daily."**

Relaxation is a skill that can be used effectively to manage stress levels when there is much pressure as well as regaining balance after a very stressful time. Williams (1994:85) states the following regarding relaxation:

> *Relaxation calms the body and the mind, and is probably the most effective way of enabling your body to adjust to its normal level of functioning when you are under stress.*

This is a skill that needs to be acquired by the corporate employees to reduce the negative effects of stress on their lives. During the stress management programme that was presented to the employees, relaxation activities were done during each session. The purpose was to give the corporate employees the opportunity to make this skill part of their own stress management routine.

The results of this question were as follows:

o   **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 14, which is an average score of 1,17 per individual.

o   **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 30, which is an average score of 2,5 per individual.

There was a 114,29% increase in the results for this question, which indicates that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was a significant overall increase in relaxation activities.

This question's score indicates the greatest discrepancy of the pre and post-test scores of all the questions. The pre- test scores indicated that very few of the participating employees made use of relaxation techniques to manage their stress levels. There was a marked increase in the use of relaxation techniques after the stress management programme was presented.

- **Question (8): "I avoid unhealthy habits (eg. smoking, or alcohol abuse) for coping with stress."**

Unhealthy habits such as smoking, alcohol abuse and high intake of caffeine have a negative effect on the immune system of corporate employees. Looker and Gregson (2003:151-155) suggest that these habits should be limited to the minimum.

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 42, which is an average score of 3,5 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 44, which is an average score of 3,67 per individual.

There was a 4,76% increase in the results for this question, which indicates that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall decrease in unhealthy habits.

This is one of the most difficult lifestyle changes to make because it is habit, and in many cases an addiction. The corporate employees may need support if they want to change these habits.

- **Question (9): "I spend leisure time in a place where I have complete change of scenery."**

Corporate employees have to ensure that they have some fun and enjoyment out of life. This fun should be experienced in a different way than working. They should take up an enjoyable activity that gives them a sense of pleasure. Brehm (1998:243) explains it as follows:

> *Physical activities, hobbies and other leisure-time pursuits are forms of recreation, activities that refresh you by means of enjoyment and relaxation. Recreation re-creates you; it renews your energy and creativity.*

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 30, which is an average score of 2,5 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 40, which is an average score of 3,33 per individual.

There was a 33,33% increase in the results for this question, which indicate that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall increase in leisure activities.

- **Question (10): "I have talked to my boss about my work commitments and expectations."**

Corporate employees are under pressure to perform within their working environment. They are often subjected to long hours and high workloads and these have a negative effect on their lives.

> *Unrealistic expectations, especially in this time of corporate reorganisations which sometimes put unhealthy and unreasonable pressures on the employee, can be a tremendous source of stress and suffering. Increased workload, extremely long work hours and intense pressure to perform at peak levels all the time for the same pay, can actually leave employees physically and emotionally drained.*

In such instances the corporate employee must have the courage and the conviction to discuss his/her workload with the manager of the team. According to the project manager of the corporate employees that formed part of this study, the employees have to work long hours and they work under pressure all the time because of the deadlines they have to meet. Each of the employees has to take responsibility to discuss their work functioning with their manager.

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 26, which is an average score of 2,17 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 36, which is an average score of 3,0 per individual.

There was a 38,46% increase in the results for this question, which indicates that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall improvement in addressing the impact of work pressure and expectations.

- **Question (11): "I have talked to members of my household to divide responsibilities."**

In times when life demands more from a person it is necessary for that person to make use of social support and shared responsibilities. Looker & Gregson (2000:123) state the following:

> *Seeking help and support from others in the tasks you perform can be mutually beneficial in reducing workload and demands. Rather than struggle, ask for help.*

The employees have to realise that they can divide household chores and tasks between the members of the household to make the burden less. One individual of the household does not have to take responsibility for everything that needs to be done. Each person in the household should have certain responsibilities.

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 34, which is an average score of 2,83 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 42, which is an average score of 3,5 per individual.

There was a 23,53% increase in the results for this question, which indicate that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, they shared more of their household responsibilities with other household members.

- **Question (12): "I get six to eight hours sleep every night."**

Some employees need more sleep while others need less sleep. In general it is accepted that most people need six to eight hours sleep a night. Burns

(2003:140) explains the following regarding rest:

The mind and body are constantly at work, even when you sleep. During sleep, however, the system has an opportunity to slow down. Energy used during exertion can slowly be restored when the body is at rest.

Demands are made on different areas of the employees' lives in the workplace, in their personal lives, with their extended family and social engagements. To gain more time to fit everything in, the employees try and sleep less so their bodies do not have the time they need to rest. In the long run this could be to the detriment of the employee's health and general functioning.

The results of this question were as follows:

o **Pre-test:**

The total score for the group was 30, which is an average score of 2,5 per individual.

o **Post-test:**

The total score for the group was 36, which is an average score of 3,0 per individual.

There was a 20% increase in the results for this question, which indicate that after the stress management programme was presented to the participating employees, there was an overall increase in the amount of sleep per night.
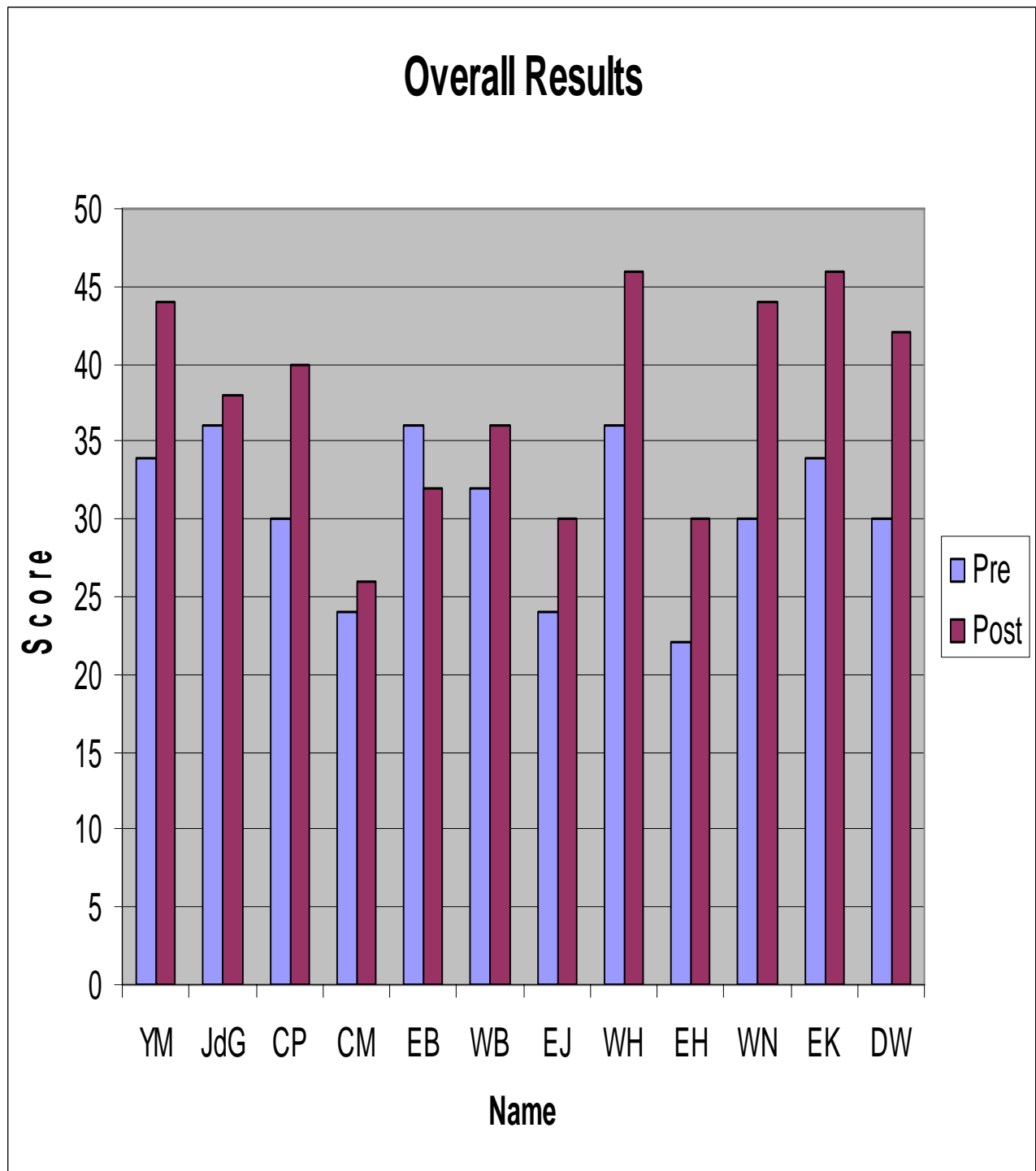
Overall Results

Figure 6.4 Result of the stress questionnaire, per person

The pre and post-test scores of all the corporate employees but one, who participated in this research study, indicated that there was an improvement in their stress levels after the stress management programme was presented to them. The overall results of the pre and post-tests of the group showed a

23,37% increase in the total scores of the group.

One of the employees (EB) showed an increase in her stress levels after the stress management programme was presented. This employee was exposed to added stress during the course of the training because her father had a heart attack and he needed to be hospitalised and cared for after the hospitalisation. She also experienced physical symptoms of stress such as nausea and migraines and her energy levels were low throughout this period of time.

The researcher would like to mention two of the other employees who attended the stress management training and who were also exposed to stressful situations during this period of time. EJ had an incident on her way to work where her car's window was smashed and her handbag was grabbed out of her car. She displayed symptoms of stress with regard to the incident, but as the training proceeded, her functioning normalised and she did not display any overt symptoms of stress. The researcher is of the opinion that one of the factors that could play a role in EJ's stress reaction is hardiness of the personality. According to Auerbach and Gramling (1998:41), hardiness is a personality trait that helps employees to cope with stress:

> *Hardiness consists of three components – commitment, control, and challenge. That is, hardy people believe in what they are doing and are fully involved in their daily activities; they believe that life experiences are controllable; and they view change in a positive sense and as a normal occurrence rather than as a aversive event.*

WB was also exposed to a stressful time during the past year because her

daughter tried to commit suicide three times. She indicated this stressful time in the activities (specifically the clay) that formed part of the stress management programme, but her post-test scores showed an improvement in her stress levels after the stress management programme was presented. The researcher is of the opinion that this could be due to the fact that she had the opportunity to make contact with the stressful issue that was in her foreground – thus her unfinished business – and she had the opportunity to ventilate her feelings. Another factor that could paly a role in WB's improved scores could be the fact that she has been living with this situation for a long time and "past experience" has helped her to develop a sense of self-efficacy. Auerbach & Gramling (1998:44) explains it as follows:

> *The most important way in which we develop expectations of self-efficacy is through successful personal mastery experiences.*

Figure 6.5 indicates the overall increase/decrease in the stress levels of the respondents within the group. The results indicate that after the Stress Management Programme was presented:

- 92% of the respondents' stress levels decreased.
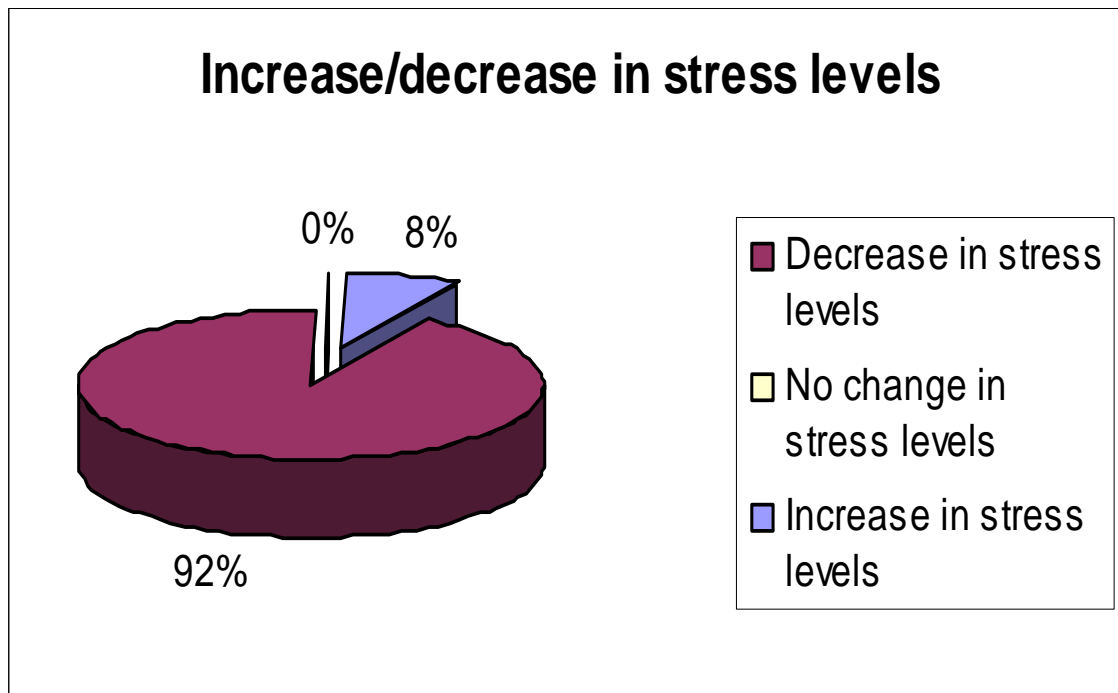- 8% of the respondents' stress levels increased.

Increase/decrease in stress levels

0%   8%

92%

- Decrease in stress levels
- No change in stress levels
- Increase in stress levels

Figure 6.5 Increase/decrease in Stress Levels

The researcher included a burnout questionnaire as part of the pre and post-tests. When looking at the General Adaptation Syndrome, as explained by Ross and Altmaier (1994:3) it is obvious that the last part of the stress reaction is collapse. This collapse can be likened to burnout. Burnout can be defined as follows:

> *Burnout is a term that is used to signify the condition of an individual who, as a result of on-the-job stress, is completely drained and exhausted and can no longer function efficiently (Auerbach & Gramling, 1998:213).*

The researcher wanted to ascertain whether the stress management programme would have an effect on the burnout levels of the participating employees. Figure 6.6 and 6.7 indicate the burnout pre and post-test scores.
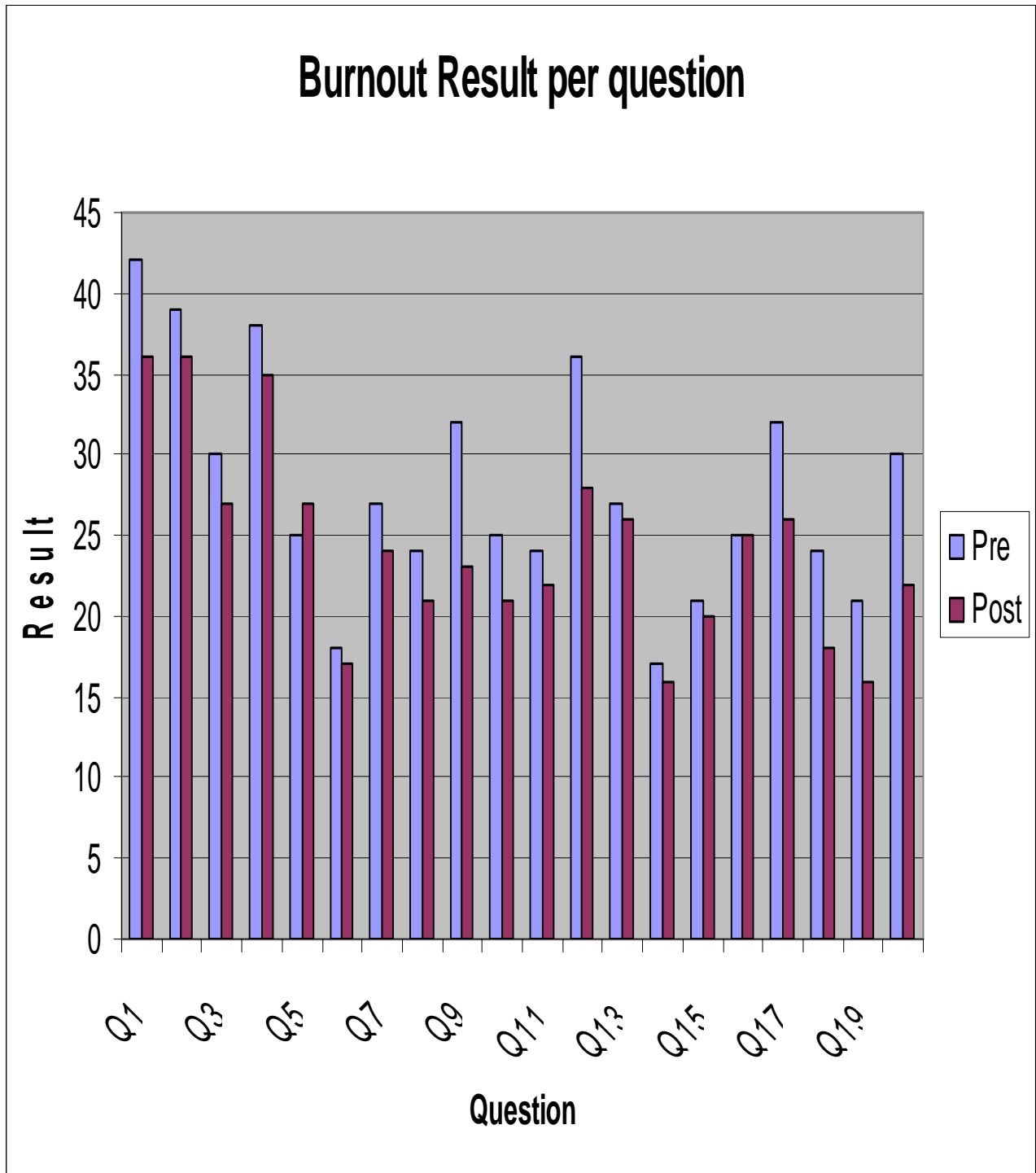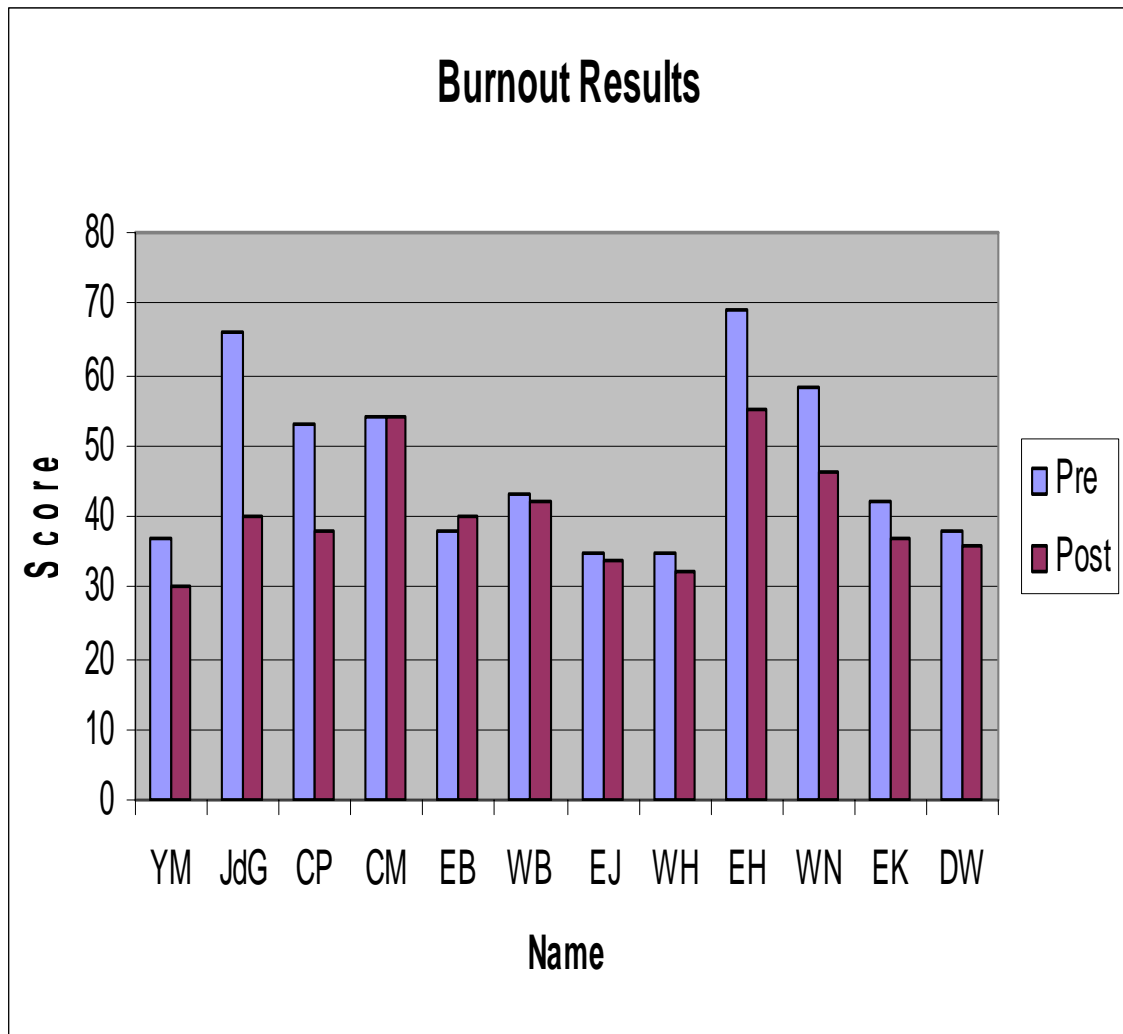
Figure 6.6 Burnout Results per Question

Figure 6.7 Burnout Results per Person

The pre and post-test scores of the burnout levels of all the corporate employees but two, who participated in this research, showed a 12,75% decrease in their burnout levels after the stress management programme was presented to them.

One of the employees (EB) showed an increase in her burnout levels after the stress management programme was presented. As mentioned when discussing her results with regard to the stress questionnaire, this employee was exposed to added stress during the course of the training because of her father's illness. Whilst presenting the stress management programme, it became apparent that this employee felt

overwhelmed by the demands in her life and that she did not experience support from family and friends with regard to the general demands in her life and the added demands because of her father's illness.

One of the employees' (CM) burnout levels remained unchanged after the stress management programme was presented.   When referring back to the general adaptation syndrome it is important to note that some people experience very high levels of stress for a long time and they adjust to that stress (Ross & Altmaier, 1994:3). The danger here is that this person may not even realise that he/she is heading towards a collapse. The researcher is of the opinion that this may be one of the reasons that CM's burnout levels did not change. She has been exposed to high levels of stress for a long time and even though she could make some basic changes that improved her stress levels, she would have to make the necessary adjustment in her lifestyle to prevent burnout. If she continues on the same path she could possible experience serious burnout in the future.

Figure 6.8 indicates the overall increase/decrease in the burnout levels of the respondents within the group. The results indicate that after the Stress Management Programme was presented:

- 84% of the respondents' burnout levels decreased.

- 8% of the respondents' burnout levels increased.

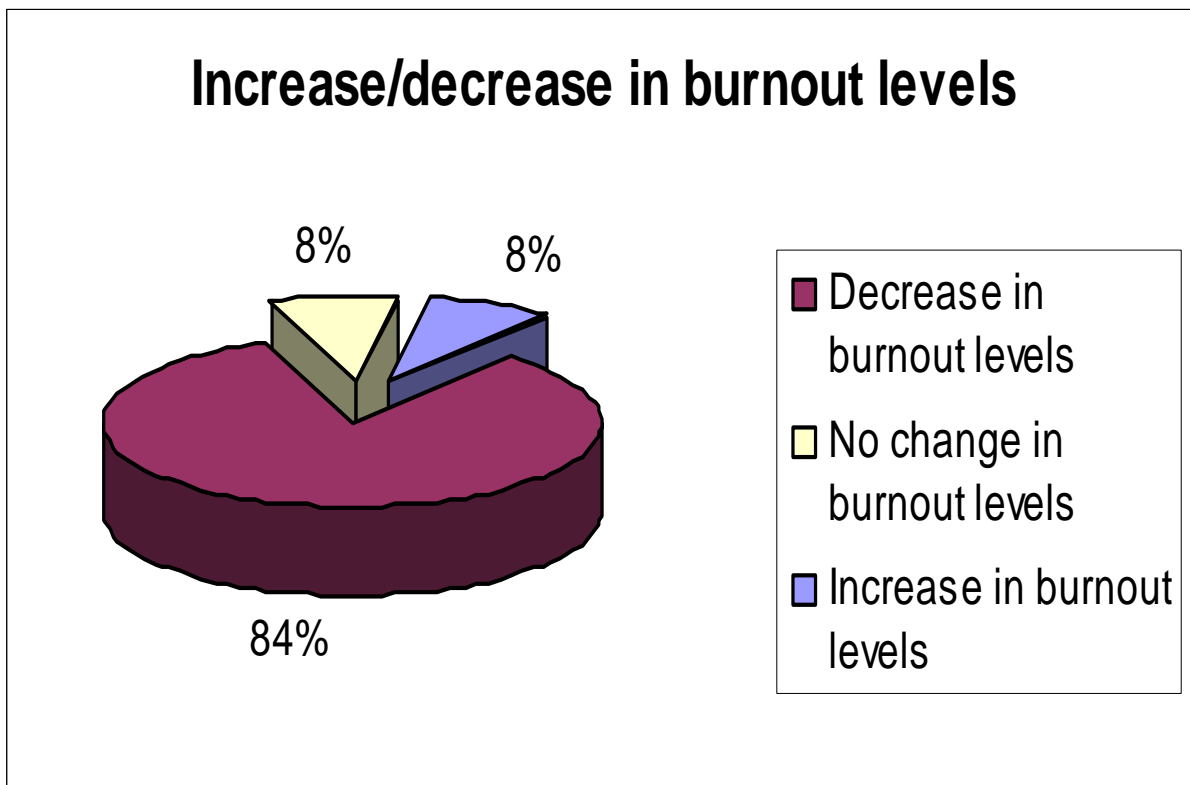- 8% of the respondents' burnout levels remained unchanged.

Increase/decrease in burnout levels

8%   8%

- Decrease in burnout levels
- No change in burnout levels
- Increase in burnout levels

84%

Figure 6.8 Increase/decrease in Burnout Levels

6.9.2.3   General Findings of the Quantitative Research

- Stress management techniques such as time management, assertiveness and communication improved after the stress management programme was completed by the corporate employees.

  Brehm (1998:159) states the following regarding time management and communication:

  > *Time management involves setting limits as well as priorities. Saying no to low priority requests and following through on your priorities and schedules is easier with good communication.*

Furthermore, Brehm (1998:169) states that assertiveness has an effect on people's stress levels:

> *Research has shown that people who do not assert themselves lack confidence in their feelings, beliefs and opinions. They are less likely to assert themselves in unpleasant social interactions and thus experience more interpersonal stress.*

- Emotional ventilation increased after the stress management programme.

- The use of play therapy mediums in the stress management programme resulted in an increase of the respondents' awareness of the effects of stress on their lives.

Awareness has an effect on the employee's general functioning as explained by Schoeman (1996:30).

> *Awareness is a means by which an individual can regulate him or herself by choice.*

- The increased awareness with regard to stress resulted in the realisation by the respondents that choices could be made with regard to stress management techniques in their lifestyles.

- These choices resulted in the realisation that control can be gained over personal circumstances by making certain lifestyle changes.

According to Looker and Gregson (2003:146), lifestyle changes would include changing aspects such as diet, caffeine and alcohol consumption, smoking habits, fitness and exercise, body weight and change with regard to the amount

of sleep and rest that the person has. Positive changes should have a positive effect on the person's stress levels.

Gaining control resulted in a decrease in stress levels. Auerbach and Gramling (1998:124) explain it as follows:

In general, the less control that the organism has over a stressor, the more severe the health outcomes: and, conversely, the more control an organism has over a stressor, the better the health outcomes

- The impact of the stress management programme was that the corporate employees became more aware of the importance of social support for their personal stress management. With regard to social support, Burns (2003:181) states the following:

Living a life with minimal stress requires human relationships that are not stressful. Humans are social animals and seek companionship, support, approval and acceptance from others at work, at home and at leisure.

- Continuous high stress levels resulted in high burnout levels before the stress management programme was presented.

Auerbach and Gramling (1998:212) state the following regarding burnout:

Burnout is the term that is used to signify the condition of an individual who, as a result of on-the-job stress, is completely drained and exhausted and can no longer function efficiently.

- The burnout levels of the employees decreased after the stress management programme was presented to them.

6.9.3 The Intervention: The Stress Management Programme

The stress management programme that was presented to the corporate employees was presented over four mornings and each session concentrated on a specific theme with regard to stress management.

Stress Management Programme			
Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4
Defining Stress	Effects of Stress	Stress Management Techniques	Personal Stress Management Programme
Relaxation & Drawing	Visualisation & Body Drawing	Clay & Relaxation	Sensory Exercise

Table 6.1 The Stress Management Programme

The following aspects were addressed during the training:

- Defining stress.

- The effects of stress physically, psychologically, emotionally and mentally.

- Stress management techniques.

- Personal stress management programme.

The training programme was based on literature and made use of activities to enhance the participation and the awareness of the employees.

6.9.3.1   The Use of Play Therapy Mediums

Play therapy mediums were used throughout the stress management training. The play therapy mediums were used to enhance the awareness of the employees with regard to their stress levels and the effect thereof on their functioning at work and in their personal lives. Schoeman and Van der Merwe (1996:35) mention the following regarding awareness:

> *With therapy based on an awareness of and contact in the here and now, solutions can thus be created.*

The employees evaluated the use of the play therapy mediums as indicated in Figure 6.9.
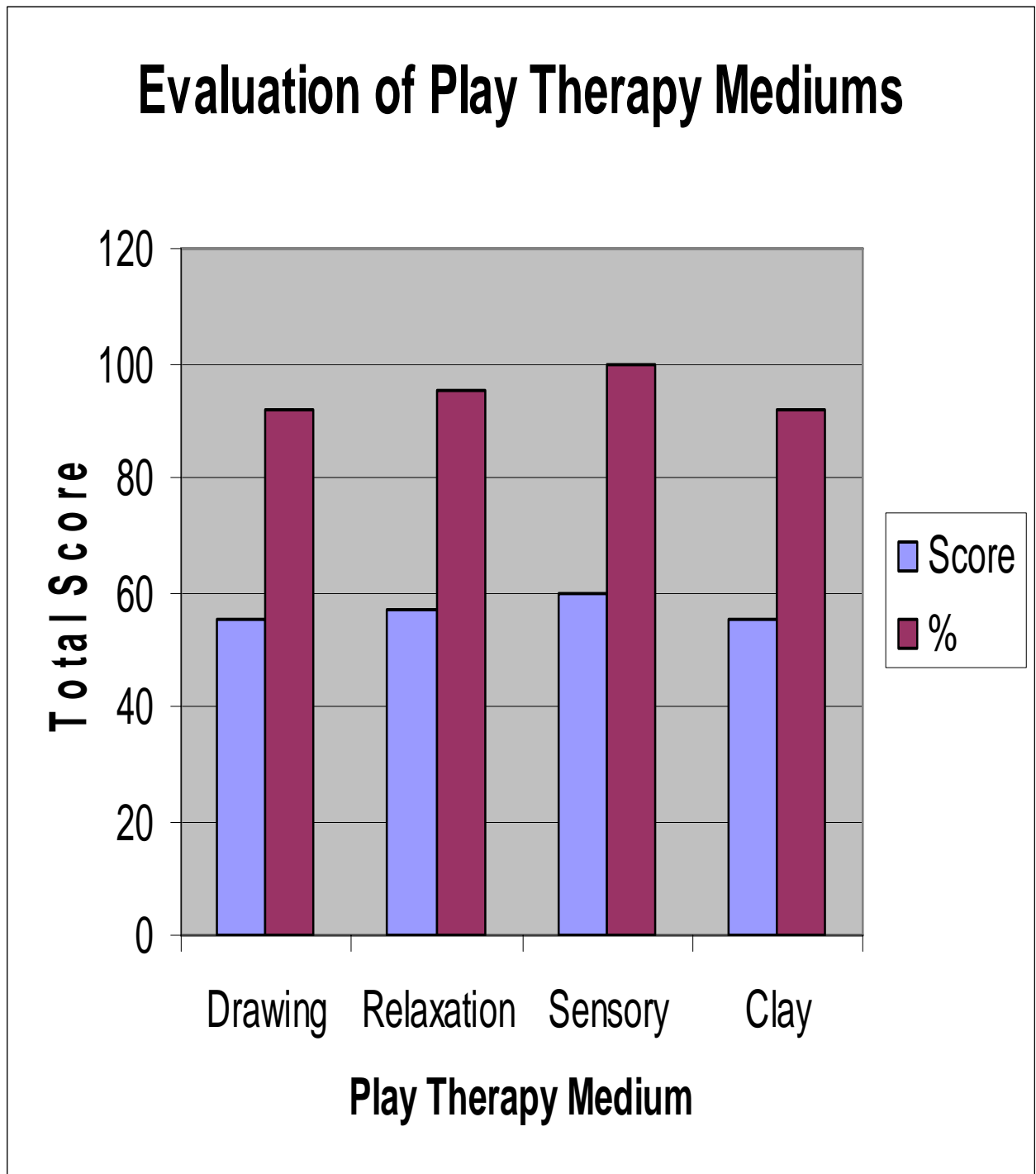
Evaluation of Play Therapy Mediums

Figure 6.9 Evaluation of Play Therapy Mediums

All the participants were positive about the use of play therapy mediums during the stress management training. They participated voluntarily in all the activities that formed part of the programme.

- **Sensory Activities**

It is obvious from Figure 6.10 that the employees enjoyed the sensory work. The sensory activities that were used included the peeling of oranges (Oaklander, 1995), music was played during all the activities and the employees were made aware of their surroundings on a sensory level on a regular basis.

Practical Example:

The researcher gave the employees the opportunity to look around the room and to find an object that they liked. The employees then had to describe the object on a sensory level, thus "tell the group about the colour of the object, the sound that it makes, how does it taste, does it have a distinctive smell and what does the object remind you of?" This enhanced the employees' ability to make contact with their senses.

- **Clay**

It is important to mention that clay is a tactile medium and, therefore, it also works on a sensory level. All the employees took part in the activity with the clay. Some of them complained that the clay got stuck under their nails and that they did not like the feeling of the clay on their hands. Jennings (1993:90) states the following with regard to clay as a sensory medium:

> *It can be used to develop or express touch sensation, but also to activate other senses and to provide the context for imaginative play.*

Furthermore, according to Van der Merwe (1996:147), the clay offers the opportunity to make contact with and ventilate feelings:

It offers an acceptable medium for releasing feelings of hostility and aggression.

The employees were requested to create their greatest stressor in the clay with their eyes closed. Thereafter, the employees had the opportunity to give feedback with regard to the activity and they could share as much as they wanted to with the group about the stressor that they created. During this session one of the women felt she did not want to discuss anything in front of the group. She was given permission to discuss if she felt up to it, at a later stage. The next person discussed her stressor in a very general manner. The researcher asked W to discuss her experience and the stressor in her life. This participant started to tell the group in a very soft voice that the stressor that she made was her daughter and that her daughter had tried to commit suicide three times during the past year. This was creating enormous stress in her personal life and, therefore, it was having an effect on her work. She left the room crying – and returned five minutes later to continue with the training. (The researcher met with W after the session to confirm whether she was receiving therapy. She confirmed that she and her family were receiving therapy). After everyone in the group had had a turn, E asked whether she could have her turn again because she did not want to talk about her stressor the first time round. With the group's permission she then told the group that she divorced her husband a year ago and that she did not realise that the divorce was still having such an effect on her life.

The clay is an effective medium to bring troubling issues in the employees' lives to the foreground. They realise that they have unfinished business in their lives and that they

need to address the unfinished business before they will reach a state of homeostasis – thus learn to manage their stress levels more effectively.

- **Drawings**

The drawings were done as a group activity and as an individual activity. The group was divided into smaller groups and then were asked to draw the "stress". Thus they had to define stress in a drawing. This activity is effective because most times the group members draw their stressors and not "stress". This gave the researcher the opportunity to discuss the definition of stress and how stress can be positive and negative.

Piaget and Inhelder in West (1996:83) state the following about drawings as a play therapy medium:

> *…drawings and play have a special place in linking the internal and external domains.*

The next drawing that the group was asked to do was a scribble. Each employee had to do a scribble and find picture in the scribble. The picture was then named and the employee had to explain how the picture and the name of the picture related to their lives. The employees were amazed to realise that their unfinished business was projected onto the picture and this brought about awareness with regard to issues in their lives that they thought were forgotten or that they thought were not issues at all.

- **Relaxation Activities**

Each training session started or finished with a relaxation activity. The progressive muscular relaxation activity was repeated because the researcher is of the opinion that relaxation is a skill that people should to acquire. In the beginning it does not

come naturally, but the more a person does the relaxation activity, the easier it becomes (Auerbach and Gramling, 1998:55).

The relaxation activity varied slightly each time it was done. Initially the researcher concentrated much on the employees' breathing, the relaxation of different sets of muscles and on their awareness of their bodies. As the training progressed, visualisation activities were included in the relaxation exercises and the employees were invited to create their own safe place that they could return to at any time after the training was over. This activity was relaxing and it also created comfort for the employees, because it was something that they could take with them after the training was completed. According to Auerbach and Gramling (1998:137), relaxation can benefit corporate employees:

> *Relaxation techniques in general are widely used by people in informal ways to moderate anxiety and to deal with stress related somatic problems.*

For relaxation and to bring a fun element into the training, use was made of balloons. Each employee was invited to blow up a balloon. The employees were encouraged to blow all their stress into the balloon and then to knot the balloon and pass it on to one of the other employees in the group. Afterwards each employee was given permission to pop the balloon in any way that he/she felt comfortable. Some of the employees sat on the balloons, some stood on the balloons, others popped the balloons with pens and others just burst their balloons in their hands. This activity gave the employees an opportunity to relax and have fun. They laughed at each other and enjoyed the popping of the balloons. Furthermore, they had the opportunity to de-stress while doing this activity – they got the message that they had the ability to let

go of the stress in their lives.

6.10 CONCLUSION

The researcher did research with a group of corporate employees. This research entailed that a pre-test was done to ascertain the stress levels of the participating employees. Thereafter, a stress management programme was presented to the employees and a post-test was done to ascertain what the effect of the stress management programme was on the stress levels of the employees.

The stress management programme included play therapy mediums that were used in activities throughout the programme. The results of the pre and post test scores indicate that the stress levels of the corporate employees who took part improved after presentation of the programme. The play therapy mediums had a positive effect on the employees. All of the employees took part in the activities and this led to greater awareness with regard to their own stress levels, the causes of stress in their lives and the choices that they had to make to take back the control over their lives.

The following chapter focuses on conclusions and recommendations that can be made from the findings of the research study.