Workplace stress in senior executives: coaching the “uncoachable"

Article

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Stress among executives is an increasing challenge for individuals, teams, and organisations as executives face high job demands and high work intensity (Cavanaugh, Boswell, & Roehling, 2000). Although the consequences of "life in the fast lane" for health and well-being such as insomnia, exhaustion, and depression are well known (Nyberg, Leineweber, & Magnusson Hanson, 2015), high-profile cases still tend to shock and surprise the public; e.g. Zurich Financial's CFO; Swisscom's CEO, who committed suicide in 2013 allegedly because of unbearable work pressure; the CEOs of Lloyds Bank and AkzoNobel, who were diagnosed with severe fatigue in 2011 and 2012 respectively (for a detailed case description see Rook, Hellwig, & Florent-Treacy, 2015). Calls have been made in the academic literature to consider stress issues in leadership development in order to maintain the well-being of leaders (e.g., Lovelace, Manz, & Alves, 2007; Campbell, Innis-Bates, Martin, & Meddings, 2007). In addition, although we know that burnout may occur if an individual denies experiencing strain, and fails to muster the resources to create resilience (Campbell Quick, Cooper, Gavin, & Quick, 2008), the specific context of stress at senior executive level is an increasing problem that does not seem to be adequately addressed.

Leaders' health problems can also have a negative impact on the share price of organisations and on the trust of employees and shareholders in the ability of the leader (Florent-Treacy & Manzoni, 2012; Steinglass, 2012). For example, when Ton Buechner (CEO of AkzoNobel) went on sick-leave due to fatigue, the company's shares dropped and the following headlines could be read in the media: "If this could be more serious, it's a bad thing. But if it's just temporary, people will wonder whether he's able to head the company's transformation as there's so much still to be done" (Mutlu Gundogan, analyst at ABN Amro, as cited in Bloomberg, 18.09.2012). Then, "[o]n announcement that Ton Buchner will return at the end of the year the shares went up 3.7% (to 44.32 Euros)" (Reuters, 17.10.2012).

Taboos are an universal feature of social systems, first described by Captain Cook in 1777 when discovering Tonga, referring to the tacit constraints on what can be said and even thought (Schoemaker & Tetlock, 2012). Talking about individual stress appears to be taboo among executives (Florent-Treacy & Manzoni, 2012): tough executives do not talk about stress as something to be feared but rather as something to be proud of. To take one high profile case, when Antonio Horta-Osorio (CEO of Lloyds Banking Group) suddenly collapsed in a board meeting in 2011, everyone, including Horta-Osario, himself was caught by surprise. Although Horta-Osario later described that period in detail –saying that he hadn't slept for 5 days due to work stress– at the time of his collapse, the serious nature of his stress level had gone undetected: "Lloyds boss goes sick with 'stress': Shock departure" (The Daily Mail, November 3, 2011).

We focus on senior executives in this article because they appear to be particularly susceptible to high levels of stress. It is seen as normal for executives to be under constant pressure, sleep four hours a night, and work during weekends. But the behaviour that propelled them to the top may have a downside. Senior executives themselves admit that any sign of fatigue or stress could have a negative impact on their career progression. As Bailey (2014) noted: "Executives may worry that colleagues would snicker if they knew about [the executive's] stamp collection or daily meditation sessions. These vital activities [that allow for renewal/stress reduction] might be perceived as signs of weakness." Many executives believe this may compromise their career progression and professional success. This hints at another problem, which is the syndrome of "loneliness at the top." Most executives will admit to having a very limited number of people they consider peers. This limits the opportunities to discuss increasingly dangerous levels of stress.

As a result, despite the highly visible cautionary tales, most executives either deny or belittle the problem: stress applies to others but not themselves. In addition, boards and key

shareholders are not equipped to cope with the problems that could arise if they acknowledge that a highly visible top performer is at risk. We call this phenomenon the "taboo of executive stress". Unfortunately, the normalisation of executive stress strengthens the taboo and distorts the fact that excessive negative stress is dysfunctional, and eventually may lead to burnout.

To sum up, despite the plethora of leadership training, workshops, coaching, and other opportunities for people to address stress in the workplace, senior executive stress continues to go unrecognized due to resistance both from the organization, and from the at-risk individuals themselves. Thus, a rigorous approach to flag up potential stress issues in executives is needed. Stress and leadership development inventories do not always pick up on stress issues be it from a lack of self-awareness, or as a result of self-deception and the expectations and pressures of the system of which the executive is a part. A common language and robust protocol is needed to develop, and increase the confidence of executive coaches who are often the first in line to be confronted with stress-impacted managers but are not trained stress experts, psychotherapists or medical doctors. Limits of the current work-related stress evaluation tools are that they disregard the unaware and unconscious aspects of work experience. A psychodynamic approach to stress would allow examining the individual experience of work and how it influences levels of performance and health at work. Psychodynamic scholars, for example, highlight personal agency in the stress experience and the importance of contextualising it within the person's life experience as a whole (e.g., Driver, 2014). One may actually enjoy stress if it is directly linked with an important goal (Bicknell, 2010 & Liefooghe, 2010) or the satisfaction of a psychological need. Firefighters, for instance, may enjoy the stress and strain of rushing into a burning building to safe someone. The enjoyment comes from the adrenaline rush and feelings of accomplishment during and after the rescue mission. For the firefighter, this can be a meaningful and therefore

positive experience. We also observe in other helping professions a secondary gain through stressful situations and the existence of the rescuer syndrome (Kets de Vries, 2010).

Given what we have learned about stress, we need to explore the topic in a systemic manner in order to evaluate whether the experienced stress has negative consequences such as burnout or can be seen as a challenge, i.e., an opportunity for positive change.

Based on a psychodynamic approach, we developed an interpretive protocol that aims to achieve a delicate balance between flexibility, validity with the coachee, and academic rigour. It is designed to provide professionals – who find themselves coaching people with high stress levels (without being stress experts, medical doctors, or psychotherapists) – with a rigorous framework to gage executive stress. While providing guidelines to enable executive coaches to overcome the taboo, the protocol is not intended as a form of prevention or treatment but rather is designed to highlight areas of potential concern and provide information on ways to create resilience. Thus, the protocol is not intended to formally diagnose stress but to highlight potential areas of stress that could be addressed in coaching or indeed might need to be addressed by a health professional.

Below we present the common manifestations of executive stress and the challenges of evaluating stress, before outlining how we developed the protocol and the psychodynamic lens on collecting and interpreting data as the base of the new interpretative protocol and making recommendations for its use in practice.

Manifestations of executive stress

In this section we introduce different stress models and provide an overview of common stress issues of executives. We do not aim to provide a detailed literature review on workplace stress antecedents, symptoms, and outcomes but rather to outline areas of the workplace stress experience that are relevant for executives. Excellent reviews of workplace

and executive stress (from a organisational psychology perspective) are provided, for example, by Campbell Quick and colleagues (2008) and Dewe, Cooper, and Driscoll (2001).

What is stress?

Stress can be conceptualised as a feature in the external environment or as an individual's psychological, behavioural, and physical response to environmental demands. The latter approach resembles the most influential stress theory, called the transactional model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), according to which stress comes from the interaction between the environment and the individual and does not reside exclusively in either. The transactional approach states that stress is psychologically mediated, connecting the individual's subjective impression of stress to systemic demands often related to perception of loss of control and lack of support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Performance issues might be perceived as the most prevalent source of stress for executives. However, it is the impression of having lost control over a situation or lacking the resources to achieve the performance target that determines whether an individual experiences stress; the feeling of an inability to cope (Karasek, 1979).

Other existing theoretical models of work-related stress also see stress as a product of the (im)balance between demands and the individual's perceived resources. The occupational stress literature argues that employees experience physical and mental health issues due to excessive job demands, coupled with a lack of control over their work and inadequate resources such as social support (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999).

The Effort Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model (Siegrist, 1996), on the other hand, puts its emphasis on reward rather than control on how one experiences work. The model outlines that two characteristics, effort to cope at work (e.g., external stimuli of workload, internal stimuli of over-commitment), and occupational rewards (e.g., salary, job security, self-

esteem) are relevant for the stress experience. An imbalance between effort and reward (i.e., high effort and low reward) leads to distress and eventually strain.

Morgeson and Humphrey (2006) also highlighted the importance of integrating the social context (i.e., interactions with others inside and outside work and the broader work environment) into (work characteristics) models that explain the stress experience at work. By doing so, they added to the existing work characteristics models and considered new mediators and moderators: knowledge, social characteristics, and contextual characteristics.

Current theoretical developments divide these work characteristics into job demands and job resources (e.g., job-demand-resources model; JD-R model; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job resources such as social support are work characteristics that buffer stress. In contrast, job demands such as high workload or lack of control undermine well-being. Job resources are defined by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) as physical, psychological, social, and organisational aspects of a job that are required to achieve a goal, reduce job demands and costs, and stimulate growth and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001).

In addition to job resources, personal resources and their role in the stress experience are also examined in the stress and well-being literature. Diener (1994), Warr and Clapperton (2009), Daniels (2011), and Warr (2013) amongst others point to the relevance of individual characteristics such as personality traits (extraversion and neuroticism) and to cognitive behaviour (such as comparisons in relation to work demands of fellow employees) as antecedents of stress and there is also research on the role of resources of the individual for maintaining and enhancing well-being (see Hobfoll, 2002). The study of resources goes back to the 1960s when Caplan (1964) explored how individuals preserve well- being in wartime, highlighting a resource that is an aspect of the self (sense of mastery) and a resource that is an aspect of an individual's social environment (social support). Other resources of individuals

that have been researched widely in psychology are self-esteem and goal pursuit (see Hobfoll, 2002).

Antecedents and moderators of executive stress

Today's work trends include longer working hours and increasing managerial demands and leaders can be seen as having an exponentially higher experience of these pressures as they have more demands and responsibilities due to their position (Lovelace, et al., 2007). The most stressful leadership challenges were lack of resources and time.

Yet, while it is commonly presumed that the higher one rises in the leadership hierarchy, the more the pressure and stress increase, past research has found that leaders experience less stress than their subordinates, and that "higher ranking" leaders experience less stress than "lower ranking" leaders (Zaleznik, Kets de Vries & Howard, 1977). Sherman and colleagues (2012) compared leaders with non-leaders in terms of their stress levels (self-rated anxiety level and cortisol level) and found that leaders were less stressed. Furthermore, those higher up the leadership hierarchy experienced less stress than leaders lower in the hierarchy. They tested whether the sense of control mediated the relation between leadership level and the stress experience and found that it did. They argued that for leaders higher in the hierarchy, the existence of a large number of subordinates as well as a sense of substantial authority contributed to the sense of control.

In the literature on executive health (Campbell Quick et al., 2008), particular individual characteristics that contribute to the executives' experience of negative stress are workaholism, anxiety, neuroticism, low tolerance for ambiguity, and type A behaviour. Individual behaviours of executives that have been found to lead to negative stress are physical inactivity, unhealthy eating habits, and substance abuse (alcohol and cigarettes). Particular stressors for executives outside of work seem to be home-work pressures such as family problems and work-life conflict. Prevalent work characteristics for executives leading

to stress seem to be work overload, travel, conflicts with colleagues, role ambiguity, career stress, organisational and executive culture such as merger and acquisition conflicts.

Impact of stress on healthy functioning and performance of executives

Psychological strain is a common outcome of work stress (van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Forms of psychological strain include depression, anxiety, and exhaustion. Psychological strain has also been linked to physiological and behavioural side effects. Physiological outcomes of stress include 'cardiovascular, biochemical, and gastro-intestinal symptoms (Cooper et al., 2001), such as high blood pressure and heart attacks (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 1991). Particularly for executives, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and a high heart rate are prevalent physiological stress symptoms (Cooper et al., 2001).

Behavioural strain is another outcome of stress and refers to the ways in which stress causes an individual to act. Examples are antisocial behaviour that includes work role disruptions, aggressive behaviour at work, disruptions to non-working life and self-damaging behaviours (Kahn & Byosiere, 1992) such as excessive drinking and smoking (Cooper et al., 2001).

"Burnout is a particular risk for executives and is the result of energy loss without recovery" (Cambell Quick et al., 2008, p. 31). It leads to a loss in connectedness and productivity (Leiter & Maslach, 1988) as it is characterised by exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

Evaluating executive stress

Traditional evaluation approaches

There are challenges to measuring stress: any assessment relates to a moment in time and many stress evaluation tools are self-reports in the form of questionnaire responses. Stressors are measured on a scale that captures the experience of critical life events (Social Readjustment Rating Scale; SRRS; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; SRRS-R; Hobson et al., 1998),

daily hassles (Hassles and Uplift Scale; Kanner et al., 1981; Daily Stress Inventory; DSI; Brantley et al., 1987), or presence/absence of work characteristics (e.g. control and demand questionnaire; Karasek, 1985). The stress experience or coping ability is measured on scales such as the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983) or Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, Krohne et al., 1996). In the physiological stress research, indicators of stress include measures of cortisol levels, heart rate, and blood pressure (Everly & Lating, 2013).

As stress is often measured through self-reports, evaluating senior executive stress is particularly challenging due to the self-deception and impression management prevalent among many executives. However, stress manifests itself in ways that can also be evaluated by observers rather than just listening to what the person has to say (Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005), such as thought patterns, emotional and behavioural reactions, and physical symptoms (Health and Safety Executive; HSE, n.d.).

A psychodynamic approach to evaluating stress

Applying a psychodynamic approach to the study of organizations, in particular to executive stress, helps to identify core issues as this approach identifies processes that underlie human behaviour (Kets de Vries, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2011). The psychodynamic approach addresses conscious and unconscious aspects of individual and collective behaviour, enabling to address emotional, relational, and political issues (French & Vince, 1999) that would otherwise not be identified.

As outlined, using simple surveys limits understanding of the individual's stress experience due to possible denial and impression management. Furthermore, most surveys capture responses on Likert-scales on pre-formed answer options but do not check how the individual experiences and copes with stress depending on the context they are operating in. A more qualitative, holistic approach to understanding the stress concept can, however,

explore how individual characteristics and environmental factors interact with each other. By looking at individual characteristics through a psychodynamic lens (inner theatre – typical cognitive, emotional response patterns, past experiences) (see Kets de Vries & Cheak, 2015) and including context factors through a systemic approach (focus on environmental characteristics in a multitude of layers and interactions with each other), more information will be gathered. Examples of individual, environmental, and systemic factors are the socio-demographic attributes of the individual, characteristics of the individual's support system (family, peers, organisational climate), scope and pervasiveness of stressors (acute, chronic, perceived intensity), individual's experience of support system (past experience with stress and coping), availability of resources and coping strategies, and situational facilitators and hindrances.

In addition, an interpretative approach (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) can capture the subjective reality of executive stress through a process of interaction by focusing on how people perceive what happens to them, on what events and objects mean to them, and on how they adapt their behaviour. It underlines that a brief moment of experience holds endless information that is embedded within different strata of awareness (Polkinghorne, 1983) and also enables the exploration of conscious and unconscious aspects of people's experience (Long & Harding, 2013).

Socio-analytical methods (Long & Harding, 2013), for example, allow for reflection and use signs to create working hypotheses about the unconscious background of certain behaviour and experiences. Socio-analytic interviewing (Long & Harding, 2013), for example, expands the traditional social science approach to interviewing (where the interviewer pays attention to the content, emotional texture and body language of the interviewee's expressed experience) by including signs of unconscious phenomena that affect the interviewee's experience. Defences can be detected which are normally used to enable

functioning but are in fact dysfunctional, and lead to negative outcomes for the individual. Indications of what kind of defences are used, can be found in the interview context, such as slips of the tongue, issues that are left out, incongruence between the affect displayed and content of a response, or repeated lateness for the interview (Long & Harding, 2013). Furthermore, there is also such a thing as unconscious communication (e.g., Sandler, 2008) between coach and coachee that will provide useful data (transference and counter-transference processes). Hence the interviewer has to be not only proficient in traditional interview skills but also skilfully leverage the use of a psychodynamic lens in conversations: active listening, prompting for more detail, and careful observation are key (Long & Harding, 2013). Reflective practice is particularly useful to tune into the unexpressed or unthought known (Hinshelwood, 2013). Based on the outlined stress experience of executives and the psychodynamic approach to collecting data in conversations (i.e., not a psychodynamic tool or therapy approach), we now outline the Stress APGAR protocol.

The Stress APGAR Protocol

Due to taboo surrounding executive stress, our objective to 'collect data' on senior executive stress is to gather it on two levels in a coaching conversation. First, factual responses to symptoms of stress, clues from the context/surroundings and appearance of the person; second, how the person responds/reacts to specific questions (defences, silences, perception of control etc.). The unthought known and reoccurring themes can be discovered this way (Long & Harding, 2013).

The interpretation of the data should be theory driven (Long & Harding, 2013). We therefore use the RADIO indicators (adapted from Kernberg, 1980) as a lens through which responses of the coachee should be interpreted: (1) reality testing (e.g., is the person sufficiently in touch what is happening around him or her?); (2) affect management (e.g., do they show stable and appropriate emotions when answering the various questions?); (3)

defences (e.g., what kind of defences are used: primitive or more mature defences?); (4) sense of identity (e.g., does the person know what he or she stands for?); and (5) object relations (e.g., does the person have a rich or deficient network of relations with others?)

We chose the name "Stress APGAR" for the protocol to highlight that the it is similar to the APGAR neonatal assessment used by paediatricians and obstetricians for over 50 years (Casey et al., 2001; Zieve & Kaneshiro, 2011); it is easy to recall; it is quick; it indicates the danger zones that require urgent professional attention; and it is well-known. The neonatal APGAR score does not claim to be absolutely precise or to detect the origin of the distress of the new-born baby; it aims to highlight the need for action for the those identified as being in the danger zone. The assessment needs to be done by a trained and experienced health care provider, can be carried out in relatively short time frame, and must be repeated frequently to notice the change of the well-being of the baby.

Our developed Stress APGAR has a similar objective: we want it to be relatively easy to use for an experienced practitioner (e.g. coach, counsellor, mentor), repeatedly carried out to assess changes in well-being over time. It is not a coaching tool or assessment tool or diagnosis instrument but an interpretative conversation protocol that can be used for the initial coaching-contracting conversation to allow the coach to determine the degree of stress concerns in terms of the client's health and functioning, and to judge the appropriateness of coaching as opposed to involving other helping professionals (psychotherapists or even doctors). Furthermore, the Stress APGAR determines whether there are particular areas that might be useful to explore in coaching to facilitate a well-functioning and resilient professional and personal life. It can be used in a coaching conversation that is designed to evaluate and discuss problems with stress and assess changes of the levels of stress over time. The protocol gives an overview of antecedents, symptoms, and outcomes that should be considered when aiming to address senior executive stress.

After we established the purpose and functioning of the Stress APGAR, we conducted a systematic literature review in order to establish antecedents, symptoms, and outcomes of stress (e.g., Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005; Michie, 2002; Quick Campbell et al., 2001; HSE, n.d.). Indeed, the identified stress indicators fit into five categories starting with the initials A, P, G, A, and R. In these five categories we assembled aspects of executives' stress experience in terms of job demands (e.g., such as work challenges, difficult work relationships, organisational climate) and resources (e.g., development opportunities, positive work relationships) and individual characteristics (e.g., personality characteristics) and resources (e.g., health behaviours), symptoms of stress in the areas of physiological (e.g., weight gain, sleep quality) and psychological (e.g., lack of concentration, lack of creativity) symptoms, and social resources (e.g., supporting relationships inside and outside of work). The purpose of the Stress APGAR protocol is not to provide systematic review/overview of all established antecedents, symptoms, outcomes and moderators of workplace stress but rather to provide an indicative overview for coaches and other professionals. The five categories are: (A detailed overview of indicators for each dimension is given in the appendix.)

1. Appearance (e.g., sleep patterns, eating habits/weight control, exercise, energy levels, hypertension)
2. Performance (e.g., ability to take decisions, concentration and memory, innovation capability, generating new ideas)
3. Growth and self-development (e.g., satisfaction with opportunities for personal growth and learning - too much? not enough?)
4. Affect management (e.g., ability to feel, understand, control and show emotions appropriately)

5. Relationships (e.g., perceived quantity and quality of relationships with life partner, family, friends and with professional peers and superior)

The protocol is used as a guideline for the coach to look for signs of stress through skilful interviewing and observation techniques that can be learned over time. There are no particular questions to be asked, but the objective is to uncover stress symptoms or information based on observation and active listening. In order to check face validity of the protocol, we presented the developed protocol to 23 executive coaches at a leading European Business School and to 20 participants at the 32nd ISPSO Annual Meeting (International Society for Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations) and invited feedback on the Stress dimensions and practicality of the tool. They agreed with the presented Stress dimensions and some participants in both groups highlighted two key aspects that should be considered when using the protocol. First, in relation to skilful interviewing based not on asking specific questions but gathering information through having a general conversation, observation, and active listening, they highlighted that it is important to speak the language of the executive. For example, talking about what currently impairs their performance is relevant for the executive and gives insights into potential stressors. Second, it might also be important to highlight in a conversation particularly with executives who may experience high levels of stress, that their stress does not signify a personal failure. For example, asking 'Can you see how these organisational problems are coming down to you?' might create a conversation and reflections on this.

In order to get to a realistic assessment of a person's functioning (and make interpretations from the insights collected) we suggest using RADIO indicators in order interpret the 'factual data' and observations from the coaching conversation. The RADIO framework enables the coach to make sense of the data collected in the interview through a psychodynamic lens rather than just considering the cognitive 'facts'. One can look for signs

of stress or depression by, for example, registering responses that are extremely positive or flat to a question about how they are generally doing, for references to having low energy, sleep problems or gastrointestinal issues; physical indicators such as being over- or underweight or having a strained complexion (physiological symptoms associated with stress and depression). Seemingly unimportant details such as the executive forgetting what question was asked several times (a possible sign of the use of defence mechanism or mental confusion) are indicators that further evaluation of possible stress problems is going to be useful. For detailed case vignettes, see Rook et al. (2015). In order to check whether the RADIO framework indeed is a useful interpretation approach in conjunction with the Stress APGAR dimensions, we provided instructions to four executive coaches who used the conversation protocol during a leadership development programme. We had offered to the participants of a general management programme to engage in a voluntary stress coaching session of 45 min in the third and last module with a coach not previously known to them. The coaches did not have any deeper knowledge about the context and the real objective of the participant. The experienced coaches involved in the study received a short briefing about the psychodynamic interpretative stress evaluation method the day before they met the participants for the first time. The sessions were entitled as stress coaching but entirely voluntary. A third of all participants of the programme chose to participate. Two case vignettes were provided by one of the participating coaches and are described in detail by Rook et al. (2016). In debriefing conversations with the participating coaches, they indeed confirmed that the protocol is useful not in terms of providing coachees with all the 'answers', but rather to encourage them to reflect upon their observations and interpret their impressions frequently. This needs to occur within a safe and supported environment provided by the coach or development professional. Certain assessments and interpretations made through the use of the Stress APGAR by the coach also need to be reviewed within the

supervision of the coach in order to avoid certain biases and ensure professional use of the protocol. In supervision, it can be discussed, for example, how the RADIO dimensions were applied for the interpretation of conversations and observations of the coaching session. Overall, the successful application of the RADIO dimensions depend on the psychodynamic training of the coach.

Recommendations for future practice

In summary, the Stress APGAR adds several new aspects to the field of stress management. First, not only 'facts' and self-perceptions regarding stress are looked at. The conversation with the coachee enables the coach to interpret the answers on multiple levels. With the help of the Stress APGAR protocol, a person's defences and coping behaviours, which might influence the trajectory of the stress experience can be determined. Second, the format of this protocol is new. It is not a clinical interview but can be administered in "normal" situations and in the "normal" environment of the executive, for example, during an existing coaching engagement or as part of a developmental training. This way, the stress experience can be more or less reliably gaged despite (1) the taboo of executive stress and (2) the unconscious repression of stress signs and their psychosomatic responses. Furthermore, the protocol helps to prepare for successful coaching on stress issues by identifying issues linked to the 'knowing-doing-gap'. Although there are self-assessment stress tests and books for executives how to identify and deal with stress, no approaches exist which help (in a coaching conversation) to move the senior executive to a place where they are ready for change.

The protocol can also be used by experienced professionals in a non-coaching context to determine whether there are concerns, in terms of the person's health and functioning. For example, HR or development professionals could pick up on signs of possible stress and initiate a conversation with the individual to determine whether further help is needed.

Employers have a duty of care for employees and relevant individuals should be able to detect warning signs in order to ensure the welfare of their employees. Having said that, to use the protocol in its full functionality, i.e., using RADIO as interpretive lens, professionals who use the protocol would need adequate psychodynamic training.

Conclusions

The protocol introduced here uses a psychodynamic lens for gaging stress in order to allow for stress indicators to be detected by coach and coachee, even if there is possible lack of self-awareness, and in the presence of self-deception or impression management. It indicates high risk and points to areas that may require professional attention. This kind of conversational protocol is, in our experience, non-threatening, and can provide a starting point for a more explicit discussion of how the executive is feeling.

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Appendix - The Stress APGAR dimensions

The stress indicators outlined in the protocol are based on a review of the stress literature (e.g., Cranwell-Ward & Abbey, 2005; Quick Campbell et al. (2001); HSE, n.d.). The purpose of the Stress APGAR protocol is not to provide systematic review/overview of all established antecedents, symptoms, outcomes, and moderators of workplace stress but rather to provide an indicative overview for coaches and other professionals.

1. APPEARANCE

Behaviour

- **Sleep**

  Suboptimal sleeping patterns which indicate stress include:

  - insomnia (trouble falling asleep or staying asleep)
  - lack of sleep
  - waking up tired

- **Eating habits**

  Suboptimal eating habits which indicate stress include:

  - too much or too little food intake
  - loss of or increased appetite
  - preference for fast food
  - craving certain foods more than usual

- **Stimulants**

  Suboptimal use of stimulants which indicate stress include:

  - using stimulants to relax or to increase energy
  - using stimulants to deal with stress
  - stimulants include alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, sugar etc.

- **Exercise**

  Suboptimal exercise patterns which can lead to stress or are a symptom of stress include:

  - lack of exercise (victim of lifestyle)
  - intensive exercise

- **Sexual activity**

  Changes in libido which indicate stress include:

  - increased libido
  - decreased libido

- **Physical activity**

  Suboptimal physical activity indicators which indicate stress include:

  - restlessness
  - uncontrollable nervous twitches or manners
  - difficulty sitting still
  - pacing
  - finger or foot tapping
  - nail biting

Physical Composition

- **Vigour**

  Suboptimal aspects of vigour which indicate stress include:

  - feeling fatigued
  - having low energy
  - feeling exhausted
  - hypervigilance

- **Digestion**

  Suboptimal digestion symptoms which indicate stress include:

  - stomach or gastrointestinal issues
    - acid stomach
    - heartburn
    - diarrhoea
    - cramps
    - gas
    - constipation

- **Head**

  Symptoms which indicate stress include:

  - tension headaches
    - migraines
    - ocular migraine

        - eye strain
        - ringing in ears

- **Muscular skeletal**

  Suboptimal conditions of the muscular skeletal system which can be symptom of stress include:

    - tense muscles
        - in neck
        - in back
        - in jaw (and/or grinding teeth)

- **Weight**

  Suboptimal issues regarding weight which can be symptoms of stress include:

    - weight gain
    - weight loss

- **Blood pressure**

  Suboptimal symptoms related to blood pressure which can be symptoms of stress include:

    - high blood pressure
    - palpitations

- **Felt body temperature**

  Suboptimal felt body temperatures which indicate stress include:

    - feeling cold
    - freezing
    - cold, sweaty hands

2. PERFORMANCE

- **Decisiveness**

  Suboptimal decisiveness behaviour which indicates stress include:

    - finding it hard to make decisions

- **Concentration**

  Suboptimal concentration patterns which indicate stress include:

- inability or difficulty concentrating (get distracted easily)
- repetitive thoughts
- obsessive thoughts
- procrastination
- cannot think rapidly

- **Memory**

  Suboptimal memory patterns which indicate stress include:

  - poor memory
  - mental confusion
  - poor judgment

- **Creativity**

  Suboptimal creativity levels which indicate stress include:

  - reduced creativity
  - not contributing new ideas to projects

- **Productivity**

  Suboptimal productivity levels which indicate stress include:

  - less productive than the person used to be
  - less productive than the person would like to be
  - not enough time to respond to email and voice messages
  - missing deadlines

- **Self-esteem**

  Antecedents of stress are for example:

  - self-consciousness
  - no confidence in own abilities
  - thinks other people find them boring
  - feels inferior when they compare themselves to peers
  - sees themselves as someone who is not successful

3. GROWTH TENSION

- **Internal capacity to learn**

  Antecedents and moderators of stress are for example:

  - Desire to learn

        - think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how they think about themselves and the world
        - like learning new things
        - open to new experiences
        - interested in the world
    - Capacity to learn
        - Self-efficacy
            - believe they can solve difficult problems if try hard enough
            - believe they can deal efficiently with unexpected events
        - Self-reflection
            - Reflecting on strengths and weaknesses
            - Reflecting on goals, values, needs

- **External capacity to develop**

  Antecedents and moderators of stress are for example:
    - Learning objects
    - External forces
        - mentors available
        - advancements possible in organisation
        - experiences pleasure from work
        - has job autonomy
        - able to use skills in the job
        - opportunity to learn new things in the job
        - a chance to show how capable one is

4. AFFECT MANAGEMENT

- **Emotional disposition**

  Antecedents of stress are for example:

- Positive affectivity
    - shows positive emotions often
    - 'is positive'
    - is an extravert
    - (Be careful here that positive affectivity is not learned/fake.)

- Negative affectivity
  - shows negative emotions often
  - is pessimistic
  - is neurotic

- **Control of emotions**

  Symptoms of stress are for example:
  - Own emotions (internal management)
    - emotions are felt too intensely
    - gets overtaken by emotions
    - suppresses emotions
    - can't get unstuck from one emotion
    - doesn't react when and how they should
    - doesn't feel emotions other people do
    - lack in confidence in interpreting own emotions
    - negative meta- cognitions and emotions
  - interaction with others (external management)
    - can't express emotions
    - doesn't know how to handle emotions of others
    - lack of empathy
    - emotional over-involvement of others (especially if person is not well)

5. RELATIONSHIP TENSIONS

- **Work relationships**

  Antecedents of stress are for example:
  - cannot handle challenges
  - cannot handle conflicts with others
  - cannot manage key people (superior, reports, peers)
  - is preoccupied by office politics
  - little contact and communication with colleagues

- **Social relationships (family and friends)**

  Moderators of stress are for example:
  - person has no partner

- person has no family
- person has no friends
- low quality and quantity of time spent with family or friends
- difficulties in relationships with spouse/ partner or family or friends

- **Communication**

  Symptoms of stress are for example:

  - the person withdraws to themselves and avoids social situations
  - tries to avoid direct social contact when possible