



INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING STRESS

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Abstract

Stress greatly affects not only people but also organizations. Therefore it is very important to prevent and manage stress and at the same time maintain well-being of employees. This paper presents two main groups of approaches: the organizational and the individual ones, with which individuals (managers/employees) can manage stress.

The paper also presents the results of the empirical research on stress, which was conducted among managers and employees in Slovenian organizations in 2011. The analysis shows which individual and organizational approaches to overcoming stress are most commonly used. The highest percentage of employees implement the following techniques of individual approaches: physical activity, followed by eating healthy food and getting a massage. However, the research results about organizational approaches show that the highest attention was devoted to organization of work and the lowest to physical activities, stimulated by the firm. Furthermore, intergenerational adaptation is not widely used to prevent and overcome stress.

Keywords: employee, organization, stress, individual approaches to overcoming stress, organizational approaches to overcoming stress

JEL classification: I31, M12, M14

1. INTRODUCTION

We encounter stress almost everywhere, at work, at home, in our free time, etc. Over the last decade, organizations have become increasingly more aware of the need to manage stress. There are two reasons for that awareness. The first is the need for motivated and productive employees and the second is an organization's legal responsibility for the care of their employees.

In the fast changing economic and social environment an employee is constantly confronted with new tasks, roles and responsibilities. The organization has to take measures not only to review its core products or services but also to redefine relations and support employees. Nowadays it is widely accepted that the experience at work has undesirable consequences for the health of the individuals and for the performance of their organizations. Therefore, for every organization and also for each individual it is very important that they know as much as they can about stress and how to prevent and manage it. Every job brings its own set of tasks, responsibilities, day-to-day problems, and the pressures and demands these place on us are an unavoidable part of working life. Every employee is exposed to stress and stressful situation, but each individual uses different ways of facing with stress, there are also a lot of different approaches. Approaches to overcoming stress have already been studied by Battison, (1999), Burke, (1993), Cooper et al. (2001), Davis *et al.* (2000); Di Martino and Musri (2001), Donald *et al.* (2005), Franke and Felfe (2011), Jimenéz and Kallus (2010), Karasek and Töres (1990), Lazarus and Folkman (1984), Leiter and Maslach (1999). Luban and Pozzi (1994), Markham, (1995), Newhouse, (2000), Newton, (1995). Palmer *at al.* (2001), Pettinger (2002), Powell (1999), Schmidt (2001), Šarotar Žižek and Treven (2010), Treven (2005), Treven and Mulej (2005), Treven and Treven (2011).

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

To research and present individual approaches for overcoming stress,

To research and present organizational approaches to overcoming stress;

To present the results of the empirical research on stress, which was done among employees in Slovenian organizations in 2011;

To present the results of the empirical research on stress, which was done among managers in Slovenian organizations in 2011;

To define mostly used ways and techniques of individual approaches for preventing and overcoming stress at work;

To define how widely the organizational approaches are used in organizations in Slovenia to prevent and overcome stress.

In the following sections, we present the individual and organizational approaches to overcoming stress in more detail and the empirical research on stress conducted in 2011 among managers and employees in Slovenia. The combined method of the in-depth interviews and the survey by using the original questionnaires was used to obtain the primary data. In the empirical research about individual approaches to overcoming stress, the research instrument – the questionnaire that we constructed on the theoretical bases presented in the next section, was previously tested and validated: 150 students were enrolled in the trial phase performed in May and June 2010. This phase resulted in some modifications of word ordering, terminology etc. In the empirical research about organizational approaches to overcoming stress, we built the original questionnaire considering the theoretical foundations, presented in the third chapter of this paper. To

obtain the feedback information about the suitability of this measurement instrument, we firstly implemented interviews with managers in four¹ organizations and then with five academics². Then the modified questionnaires were sent to 2409 organizations in Slovenia that are included in the data base of the The Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Public Legal Records and Related Services. From employees, we received 470 fulfilled questionnaires about individual approaches to overcoming stress, and from managers, we received 320 fulfilled questionnaires about organizational approaches to overcoming stress during the period from April 2011 until June 2011.

The hypotheses of this study proposed:

H1: Most of the employees in Slovenia prevent and overcome stress with setting their priorities at work.

H2: Among employees in Slovenia, the use of the relaxation techniques is the least established way to prevent and overcome stress.

H3: Physical activity is mostly used individual approach for prevention purposes or for stress recovery by Slovenian employees.

H4: Intergenerational adaptation is not widely used to prevent and overcome stress in organizations in Slovenia.

Hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 were verified by using the descriptive statistics (frequencies and structures), and hypothesis H4 was verified by using factor analysis.

Research provided the results about the approaches that are commonly used for overcoming or preventing stress.

2. INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING STRESS

Individual approaches to overcoming stress are the most easy, accessible and efficient way for maintaining well-being and preventing stress. The best known and commonly used individual approaches are: physical activities, meditation, yoga, medical hypnosis, autogenic training, visualization, relaxation, cognitive methods, biofeedback relaxation method, emotional freedom technique - EFT, Bowens therapy, massage and aromatherapy, humour and laughter, music therapy, therapy with colour, sleep, eating habits and time management.

One of the most commonly and easily used individual approaches is *physical activity*. Physical activity is any activity that we may use in order to improve or maintain our physical fitness as well as our health in general. Likewise it is the best protection against stress and stress-related diseases. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008) physical activity generally refers to movement that enhances health. We can divide physical activities on everyday activities (walking, cycling to work, doing household, gardening etc.), active recreational activities (walking or cycling for recreation, dancing etc.) or sport (exercise and fitness training at a gym, competitive sports such as football, tennis etc.). The most important at physical exercise as a way of preventing and maintaining stress is its regularity. It is not the same if we are active once a month or once a week. If someone includes regular physical activity in his life, then his muscles and heart strengthens, lung capacity increases, his general well-being and effectiveness at work improve.

In recent years people tend to find the solution for emotional and mental tensions in meditation. Meditation greatly contributes to our physical and mental well-being, while it is safe, effective and free. Meditation helps a person in many ways. The most important effect of meditation is that it allows a complete relaxation. It helps us to forget about our body and totally relax. We are also unaware of physical discomfort or pain - our body is relaxed for as

long as we meditate (Singh, 1996). Meditation teachers consider that one hour of meditation is equivalent to four hours of sleep. With meditation we can also restore our strength and vitality. It can also help us enhance our creativity, ability to concentrate and efficiency. With regular exercise we can manage and direct our attention wherever we want to and be able to focus on a specific thing.

Also yoga as one of the individual approaches became very popular in recent years. Yoga is a commonly known generic term for the physical, mental and spiritual practices or disciplines. It was invented in India over a thousand years ago. It is the oldest system of personal development in the world that embraces our body, mind and spirit. From the beginning, yogis were familiar with the essence of the human nature, and they knew what a person needs in order to live in harmony with others and their environment. It is a method by which we can all learn to manage stress on a physical and mental level.

In recent years medical hypnosis has become one of the more popular individual approaches for overcoming stress. Hypnosis is a transitional state of reduced attention in patients. It is a condition which can lead to various phenomena by itself or as a reaction to verbal or other impulses. These phenomena include the replacement of consciousness or memory and increase susceptibility to suggestions, answers and thoughts, which are not close to patients in the normal mental state (Tepperwein, 1984). Hypnosis in humans causes an altered state of consciousness, which is characterized by extreme relaxation, and high susceptibility to stress (Sachs, 1982). Hypnotic state can be induced by concentrating human attention on the mental, visual or other sensory notions, and with a suggestion of relaxation and well-being. Although it seems like a person is asleep in state of hypnosis, the brain wave pattern and the experience that is encountered in a state of hypnosis is different from those when we are asleep. Hypnosis helps us achieve a state of deep muscle relaxation on the basis of suggestions. It is also effective as an aid in controlling pain or weight, treating phobias, smoking cessation and in other cases connected to psychosomatic problems.

Autogenic training is a less known individual approach for maintaining and overcoming stress. The term autogenic training comes from the Greek word *autos*, which means (it) self, and word *genos*, creation; this expression would therefore mean "training, which comes from itself". This is the training of reflexes that are in the body. This training is done through self-motivation or motivation that is directed from ourselves without foreign influences (Sabati Šuster, 2008). Autogenic training is a method of self-hypnosis, developed by a German psychiatrist J. H. Schultz. Individual achieves control over his psychological processes through specific exercises. These exercises allow him to transfer power of performance to his organism. In this way he can, for example, transfer perception of arm heaviness in a physical feeling. Transfer from the level of mental experiences to physical activity is possible because the body and soul are a unified whole. The method is based on individual alleviation of tension using physical concentration and it should take place only under the direction and supervision of a qualified therapist. The reduction of tension in physical concentration can be achieved in six stages. The first stage is release of muscular tension (weight exercise), the second stage is release of tension in vascular walls (thermal exercise), and the following stages are: heart exercise, breathing exercise, solar plexus exercise and cold forehead exercise (Treven and Treven, 2011).

The next very often subconsciously used individual approach for preventing and maintaining stress is visualization relaxation. Visualization relaxation is a relaxation technique that uses the power of your imagination to reduce anxiety, induce feelings of peace and calm, and bring on a general sense of well-being. With visualization we are trying

to create a picture in our head of an event we want to experience. In the beginning we imagine a fictional world, and this represents the first step toward realization of our wish (Newhouse, 2000). The feeling of satisfaction, achieved with visualization, relaxes the brain. Visualization can be guided (with voice) or unguided (the flow of thoughts directs the perception of the environment; however it is necessary to be totally relaxed before starting).

Cognitive methods are also one of the most popular ways to reduce stress. They consciously strive to neutralize negative thinking patterns, and replace them with positive ones, so that we do not have to cope with stress. For example: we can express the basic principle of all cognitive stress management methods with the following words: "We cannot always change the world around us, but we can change our reaction to it". In other words, the same principle can be described as: "We don't have to burden ourselves with things that we cannot change".

In *biofeedback relaxation method* as the individual approach for overcoming and maintaining stress we use devices and equipment for continuous monitoring of the body's responses, triggered by stress reaction, e.g. changes in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, skin temperature, sweating and electrical activity. The user can constantly monitor the level of stress reaction and the relaxing state. Biological reverse effect is very useful especially when learning relaxation techniques, because it helps us progress and relax immediately. The essence of this technique is that the individual has to learn by himself how to relax, with the assistance of permanent feedback (Tušak *et al.*, 2008). Biofeedback therapy usually lasts from 30 to 60 minutes, and it should not include more than 15 therapies. Number of hours per week and the duration of the therapy depend on the condition of the patient.

An *emotional freedom technique (EFT)* is one of the energy-meridian techniques or the energy psychology techniques. In fact this is a very crafty and effective technique, derived from cognitive and behavioural psychology, neuro-linguistic programming and acupressure. It is based on the premise that energy flows in the body are blocked, if emotions are accumulated inside of us, and this leads to a deterioration of mental and physical health. Technique EFT removes energy blocks and allows energy to flow in order to achieve emotional relief. During the basic EFT process we stimulate certain acupuncture points on the face, chest and hands. At the same time we have to focus on a problem that is bothering us, and we also have to estimate the intensity of emotional or physical burdens, which are part of the problem. Stimulation of the points causes changes in the unregulated energy field that was created during the negative experience (Slapar, 2006). We usually feel improvement after only a few minutes of EFT performance. The most important part of the EFT technique is certainly integration with the problem.

Bowen's therapy is based on the theory that the body is somatic-energetic self-regulation unit, which even with minimal external stimulations begins to regulate disturbed balance (Slapar, 2006). Research showed that Bowen's therapy has immediate and balanced effects on autonomic nervous system (the so-called part of the nervous system that operates independently of our consciousness) and the energy system. Autonomic nervous system controls over 80 percent of all bodily functions and is very sensitive to prolonged stressful conditions, or excessive stimulus. If we experience our life mainly through the effects of the sympathetic nervous system, which is ready to "fight or escape", then the body cannot achieve the balance, that is needed for healing. For this to happen a "braking" part of the nervous system (the parasympathetic nervous system) should be active. Bowen's therapy triggers a temporary shift to sympathetic dominance in parasympathetic nervous system,

thereby creating an opportunity to balance, which our body quickly recognizes and begins to control (ibid.). It is extremely effective in treating muscle-skeletal connective problems which are result of sports injuries, accidents, negative work habits (such as training, physical work) and physical manifestations of stress. The therapy is used to balance disorders which are already present or as a preventive measure. Many clients, who are already familiar with its effects, regularly use it for deep relaxation and stress reduction effects. Bowen's therapy can be used safely in all stages of life (Slapar, 2006).

Therapeutic massage helps us with mental and physical relaxation and therefore also at maintaining and preventing stress. It is particularly appropriate for people who work behind a computer or a desk and because of an improper posture feel muscle tension in their neck, shoulders and spine. It also helps with stress due to backlog, or other stress factors. Massage does not only eliminate tension in the muscles, but also stimulates blood flow in the body. This causes calming of the spirit and relaxation on the mental level.

Humour and laughter are also one of the most used and easy individual approaches for overcoming and maintaining stress. Between humour, laughter and health there is a significant correlation. Humour and laughter affect well-being and health of the individual. The ability to find a humorous side of problems gives us a sense of an alternative perspective in solving them. A sense of humour often plays a role in defence mechanisms. In the classification of defence mechanisms or various mental strategies which help us when we are frustrated, the use of humour is attributed to the healthy, therefore well-organized, person (Bucik, 2007). In addition, laughter as a form of behavioural sense of humour provides a physical relaxation. That is why humour and laughter strengthen the ability to fight stress and enhance the immune system in our body (ibid.). Laughter is truly an effective anti-stress weapon. It creates a series of short and sharp exhalations, which serve as a solar plexus massage. A single minute of laughter or tickling is equivalent to 30 minutes of relaxation (Newhouse, 2000).

Music has always been a way of relaxation, joy and prosperity. All kinds of music are good, but we must carefully determine the duration of listening to music and appropriate style to the circumstances and attitudes (ibid.). Modern music, such as hard rock causes continuous release of adrenaline. This kind of music is suitable for less active people, because it encourages them to take action. If we are under stress, we should not listen to such type of music. Meanwhile, soft music drives away worries and fills our spirit with peace and harmony. The most beautiful music can be heard if we listen to nature and its sounds. Singing birds, refraction of waves on the coast and movement of leaves in the wind, hide inside them a harmony, which usually cannot be seen (ibid.). The most effective ways of revitalization with music is when we create it ourselves. A song is a powerful anti-stress weapon. We can sing anywhere, silently or out loud, under the shower or on the street. When we sing, we need to control our breathing, relax and be away from everyday problems. At the same time we are performing a full body massage with our vocal cords which cause shock and airflow: worries goes away, nervous tension and emotional blockages disappear (ibid.). No matter whether you sing right or wrong, it is essential that you sing. Sound vibrations affect you (ibid.).

One of the latest individual approaches for maintaining and preventing stress is also with *colour therapy*. Nowadays there are plenty of different colour treatments. They have already started advising people on proper use of colours concerning clothing, living and work spaces. Colours can help us feel better. The seven colours of the rainbow should be associated with the seven energy centres or chakras in our body. Exposure to an appropriate

colour should therefore heal a specific disease. Every colour has its own effects and on that basis each colour has positive effect on certain parts of our body (De Giorgio, 2001). For example, *Red* stimulates blood circulation, alertness and self-esteem and reduces sleepiness and depression; *Orange* increases self-confidence and happiness and reduces loneliness and fatigue; *Yellow* promotes memory, ability to work and charm, but decreases the desire to criticise; *Green* strengthens the financial condition, happiness and energy and helps coping with claustrophobia, indecisiveness and fears; *Blue* increases calmness and patience, and reduces the negativity and stress; *Indigo* increases stability and rational assessment, lowers blood pressure and impulsivity; *Violet* promotes physical abilities and spirituality, and helps against aggression and insomnia. For example, we can install a coloured light bulb in a room - by choosing appropriate colours we will feel better, work better, faster etc.

Sleep is vital for survival, health, good physical and mental fitness. The length of sleep is not as important as how well we sleep. Too little or too much sleep can also cause irritability and deterioration of mental abilities. Most adults sleep seven hours a day, some also nine hours, while for others five hours of night rest are sufficient (Looker, Gregson, 1993). Stress is one of the worst interferer of night rest; sometimes because of it we can stay awake through the night. Even if we try going to sleep, we cannot because of the different worries, accumulated problems or fears for future. And even when we finally manage to fall asleep, when we wake up we feel even more exhausted and tired, because the problems stayed where we left them the night before. Frequent nightmares are a sign of harmful stress (Božič, 2003).

One of the most effective ways of overcoming stress is maintaining physical and mental vivacity by having healthy *eating habits*. This cuts down the possibility that we will be feeling the consequences of severe burden. We should maintain our physical health by having a proper diet and doing regular cardiovascular exercises. Pre-intensive production and heavy use of chemicals in agriculture are causing the increasing deficiency of essential elements in the soil and the crops. All products have the highest nutritional value when they are collected. On the way from the farms to the processing plants and supermarkets, they lose much of nutritional value. Therefore it is healthier if we buy fresh vegetables and fruit at the market when we need them, not once a week or every two weeks in major shopping centres. Research is showing how food affects health. In countries where they use little salt, people do not know problems with high blood pressure. In countries where they use more salt, the problems of high blood pressure are more significant and are on the increase. Sugar in large quantities also has a bad effect on health. It leads to various medical conditions, such as a reduction of blood sugar, which affects the onset of severe fatigue and irritability.

Because of everyday changes and a fast way of living *time management* is becoming more and more important. Time management is also one of the individual approaches to maintaining and overcoming stress. Many people do not know how to make good use of their time and are less efficient. The primary reason is poor allocation of time devoted for various activities. A properly organized individual can make twice as many tasks as a poorly organized one. To easily cope with stress caused by work commitments and responsibilities in domestic and social environment, we can use the basic principles of time management. Since we cannot truly devote attention to the assigned task, we can feel stress. To avoid stress, we need to take the control of our activities. One should consider the following rules (Ferner, 1995):

- determine priorities and follow them strictly,
- do not allow others to hinder you,

- transfer responsibility to others.

3. ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES TO OVERCOMING STRESS

Organizational approaches are used for preventing and maintaining stress inside organizations. Organizations can help employees in managing stress in two ways. The first way is to introduce strategies which control factors that cause stress. The second way is with various programs that assist in maintaining the welfare of employees and act as preventive measures. We continue by presenting the strategies for managing stress and assuring well-being of employees, strategies for reducing employee stress and programs for managing employee stress.

Strategies for managing stress and assuring well-being of employees are very important for every organization. They assure well-being of employees in an organization and consequently prevent stress and stressful situations. The purpose of strategies for managing factors that cause stress in employees is the reduction or total elimination of stress in their work environment as well as assurance of their well-being. Strategies are effective if the company carries them out systematically on the basis of careful assessment of different stressors (Burke, 1993; Ivanchevich, Matteson, 1980 and 1993). They are focused on changing or adapting the work environment to the employees. Many different strategies for reducing employee stress have been developed so far. They can be grouped into categories depending on different factors - sources of stress in the workplace. Strategies for managing stress and assuring well-being of employees are: creating favorable organizational climate, job enrichment, reducing conflict, precise roles definition, career planning and developing, effective leadership, development of communication capabilities, motivating employees, job satisfaction and interpersonal relationships (Treven, 2005).

Table no. 1 Stressors and strategies for reducing employee stress

<i>Stressors in the workplace</i>	<i>Strategies for changing work environment</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type of employment • The dividing line between work and free time • Role conflict • Uncertainty of role • Strain/Exposure of role • Responsibility for other employees • Organizational factors • Harassment and workplace violence • Working conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transforming work • Flexible work planning • The analysis and careful definition of roles • Developing Communication Skills Managers • Creating a favorable organizational climate • Planning and development of career • The creation of appropriate working conditions

Source: [Treven, 2005]

When designing work tasks (*transforming work*) inside the organizations, the motivational aspect and the employee satisfaction at work are often ignored. This causes stress among employees. Therefore, when determining the duties of our staff in organization, we should focus our attention on the element that enriches work. This element concerns mainly the improvement of the substantive work factors and job characteristics. Among the substantive elements of work we include responsibility, autonomy and recognition of potential for success, advancement and development. Basic features include a variety of labour skills, the variety of tasks, the importance of tasks, autonomy and feedback

(Treven, 1998). Tasks, which take into account the element of enrichment, are less stressful for employees.

Flexible work planning *is an important dimension of designing work. Flexible work planning has already been discussed by Hawthorn in twenties and thirties of the last century (Roethlisberger, Dickson, 1939). Flexible work planning enables employees to determine their own working hours within the prescribed limits in the organization. In many organizations there is a flexible time of arrival between 7AM and 9AM and a flexible time of departure between 3PM and 5PM, leaving employees to choose their own preferred time of arrival and departure provided that they work 8 hours per day. The strategy of flexible design work is that employees have more self-control in their workplace and also in their free time.*

The analysis and precise definition of roles *is one of the strategies for reducing employee stress. There are many factors which are associated with the role of an employee in the workplace and are a potential source of stress. Stressors in connection with the role are: the role conflict, the role uncertainty, to burden the employee with too much or too little work or the responsibility for other employees.*

Developing communication skills of managers is very important in relations between employees and between employees and supervisors. The more effective communication takes place between supervisors and employees, the lesser the probability of developing stress. The effectiveness of communication often depends on the managerial behaviour, for example, encouraging staff performance, praising a job well done, determining the direction of their operation and providing support at work.

Creating a positive organizational climate also the structure of the organization and atmosphere in the workplace are potential sources of employee stress. In relation with these two factors we may suggest at least three strategies for reducing stress among employees. These are: decentralization, participatory decision-making and improvement of climate in organizations.

In the last few years, interest about strategies that promote decentralization has been increasing. These strategies are related to changes in communication patterns and connections within the organization and the creation of working groups (Schuler, Sethi, 1984). A team is composed from several working groups and is autonomous, which means that team members develop their own objectives and procedures in order to achieve them. Within the team there is also a prize split into as many parts as there are team members, which means they all receive an equal share for a job well done.

The second strategy is participatory decision-making. It includes the design of communication systems and channels in the organization and allows all employees to be included in the process of making important decisions. By doing so they gain more information, which affects the increase of their sense of power and control and reduces the uncertainty and stress in the workplace (Jackson, 1983).

The third strategy is a concern for a good atmosphere within the organization. Many organizations have inadequate, inflexible and impersonal atmosphere as a result of rigorously formalized levels and relations between employees. That kind of atmosphere creates stress and reduces employees' efficiency. Such organizations should implement a more decentralized and employee-friendly structure, participatory business decision making and communication flows, running from lower to higher levels of decision making.

Next to reducing stress among employees *planning and developing a career* is also important. This is a planned or unplanned sequence of works and activities that includes

elements of promotion (of a mental sense), self-realization and personal development over a defined period of time (Clark, 1992). Developing career includes activities which are undertaken by an individual alone or in cooperation with others, because of career progress. The design and development of an employee's career is very important therefore organizations must give plenty of attention to it. This can increase the quality and quantity of work done and, willingness to participate and decrease the number of dismissals.

Coaching is an interactive process which helps individuals and businesses to achieve superior results by using special techniques that lead to individuals' own thought process and development. By using coaching we achieve greater efficiency, effectiveness, satisfaction in business and personal life. Coaching is based on promoting the individual's mental processes and helping him to come to a solution, which otherwise would have come much more difficult, or perhaps not at all. The objectives of coaching are: autonomy at work, stress reduction, overall improvement, improved motivation, improved results. Coaching is a technique which will be very important in the future, while with new technologies and development the process of coaching will be continuously upgraded. Nowadays there are quite a few innovative designs of coaching and one of them is coaching in conjunction with AlfaSphere.

AlfaSphere is a room of multidimensional experiences that takes us to the alpha status and leads to harmonized state of body and spirit. It stimulates and binds our senses. Different dimensions of perception come together in a comprehensive, more sensual experience. Different colours, shapes and lights in our own unique combination of sounds, vibrations and warmth lead to deep relaxation. We feel relaxed and free, both physically and mentally. Rational and analytical thoughts fade into the background. All feelings are directed in our insides. AlphaSphere takes us to a state of deep relaxation and expands our horizons of perception and the world.

Studies have shown that twenty-minute nap (*power nap*) during the day can bring a lot more than if we would extend the morning sleep for twenty minutes. There is evidence that shows that the human body needs rest after eight hours of wakefulness. It is clear that the effects of sleep deprivation can be seen the next day. If individuals have lack of sleep over long periods of time, it will lead to exhaustion, which will be seen in their reaction time, situation assessment, vision, data processing, short-term memory, performance, motivation and patience. Many experts advise a short nap during the working process, which is expected to last between 15 and 30 minutes, which is just long enough that an individual cannot slip into deep sleep.

Working conditions are also one of the strategies for reducing employee stress.

Stressful working conditions factors are: noise, vibration, dust, unfavourable temperatures, hazardous substances and light. In order to improve working conditions, we can use two sets of strategies. The first one involves different ways of arranging working conditions, such as reducing noise levels, adjusting the heat and light. The first group also includes protecting people from certain stressors (such as use of tinted glasses or earbobs). In this category we also include strategies for changing working practices. As examples of these strategies, we noted an increase in the number of breaks and shortening breaks during work, denial of requests for prescribed clothing and the like.

Programs for managing employee stress are one of the organizational approaches which can be used for maintaining and preventing stress. The most commonly used programs are: programs for training employees on how to handle stress, programs for health and welfare and programs for assistance/to help employees.

In the programs for managing stress, employees get to know different methods, such as relaxation, meditation, yoga, autogenic training and lifestyle management. Their purpose is to teach individuals how to effectively reduce stress.

Maintaining physical and psychological health of employees is very important, while a healthy person can manage stress better than the one who has phobias, nightmares, appetite disorders, heart disease or other health problems. Such programs are implemented in the form of workshops where employees can learn how to properly care for their health and how to cope with certain kinds of behaviour, such as weight loss, smoking cessation and physical activity. However, they are then expected to apply newly gained knowledge on their own. Organizations, where employees are involved in programs for maintaining health, believe that such programs are an investment that has positive economic effects. Employees, who are able to effectively handle stress, are in better health, this means less absenteeism due to illness and an increase in productivity.

Programmes for assistance provide support to employees at facing with various problems, such as career planning, financial and legal advice and other (Newton, 1995). Such programs have already been highly developed for several years not only in the U.S. and Western Europe, but also in Slovenia where they are rapidly expanding.

4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

4.1 Empirical research about individual approaches to overcoming stress

Based on the presented theoretical foundations about individual approaches to overcoming stress, we built the original questionnaire for the empirical survey. This research instrument was previously tested and validated: as already mentioned in the Introduction, 150 students were enrolled in the trial phase performed in May and June 2010.

In the quantitative part of the empirical research on individual approaches to overcoming stress that was implemented in Slovenian organizations in 2011⁵, employees were asked how they prevent and overcome stress at work, and which techniques to overcome stress and attain well-being and an individual's holism they know. We received 470 fulfilled questionnaires from employees in organizations in Slovenia.

Table 2 presents the results about the frequency with which employees in Slovenia as individuals use different ways to prevent and overcome stress. Most frequently, the respondents set priorities (32.6 % of them always and 43.8 % of them almost always) and take pressures as a challenge (20.7 % of them always and 41 % of them almost always). The results in Table 2 can let us also confirm the hypothesis H1: "Most of the employees in Slovenia prevent and overcome stress with setting their priorities at work." Namely, 94.3 % of them always, almost always or sometimes prevent and overcome stress with setting their priorities at work.

About 40 % of the respondents sometimes take a quick break and drink tea or coffee, get help from colleagues when needed, and talk to the leader. Least frequently, they use relaxation techniques (31.6 % of them never and 29.2 % of them almost never). The hypothesis H2: "Among employees in Slovenia, the use of the relaxation techniques is the least established way to prevent and overcome stress," can therefore be confirmed.

Table no. 2 Frequency table – the ways to prevent and overcome stress

	N	Never		Almost never		Someti- mes		Almost always		Always	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
I take a quick break and drink tea or coffee.	465	24	5.2	51	11.0	187	40.2	119	25.6	84	18.1
I get help from colleagues when needed.	465	26	5.6	69	14.8	175	37.6	114	24.5	81	17.4
I talk to the supervisor.	464	30	6.5	64	13.8	175	37.7	103	22.2	92	19.8
I use relaxation techniques.	465	147	31.6	136	29.2	121	26.0	38	8.2	23	4.9
I set priorities.	463	12	2.6	14	3.0	83	17.9	203	43.8	151	32.6
I take pressure as a challenge.	463	7	1.5	32	6.9	138	29.8	190	41.0	96	20.7

Notes: N - number of respondents, f- frequency

Table 3 presents the results about knowing and implementing the techniques for preventing and overcoming stress, attaining well-being and individual's holism. The analysis shows which individual approaches for overcoming stress are most commonly implemented by employees in Slovenia. The highest percentage of them implements physical activity - various forms of sport (58.2 %). This result let us confirm the hypothesis H3: "Physical activity is mostly used individual approach for prevention purposes or for stress recovery by Slovenian employees." This approach is followed by eating healthy food (29.3 %) and getting a massage (26.2 %). Bioenergy is the technique known by the majority of employees (71.5 %), but only 2.1 % of employees implement this technique to overcome and prevent stress. More than a half of them know the following techniques: aromatherapy, healthy food, meditation, yoga, massage, and music therapy. On the contrary, tai chi, reiki, cognitive methods and chromo (i.e. colour) therapy are the techniques that are implemented by the smallest number of employees; moreover, more than a half of them do not even know reiki, cognitive methods, visualization, chromo therapy, tai chi and autogenic training.

Table no. 3 Frequency table - techniques for preventing and overcoming stress

	N	I do not know		I know		I implement	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
Meditation	374	106	28.3	251	67.1	17	4.5
Yoga	374	126	33.7	240	64.2	8	2.1
Healthy food	375	7	1.9	258	68.8	110	29.3
Aromatherapy	375	69	18.4	260	69.3	46	12.3
Massage	374	43	11.5	233	62.3	98	26.2
Physical activity (various forms of sport)	373	8	2.1	148	39.7	217	58.2
Cognitive methods	375	258	68.8	112	29.9	5	1.3
Autogenic training	374	188	50.3	170	45.5	16	4.3
Visualization	374	257	68.7	100	26.7	17	4.5
Music therapy	375	127	33.9	198	52.8	50	13.3
Chromo therapy (colour therapy)	375	243	64.8	126	33.6	6	1.6

	N	I do not know		I know		I implement	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
Reiki	375	299	79.7	71	18.9	5	1.3
Bioenergy	375	99	26.4	268	71.5	8	2.1
Tai chi	374	226	60.4	146	39	2	0.5

Notes: N – number of respondents, f- frequency

4.2 Empirical research about organizational approaches to overcoming stress

Due to the combined method of obtaining the primary data, the empirical research on organizational approaches has been implemented in two phases: the qualitative research via in-depth interviews with managers and academics in the first phase and the quantitative research – the survey among managers by using structured questionnaire in the second phase.

Namely, considering the theoretical foundations of organizational approaches, presented in the previous chapter, the original questionnaire about organizational approaches to overcoming stress was built. To obtain the feedback information about the suitability of this measurement instrument, we firstly implemented interviews with managers in four⁴ organizations with well-developed HRM: one large manufacturing company, one public sector organization, one small manufacturing company and one medium service company. In each of the four organizations one informant from the management level was identified: we interviewed three HRM managers and one general manager. The goals of the first phase were as follows. Firstly, we evaluated how managers understand the employee stress factors. The second and the most important goal was to get the information on possible activities the firms were using for stress prevention in the past. In-depth interviews were short and lasted about 15 minutes. The structure of the interviews was as follows. First the interviewer explained the purpose of the interview to the respondents. Then the respondent was encouraged to openly talk about the topic, while the interviewers encouraged a conversation based on topics and questions prepared in advance. In the case of any ambiguities, the interviewer was encouraged to ask additional questions. The managers' suggestions were assessed by the group of five academics from the fields of systemic thinking, internal marketing, psychology and HRM. The managers were also asked which employee stressors and which measures for preventing stress they found the most important, and which stress prevention techniques they had been using in order to prevent stress.

The main results of the first phase were as follows. Over the last few years two companies often carried out training on communication, motivation and manager training. Most companies stress the appropriate communication as an important stress prevention factor. One of the companies tried to inform the employees as much as possible with the help of the trade unions and the works council, to avoid inaccurate rumors among the employees. The company holds meetings on a monthly basis in order to give the employees the opportunity to express their problems and then try to find solutions together. Another company develops communication in such a way that they encourage help among the employees. Yet another company enables the employees to express their problems when they occur and to talk to the company's management about it. Most of the companies deal with stress prevention by engaging in sports activities such as cycling (cycling marathon), hiking, swimming, wellness (free tickets) and others. Some mention that outside of working hours this can also be seen as a burden, obligation or a duty. Socializing among the employees (birthday celebrations, picnics) and company trips were also organized, which

decreases employee stress. This also includes giving gifts for the children of the employees. People get to know each other while socializing and react differently as well. However new relaxation techniques for the employees have a financial limit.

The results of the individual in-depth interviews with managers and academics showed that the statements included in the questionnaire structured for the second phase were mostly understandable, that they sufficiently describe organizational approaches to overcoming stress. In this phase some modifications of layout, wording, and number of questions (three items were not used) were made. The questionnaire includes the question whether managers believed that organizations do enough to overcome stress, and the statements about the implementation of organizational approaches to overcoming stress.

In the second phase the quantitative research on stress was implemented in Slovenian organizations. The representative sample of companies with more than 10 employees was used: 2409 organizations were selected from the organizations in Slovenia. During the period from April 2011 until June 2011, 320 fulfilled questionnaires were gathered from managers, representing a response rate of 13.3%. We first asked respondents (managers) whether they believed that organizations do enough to overcome stress. 45% of managers responded that they thought that their organization did enough to overcome stress, 45% of managers thought the opposite, i.e. that the measures they employ were not sufficient, but they state, that they are thinking about stress. 7% of managers answered that they at all did not employ any activities to prevent stress of their employees. 3% of respondents did not give any answer to the question.

In addition, we also asked respondents about the implementation of organizational approaches to overcoming stress. The answers were measured on a 5-point interval Likert-type scale: from 1 – *I absolutely not agree* to 5 – *I completely agree*. The measurement scale consisted of 22 items. In order to reduce the number of items and to group them, the factor analysis based on the principal components extraction method was employed. From the initial 22 items 15 remained in the final solution: the factor loadings in Table 4 show moderate to strong correlation between items and factors. Table 4 illustrates a very clean factor structure with the high loadings within factors, and no cross-loadings between factors. After the Varimax rotation we grouped the items in three factors as can be seen from Table 4.

Table no. 4 Rotated (varimax) factor matrix - factor loadings, means and standard deviation

	Factor loadings			Mean	Standard deviation
	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3		
We take care of good relationships and a good working environment.	0.837			4.27	0.57
We organize processes and work in a way to minimize uncertainty.	0.788				
We take care of good communication and transfer of information within the organization.	0.782				
We provide the necessary training to work happily and well.	0.750				

	Factor loadings			Mean	Standard deviation
	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3		
We help employees in their career development.	0.659			4.27	0.57
In case of problems we provide needed help (financial, psychological, legal advice, help with relocation,...).	0.647				
We offer the possibility of reconciliation of work and family life.	0.639				
We provide technical security of process and job.	0.635				
We ensure that employees understand their duties and responsibilities.	0.598				
We co-finance recreation for our employees.		0.897		1.71	0.89
We take care of employees' physical activity (hire gym, fitness center or ensure other regular weekly recreation).		0.818			
We co-finance wellness services for our employees.		0.780			
Within working hours we organize aerobic exercises.		0.588			
We create opportunities for older adults to maintain participation and engagement within the organization.			0.747	2.53	1.06
We have established intergenerational cooperation.			0.718		
We provide day care for children of our staff.			0.665		

We named the first factor *organization of work*, since it consists of the tools that help the employees by administration of their activities. The second factor was named *physical activities* since it measures the amount of employee stimulation towards physical activities by the firm. The third factor *intergenerational adaptation* measures how well the organization can respond to the need of employees in different phases of their life cycle. The results in Table 4 show that the highest mean was calculated for *organization of work*, followed by the one of *intergenerational adaptation*, and the lowest mean was calculated for *physical activities*. *Intergenerational adaptation* is therefore not widely used to prevent and overcome stress. Hypothesis H4: "Intergenerational adaptation is not widely used to prevent and overcome stress in organizations in Slovenia" can therefore be confirmed.

5. CONCLUSION

Stress has become one of the most common problems of our everyday life. The need for managing and preventing stress has become more and more common. Although stress is not always negative it is usually harmful for an individual's health and ultimately affects his performance. We should be aware of the fact that preventing stress is much easier than managing it, but managing stress is a continuous process and an essential aspect in our everyday life.

Based on the literature review we segmented approaches to deal with stress in two groups, and these are: individual and organizational approaches. The research results of the empirical survey among employees in Slovenia about ways and techniques for preventing and overcoming stress show that the most frequently used ways for preventing and overcoming stress are setting priorities and taking pressures as a challenge. On the other hand, they use relaxation techniques least frequently. The most commonly used individual techniques are physical activity, eating healthy food, and getting a massage. Considering the results of the empirical survey among managers in Slovenia about organizational approaches to prevent and overcome stress, least attention is given to physical activities and intergenerational adaptation; however, the tools of organization at work would need more attention, as well. Namely, general impression of employees in Slovenia is that their organization does not give enough attention to overcoming stress at the workplace. Other empirical results support this impression and suggest that organizations focus on approaches to reduce stress. For more specific guidance, organizational approaches should be analyzed by background characteristics of organizations and employees. With internationally comparable data and drawing from experiences in other countries, effective strategies for organizations with certain characteristics are more easily determined.

There is still too little effort dedicated to ensuring the well-being of employees and stress is only one of the indicators. Nevertheless, persistent stress management does not only contribute to increasing the well-being of employees but impacts also other parts of organization - a perspective often lacking attention by organization's leadership.

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Notes

¹ The feedback information we got from these four interviewees was sufficient not only because they come from different organizations (manufacturing companies, service company, public sector organizations) of different size, but also and in front of all because their opinion about the questionnaire (are the statements understandable, do they need modifications, is the length of the questionnaire appropriate, is the way of obtaining data appropriate etc.) were based on their experience in organizational approaches to overcoming stress and because they were further assessed by the group of five academics from the fields of systemic thinking, internal marketing, psychology and human resource management (HRM).

² More explanations and arguments can be found in the fourth chapter of this paper.

³ This paper is also based on the basic research project "A requisitely holistic model of measuring employees' well-being in transitional organizations as compared with both innovative and less innovative ones", sponsored by the Slovenian Research Agency, contract number: 1000 – 09 – 212173. As already written in the Introduction, the questionnaire was sent to 2409 organizations in Slovenia that are included in the data base of The Agency of the Republic of Slovenia for Public Legal Records and Related Services.

⁴ Please consider the comment in the Introduction, too.