

Beyond Type A: the seven warning signs of stress



Dr James Petersen introduces the Stress Management Questionnaire

The stress response and its impact on the human condition has been well documented by researchers and clinicians alike. From Hans Selye's pioneering work on stress to current day icons such as Friedman and Rosenman², Herbert Benson³ and Richard Carson⁴, there are now considerable information and techniques for helping one to master stress. Good stress management programmes require some form of stress assessment to help pinpoint key stress 'risk' areas. Until the 1980s there were few well researched stress assessment tools available for clinicians, counsellors and stress management trainers to use with the large number of 'normal' stressed-out population commonly seen in clinics or attending stress management programmes. These individuals had what was commonly called coping problems or 'problems of living' and simply needed guidance to learn how to reduce or master personal stress at work and home. Many people seen in clinics and counselling centres did not fit into the 'emotionally disturbed' category. Consequently, standard psychological testing was not appropriate.

Likewise, trainers conducting stress management programmes often looked for ways to help programme participants identify stressful behaviours and attitudes as part of their programme. They often used quick check lists to help participants look at stress, stressors and the consequences of stress as a 'self-exploration' exercise. A standard practice was to have participants complete a check list of 10-20 items to identify stress levels or patterns. In general, these check lists provided little help in developing a plan to conquer stress.

At the Biofeedback and Stress Management Clinic in Tucson, Arizona, I was working on finding more effective ways to help our clients identify and understand how they were 'dealing' with stress and, then, to develop the personal stress mastery skills necessary to prevent and/or reduce stress at home and work.

Inspired by the pioneering research of Drs Friedman and Rosenman² on Type A Behaviour and coronary heart disease, a stress assessment protocol, called the Stress Management Questionnaire (SMQ),

was created. The purpose was to assist stressed individuals to determine if they were exhibiting one or more of the three main characteristics of the Type A Personality: ie inner and externally directed *hostility*, often set off by seemingly minor events; a strong sense of *time urgency* or impatience; and a highly *competitive* attitude, leading toward high achievement and strong competition with self and others.

The Stress Management Questionnaire (SMQ)⁵ was used in our Biofeedback and Stress Management Clinic and, also, integrated into the Kellogg Foundation's Project Well Aware! at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

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More research was needed, however, to establish the validity of the scales and to develop a normative base for use in both counselling and training applications. With a grant from the US National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety⁶ (NIOSH), a comprehensive research project was initiated in 1980 to determine the validity of the SMQ scales and to establish a viable stress self-assessment tool. A stratified, random sample of employees from several companies was recruited to participate in this study. Each employee completed the long form of the SMQ.

Through various statistical analyses of the data collected, two scales were factored that mirrored the Type A Behaviour theory of Friedman and Rosenman²; they were Anger/Hostility and Time Orientation. However, five other, unique factors were developed that correlated with high scores on a physical wellbeing assessment. These additional scales were: Perfectionism, Disappointment, Negative Mood (Burnout), Underachievement and Tension. The net result was a scaled-down self-assessment tool that comprised just 41 questions and became the heart of the SMQ.

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For our perspective, the SMQ is best seen as an educational and self-assessment tool providing key stress 'risk' information about one's self in relation to stress. With this information, behavioural and attitudinal changes can be targeted for Stressmastery. The primary characteristics of each of the seven stress warning signs scales are described below.

1 Hostility/anger

Numerous studies over the years have shown that anger/hostility is a Type A Behaviour highly correlated with an increased risk of coronary heart stroke, myocardial infarction, high blood pressure and gastrointestinal or stomach problems. The Hostility/Anger Scale of the SMQ assesses the degree to which a person is showing anger or hostility toward others and the degree to which anger is being used to control or influence others. A high level of anger, compared to the norm group, was a predictor of physical and interpersonal problems.

2 Perfectionism

Perfectionism is close to the Type A concept of Competitiveness but is more directed at self, than at others. Perfectionism in the SMQ reflects a pattern of behaving in self-exacting and self-demanding ways. Perfectionists are often intolerant of anything less than meeting 'their high standard'. Perfectionism is not the quest for excellence; rather, it is the attempt to obtain the unrealistic and unobtainable goals in one's own life and work. Individuals exhibiting a high degree of perfectionist-like behaviours have a higher frequency of chronic health and emotional problems, according to our research. Individuals caught up in perfectionist behaviour experience significant personal distress, unrest and ever-present anxiety. Their unrealistically high standards and quest to avoid failure frequently provoke negative reactions and even rejection from others.

‘The SMQ is a mirror to the way a person actually functions on a day-to-day basis’

3 Time-urgency

Excessive or chronic Time-urgency is a classic component of the Type-A personality. Individuals who are overly time-oriented risk having a greater amount of cardiovascular, gastrointestinal and other health problems than the more patient or less time-urgently oriented person.

Individuals prone to behaving and thinking that everything has to be done quickly and under strong timelines are at 'risk' of creating unmanageable

stress and distress. While functioning under time constraints is common, the self-imposed 'rush-rush' approach to many aspects of one's life is not only unnecessary, but ill-advised. The inward drive and self-pressure to do more, quicker and in less time can be counterproductive as this may lead to physical problems and disease such as chronic headaches, back pain, and gastro-intestinal problems.

4 Disappointment

Excessive disappointment is a stress warning sign scale identified in the research on the SMQ. Those who scored high on this scale had a greater than average amount of physical/health problems. Disappointment is the result of setting unrealistic or irrational expectations of others. Frequently disappointed people blame their misfortune on external events and people and fail to see their own responsibility to control their way of thinking. High scorers on this scale have great difficulty in setting realistic expectations for others or the world around them; they do not appraise a situation very well in terms of what can be realistically expected. Expressing constant disappointment is a stress management warning sign with potentially serious negative health effects.

5 Burnout

Negative mood or burnout is a behavioural characteristic identified by the research on the SMQ as a stress 'risk' factor. It is a strong stress warning sign that has potential negative effects on health and productivity. Individuals experiencing significant burnout are likely to experience greater stress than normal which, if not reversed or altered, can lead to more serious conditions such as depression. Burnout is not the same as depression but, nevertheless, individuals with these conditions have both physiological and psychological aspects that may require competent professional attention.

6 Underachievement

Underachievers believe strongly that they are living unproductive or unsuccessful lives; they are disappointed with how well they are doing, even if they are doing well by objective review. This 'risk' factor is more about disappointment with self than with others. People who feel they are unproductive also tend to feel dissatisfied, which, in turn, can produce a variety of physical and emotional problems. The quality and quantity of their work, as well as their relationship to others, can be negatively affected.

7 Tension

Tension is a strong physical or physiological 'stress risk' indicator. This scale assesses the degree to which one allows personal relaxation and calm into their lives. Chronically highly tense individuals experience a level of physical and emotional tension that is greater than normal. People who report being tense and unable to let go and relax are at risk of stress-related problems. Most tense individuals do not take time to relax and release inner tension and are unable to enjoy much of what they do.

Applying the SMQ in a counselling, EAP or training environment

The goal of coaching and counselling can be summarised as finding out what the problem is and then bringing to bear the skills and talents of the counsellor or coach to help, encourage and train the individual to learn new, different or better skills and attitudes to mitigate the stress that is causing physical, interpersonal or emotional problems. In stress theory as well as in the total SMQ, there are three key elements: stressors (daily hassles and major life events); stress effects (physical and emotional); and stress 'risk' factors or warning signs. In this article, I have discussed the area of stress warning signs as part of the SMQ.

The SMQ, which can be taken online or in print format, is a tool that can assist counsellors and trainers to help stressed people make lifestyle changes to mitigate the effects of prolonged stress. Rather than focusing on abstract concepts, through guidance from trained professionals, the SMQ can provide a roadmap for personal change based on behavioural data self-reported by the individual. In essence, the SMQ is a mirror to the way a person actually functions on a day-to-day basis. ■

References

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For a free trial use of the online SMQ, please email Jim Petersen: jpetersen@stressmaster.com