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Perceived Job Aspects and Outcomes Related to Eustress in the Working Population

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Abstract

In the last decades, the negative response to stress, so-called distress, became a well-known topic in clinical research, but less often deliberated is the positive response to stress, named eustress. As positive psychology focuses on enhancing positive work qualities, eustress and related job aspects are of special interest. While theory and quantitative research already suggested promising effects on health and well-being, the subjective experience of eustress is relatively unexplored. Therefore, the validation of theoretical knowledge and a more complex understanding of the phenomena of eustress, its emergence and outcomes perceived by employees is needed. Grounded in the Job-Demands-Resources Model, this study intended gaining more insight in job demands and job resources employees perceive related to eustress as well as perceived outcomes. A qualitative exploratory research with diverse employees in the form of interviews was conducted, which were inductively and deductively analyzed, combining a conventional and directed content analysis. Results yielded job resources as appreciation of client, accomplishment and having influence or responsibility and job demands as a high workload and a rigorous planning associated with eustress. Job resources seemed to be more often related to eustress and its positive outcomes than job demands. Employees associated eustress with positive emotional, mental, physical and behavioral outcomes, which are expected to have positive long-term effects on health and well-being and probably functioning as indicators to measure eustress. These findings provide a good starting point for further research and practical interventions to improve job qualities, but also developing an instrument making eustress measurable.

Keywords: eustress; work stress; outcomes and effects

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Perceived Job Aspects and Outcomes Related to

Eustress in The Working Population

In the last decades, the experience and risks of the negative response to stress, or so-called distress, became a well-known topic in our society and in the clinical research. Especially in the working population distress is frequently discussed. Genuinely, for employees, it seems to be easier to describe the negative than the positive experience of work stress (Nelson & Simmons, 2003). Also, the fact that distress at work has a negative influence on the health of employees is well-established (Nelsen & Simmons, 2003). While the term distress seems more familiar, less often deliberated is the positive response to stress, named eustress (Hargrove, Nelson & Cooper, 2013).

As the movement of positive psychology concerns enhancing positive qualities in individuals and workplaces as well as repairing negative aspects of work and careers (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), the phenomenon of eustress gets increasingly attention and is included in the definition of stress. Based on the foundational work of Hans Selye, Quick and their colleagues (2000) included the concept of eustress in their approach and described eustress as the healthy, constructive outcome of stress. More precisely, eustress is defined as “the positive psychological response to a stressor, indicated by the presence of positive psychological states” (Simmons & Nelson, 2001, p.9). Experiences of eustress at work can be described as having a total focus and an aroused attention on the task, while being in a mindful state of challenge and fully present in the here-and-now (Hargrove, Nelson & Cooper, 2013).

Earlier research suggests that eustress is associated with healthy and positive outcomes (Quick, J.C., Quick, J.D., Nelson & Hurrell, 2000). For example, in different studies positive effects on the work performance are described, such as an enduring active engagement in work, getting easier into the flow of work and being more likely to savor the challenges that must be faced (Nelson & Cooper, 2007; Nelson & Simmons, 2003). Moreover, eustress seems to have

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general positive effects on the health and well-being. For example, it was found that eustress was conducive to physical and psychological health and growth, and that eustress was a significant predictor of positive individual outcomes, including hope and self-reported perceptions of health and well-being (Deary, Watson & Hogsten, 2003; Howard, 2001; Nelson & Cooper, 2007; Simmons & Nelson, 2001). As the literature suggests promising outcomes of eustress, further knowledge is needed to understand how eustress at work emerges and how eustress is experienced by the employees.

The Holistic Stress Model

Nelson and Cooper (2007) generated a holistic model to gain a more complex understanding of the presence-absence of both distress and eustress in order to fully comprehend the stress response to stressors. Grounded in the cognitive appraisal approach (Lazarus, DeLongis, Folkman, & Gruen, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the Holistic Stress Model assumes that stressors are inherently neutral. It is the cognitive appraisal of stressors that results in simultaneous a positive response and a negative response. Therefore, the *response* to the stressors with either a higher positive or negative valence results in either eustress or distress, based on the degree of attraction and/or aversion experienced toward the event or object. Eventually, positive and negative responses differentially affect valued outcomes at work (Nelson & Cooper, 2007).

Simmons & Nelson (2007) describe positive and negative responses as complex and never pure; therefore, they appear in diverse physiological, psychological and behavioral indicators. For example, indicators of the positive response are positive psychological states (e.g. positive affect), whereas negative psychological states (e.g. negative affect) are indicators of a negative response (Edwards & Cooper, 1988).

Moreover, the appraisal of a demand is affected by individual differences or personal traits of an individual which moderate the relationship between stressors and responses. The

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individual selects strategies to banish or improve the own negative response to stressors, or to emphasize or potentially reduce the own positive responses. These strategies can be focused on either perceived stressor or on the perceived response. At work, the relationship between responses and outcomes is additionally moderated by both the explicit and implicit agreements that determine what is expected and acknowledged from the employees at work (Simmons & Nelson, 2007). Stressors at work can be divided in role demands, interpersonal demands, physical demands, workplace policies, and job conditions (Barnett, 1998; Quick et al., 2000).

In conclusion, following the Holistic Stress Model, eustress at work is a positive psychological response to the stressors as role demands, interpersonal demands, physical demands, workplace policies and/or job conditions indicated by the occurrence of positive psychological states. Eustress at work does not reflect the absence or a lower number of these stressors, but the extent to which cognitive appraisal of a stressor is seen to either benefit an individual or enhance the own well-being (Nelson & Cooper, 2007).

Eustress in Occupational Stress Models

The Job-Demand-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2003a; b; Demerouti et al., 2001a; b) describes the role of different job aspects and stressors in greater detail. In contrast to other occupational stress models, this model focuses on both positive and negative indicators of employees' wellbeing. It is applicable for a wide range of professions and considers improvements to employees' well-being and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The JD-R model states that job aspects can be divided into two general categories, namely job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands as high work pressure, emotional demands, and role ambiguity are related to high strain and seem to have negative effects on the health of employees (e.g. Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004), whereas job resources, such as social support, performance feedback and autonomy seem to

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enhance the motivational process related to work (e.g. Demerouti et al., 2000).

Similar to the Holistic Stress Model which describes stressors as inherently neutral, the JDR-Model assumes that job aspects are not automatically negative, but can be job demands as they need high effort which the individual potentially cannot meet (Meijman and Mulder, 1998). In contrast, job resources are described as job aspects that are functional for the achievement of work-related goals or decrease the physiological and psychological costs of the job demands. Consequently, job resources potentially buffer the effects of job demands and distress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Moreover, the JDR-model demonstrates that job resources particularly influence motivation or work engagement when there are high job demands. Therefore, job resources in combination with high job demands create psychological meaningfulness and safety for employees promoting engagement (Frey, Jonas, & Greitemeyer, 2003; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Finally, the JDR-Model locates job demands and job resources at four different levels, namely the level of the organization at large, the interpersonal and social relations, the organization of work and the level of task (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

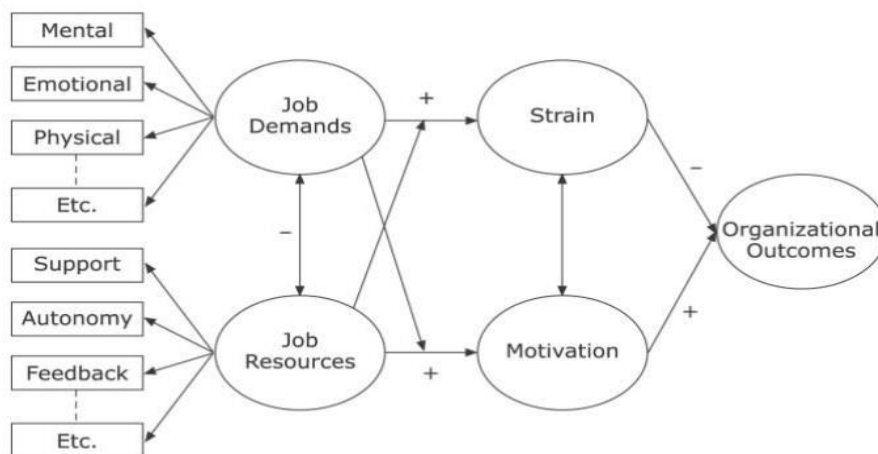


Figure 2. The Job Demands-Resources Model by Bakker and Demerouti (2007).

To combine the assumptions of the Holistic Stress Model and the JD-R Model, it is suggested that eustress at work is a positive psychological response to stressors at different

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levels indicated by the presence of positive psychological states which may be influenced by different job aspects. However, the extent to which the combination of job demands and job resources indeed is related to experience of eustress at work and in how far this theoretical phenomenon is experienced and can be confirmed by the employees till now seems unclear.

The Study

Our understanding of stress has grown rapidly in the last decades. While the term distress seems more familiar, less often deliberated is the positive response to stress, named eustress (Hargrove, Nelson & Cooper, 2013). In this study, job aspects that influence the generation of eustress at work are of special interest. Theoretical knowledge suggests that eustress can be possibly ensued by certain job aspects which function as resources in combination with job demands. Eustress is suggested by the literature to have positive outcomes on work performance, health and well-being (Deary, Watson & Hogsten, 2003; Howard, 2001; Nelson & Cooper, 2007; Simmons & Nelson, 2001). To validate the role of job resources and demands on eustress at work and its outcomes, more insight of the subjective experiences eustress at work and the associated outcomes is needed. Moreover, findings of the research topic of job resources and demands at work and related outcomes may also provide further insight not only in the experience of eustress in general, but especially in eustress at work which offers the possibility of practical interventions for employees and employers to enhance eustress at work and its suggested positive outcomes.

The aim of this study is to explore the individual experiences of employees with the aid of an explorative analysis. The explorative analysis will be performed by means of interviews with employees of different demographics and professions in order to examine which job demands and resources are perceived by employees to effect their experiences of eustress. Furthermore, the subjective outcomes of the experience of eustress are examined. The research question therefore is: *How do individual employees perceive job demands and job resources*

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ensuing eustress and which outcomes of eustress are perceived? For further simplification, the main research question is divided into two sub-questions, namely (1) *how the individual employees perceived job demands and job resources ensuing eustress*; and (2) *how the employees perceive the outcomes of eustress*.

Method

Due to collaboration of research, this study and the related research method was extended to not only examining the research topic of experiences of eustress and gathering demographical information, but also investigating the research topic of another study regarding experiences of eustress and distress, coping and employees' work experience.

Participants

Participants were selected based on convenience sampling from the researchers' network with the inclusion criteria of (1) having a part-time or full-time job (at least 20 hours per week) and (2) being older than 18 years. Exclusion criteria therefore were being a student or pensioner and/or working less than approximately 20 hours per week. These criteria were chosen to ensure that the participants are belonging to the working population in their main time of the working days and in turn experiencing a form of work stress. To enhance job diversity and variation coverage, a recruitment of participants with different age, gender, work experience and profession was engaged to cover a broad range of the population and gain insights in diverse job aspects and outcomes of work stress.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with respondents from Germany in May of 2017. The sample of this study had a great variation coverage. Participants were ten Germans of whom five were male and five were female. The participants had an average age of 36 years ($SD=12.74$) and the majority had a background in higher education. The average work experience of the participants counted 15.7 years ($SD=14.83$). Regarding the job diversity, one participant worked as online marketing manager, one as CEO, one as psychotherapist, one as

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child care worker and two participants functioned as mechanical engineers, two as recruiters and two as medical nurses. The participants were all currently full-time or part-time employees with an average work week of 41 hours ($SD=6.97$). There were no drop-outs.

Procedure and Design

An interview survey design was conducted. All participants were recruited through personal contacts of the researchers and the interviews were conducted by the researchers. The participants were subsequently approached with the aid of standardized email to participate in the current research. No financial or material incentives were offered, other than gaining insight into the research subject. Beforehand the researchers conducted a pilot interview to test the interview scheme and procedure to detect possible shortcomings and misunderstandings and allow the interviewer to identify possible pitfalls. Due to this pilot interview, several minor changes were made to the interview scheme in regard of the formulation of questions and sub-questions to facilitate the interviewees understanding of those and ensure no important information for the study was missed.

After the pilot interview, individual appointments for the interview were arranged with all interested participants. The semi-structured interviews were either conducted at the participant's home or office in a quiet room and recorded with a smart phone. The interviews consisted of three phases. In the first phase, the interviewees had to fill in the informed consent and got a short introduction to the interview and current studies. Also, the interviewees were informed about their rights of ending the interview, no obligation of answering all questions or giving information about uncomfortable topics, as well as data processing and anonymity. The participants were informed about the studies beforehand, because it was not expected that this information could influence the answers of the interviewees, but only make clear what was going to be done with which purpose, eliminating potential insecurity and uncomfortableness. In the second phase the interview scheme was conducted. In the third phase, the interview

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concluded by evaluating the interview and answering potential remaining questions of the interviewee. In this phase the interviewee was also informed about the possibility to receive an e-mail with a written report of the content, results and conclusion after the studies took place. All interviews were conducted personally and held in German (native language of the interviewee and interviewer). The average length of the interview was 29.16 minutes ($SD=7.30$).

Interview

The data were collected in form of a semi-structured interview, consisting of four main interview topics which were relevant for the two studies. The experience of distress was chosen as the first main topic which was relevant for the other study. As second main topic the experience of eustress was investigated, which was relevant for as well the current study as the other study. The third main topic regarding the work experience was only examined for the other study as well. Demographics were used as the fourth main topic which was pertinent for both studies. The topics were organized in this order to offer the interviewees a logical structure. The main subjects were investigated with only open questions, which were formulated rather broadly and interviewees were asked about their experience of work stress in detail to provide the participants the opportunity of comprehensively defining their experience of work stress in the form of eustress and distress. The interview questions were based on the researcher's theoretical overview of the topic.

The interviewers structured the first and second main topic in an equal way. First, it was tried to reach a common understanding of the concept of distress and eustress based on earlier literature. Introducing the first main topic of distress, the interviewer offered a definition of distress emphasizing the negative, unpleasant perceived state of tension and overload or overextension based on the definitions of Selye (1976) and Hargrove, Nelson & Cooper (2013). If the definition of the concept was not clear to the participant, a further example was given of

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how distress at work can emerge through a high workload while experiencing a negative tension. Referring to the introduction of the second main topic which concerned eustress, the interviewer gave the definition of eustress as experiencing a high workload while having the ability and skills to manage the demands and having the opportunity of living out the concomitant positive energy. The definition was based on the work of Quick and colleagues (2000). If this definition was not clear to the interviewee, the interviewer gave an example of a work situation of eustress where a positive tension emerged by being able to manage the own responsibilities and tasks. The interviewees were asked to approve the understandings of both eustress and distress by giving their own definition of the concept. After the introduction of the concerning main topic through the alignment of the interviewer's and interviewees' definition, the interviewees were asked the same 14 open questions regarding the experience of eustress and distress at work. These included questions of the perceived occurrence of distress and eustress in an average work week, a detailed description of situations of distress and eustress at work and perceived sources of distress and eustress at work. Also, open questions of the effect of distress and eustress on the daily life and perceived physical, mental, emotional and behavioral outcomes of distress and eustress were included, as well as the interviewee's coping to decrease the amount of distress and increase the amount of eustress and possible improvements. The third main part of the interview contained ten open questions about their profession and work experience. Lastly, demographic information was inquired to become acquainted with the different professions and related work experiences (Appendix A).

Data analysis

To be able to process and analyze the data yielded from the semi-structured interviews a content analysis was conducted (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, for the creation of a framework for the coding scheme for the analysis for both studies, the four main topics of the interview were used as a baseline to for the structure of the coding scheme. For reasons of

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simplification, the coding two of the four main topics were divided into different sub-categories using an inductive approach as the sub-categories were based on the topics found in the interview, allowing the subcategories and labels to flow from the data. The first main topic of experiences of distress was divided into the sub-categories 'distress definitions', 'distress occurrence', 'distress job aspects', 'distress outcomes', 'distress improvements' and 'distress daily life coping'. In the same way, the second main topic of experiences of eustress contained the sub-categories 'eustress definitions', 'eustress occurrence', 'eustress job aspects', 'eustress outcomes', 'eustress improvements' and 'eustress daily life coping'. The main topic of work experience and the main topic of demographics were not differentiated into further sub-categories. In this way, an inductive approach served as guidance for the coding. The main analysis for both studies therefore took form of a conventional content analysis where no preconceived theory is used for the development of the framework of coding scheme, but instead allowing the categories and codes to flow from the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kondracki, Wellman & Amundson, 2002).

For this study, only the part of the coding scheme regarding the main topic of experiences of eustress was relevant for the aim of the research. For further simplification of the analysis, the main research question was divided into two sub-questions, namely (1) how the individual employees perceived job demands and job resources ensuing eustress; and (2) how the employees perceive the outcomes of eustress. In order to answer the first sub-question, the Job-Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) was used to categorize the codes related to the sub-category of circumstances of eustress as either job demands or job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands were identified as being related to high strain, guided by the examples of high work pressure, emotional demands and role ambiguity, whereas job resources were recognized as enhancing the motivational process related to work, such as the examples social support, performance feedback and autonomy (e.g. Demerouti et

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al., 2000). Thus, a deductive approach and from theory directed content analysis was performed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The sub-category of outcomes of the main topic of eustress was coded and used to answer the second sub-question, without using any further theory. For both sub-questions, the co-occurrence of the codes within the concerning sub-category was calculated. In order to answer the main research question, next to the analyses that answers the sub-questions, an additional analysis was conducted. The co-occurrence of the codes of the categories of job circumstances and outcomes was used to identify a possible relation between the described job aspects and perceived outcomes in the experience of eustress. In conclusion, an inductive conventional content analysis was applied at first place for both studies, followed by a deductive directed content analysis explicitly for the current study. In this way, both a deductive and an inductive approach was used to establish the coding scheme.

For the application of the coding scheme, iterative steps were used. The respective answer to every interview question was used as a unit of analysis which included up to ten sentences. The unit of analysis was then coded with the codes that were most applicable or a new, more suitable code was created. In the frame of open coding there was no minimum or maximum amount or length of codes predetermined. There was no context information gathered which had to be considered for the coding process as information from outside the interview. Hence, only the actual answer to the interview questions were used. Finally, the interviews were double coded and checked by two interviewers, finding a consensus of the coding. As only one of four main parts of the coding scheme was used for this study, a great amount of the applied coding related to distress, coping or work experience was irrelevant for this study and left out of the results. The responses to the interviews were analyzed by coding the transcribed interviews with the program AtlasTi.

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Results

In the following paragraphs the findings considering the main research question of how the individual employees perceive job demands and job resources ensuing eustress and its perceived outcomes will be described after answering the two sub-questions (1) how the individual employees perceived job demands and job resources ensuing eustress; and (2) how do the employees perceive outcomes of eustress.

Structure of The Coding Scheme

In Table 2, an overview of the codes, their definitions, examples of codes and times of usage of the coding relevant for this study is provided. In the first subcategory 'definition' all fragments were coded in which the participants defined their individual understanding of the concept of eustress. This category covered 3.86% of the applied coding. The average experiences of eustress in a workweek were conceived with the code 'occurrence' comprising 4.25% of the applied coding. The vivid codes 'contact to clients' and 'workload & planning' were allocated to the fifth subcategory 'job demands', whereas the codes 'leisure time', 'accomplishment', 'appreciation superior', 'appreciation client', 'influence & responsibility' 'rewards' and 'other' were compromised by the subcategory 'job resources'. The job demands covered in total 9.27 % and the job resources 41.7% of the applied coding. The outcomes of eustress were labeled with the codes 'physical', 'emotions', 'mental thoughts' and 'behavior' and summarized the fifth subcategory 'outcomes of eustress', representing 30.88% of the applied coding. The last subcategory covering suggested improvements of job aspects to enhance eustress were coded with 'leisure time', 'delegation', 'planning' and 'other' (10.04% of coding). In total, for this study 19 codes were generated and applied.

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Table 2

Applied Coding Scheme and Number of Coding for This Study

Coding Categories	Codes	Description	Total
Definition	Definition	Individual definition of eustress of the participant <i>“Stress that is not perceived negatively, but yes... maybe even improves the performance”</i>	10 (3.86%)
Occurrence	Occurrence	Number of eustress situations experienced in an average workweek <i>„One, two times maybe. Even if so.”</i>	11 (4.25%)
Job demands	Contact to Clients	Contact to clients or patients <i>“When your work depends on the customer”</i>	13 (5.02 %)
	Workload & Planning	Workload or planning of tasks, workweek or working days <i>“When you have a lot work to do, the requirements are high, maybe even to high”</i>	11 (4.25%)
Job resources	Accomplishment	Finishing tasks <i>“When you have success”</i>	28 (10.81%)
	Appreciation Client	Getting appreciation from the clients or patients <i>“When my clients are satisfied”</i>	26 (10.04%)
	Influence & Responsibility	Being influenceable, able to help or being responsible <i>“A conscious decision.”</i>	17 (6.56%)
	Appreciation Superior	Getting appreciation from the superior or colleagues. <i>“When you kind of get an appreciation for your work in the form of a praise or a wage raise or God knows what”</i>	10 (3.81%)
	Rewards	Getting rewarded for the work (e.g. financially) <i>“A wage raise”</i>	7 (2.7%)
	Leisure Time	Eustress through or in leisure time <i>“Soccer it is”</i>	5 (1.93%)

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Outcomes	Other	Other <i>"I think that is also a factor for eustress, when there is a good climate"</i>	15 (5.79%)
	Emotions	(Changing) Emotions or Feelings <i>"feeling pleased in that moment"</i>	30 (11.58%)
	Mental Thoughts	Thoughts or mental reactions/changes <i>"'Okay, I can do this'"</i>	25 (9.65%)
	Physical	Physical reactions in the body <i>"a sharpened perception"</i>	20 (7.72%)
	Behavior	Behavioral reactions or changes <i>"Telling the team of the success"</i>	5 (1.93%)
Improvements	Leisure Time	Improvements in private life <i>"Going outside"</i>	6 (2.31%)
	Planning	Change planning <i>"Keyword time management"</i>	3 (1.16%)
	Delegation	Delegating tasks <i>"On the short-term, another associate"</i>	2 (0.77%)
	Other	Other possible improvements <i>"Goal direction"</i>	15 (5.79%)
Total (19)			259 (100%)

Employees' Perceptions of Eustress in More Detail

In the following, based on the applied coding scheme an overview of the experiences of eustress of the participants is offered. A variety of job demands and job resources were present, as well as possible improvements of job aspects that could be made and perceived outcomes of eustress.

Definition of eustress. Generally, the participants defined eustress as an experience of high level of stress, e.g. *"having a lot of work to do"* or *"high demands"*, but related to positive psychological states as *"being motivated"*, *"feeling confident"* and *"pleasure at work"*. In that

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way, the definitions of the different participants did not only correspond with each other, but also with the definition given by the interviewer based on earlier literature. Therefore, a general agreement of the understanding of the concept of eustress existed. The definitions of eustress of the participants can be represented by the following quotation:

“For me eustress is, for example, having a high workload, but from it I don’t get distressed, but also kind of feeling strengthened. That I am glad about it, even when it was exhausting.”

Occurrence of eustress. On the average, the participants thought to experience eustress at work four times a week ($SD=2.45$), ranging from “one to two times” to “10 times a week”. Thus, there was a great range of the experience of eustress in the participants, but in average the participants experienced a situation of eustress at work nearly every workday.

Perceived Job Demands and Resources

In the following section, the first sub-question *How the individual employees perceived job demands and job resources ensuing eustress?* will be considered as well as suggested improvements of job aspects to enhance eustress at work.

Job demands related to eustress. In the frame of experiences of eustress described by the participants, two job demands were identified. Related to the social aspect of work, the code ‘contact to clients’ was often applied as nine of the ten employees’ work is linked to contact to clients. This code included descriptions like “*working with human beings*”, referred to as either positive as “*when the children are happy and smile to you*” and “*when the relationship level to the patient was good despite everything*”, but also related to a high workload as “*a lot of client’s enquiry’s*”, “*a lot of calls*” and “*reclamations*”. The following quotes represents the strain of contact to clients, but also the positive aspects:

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“That is kind of positive stress, because there are of lot of calls, again and again, quickly in a row, in the last half hour before end of work, but I could help all clients.”

Another job demand found in the descriptions of experiences of eustress was the code ‘workload & planning’. More related to the actual work, this code was created and applied 11 times. The code compromised descriptions of situations like *“having a lot to do”*, *“high requirements”*, *“facing new challenges”*, *“an overview of the goals”* and *“to-do-list principle”* and hence a high workload or tight time schedule of the work. In the context of eustress, participants described to be able to complete the tasks despite the strain, which can be summarized by the following example:

“Well, for example, when I can finish my intended work schedule or tasks in in a good rhythm”

Job resources related to eustress. The subcategory ‘job resources’, included a range of job aspects that were identified as job resources in the descriptions of the participants’ experiences of eustress. This subcategory contained the most applied codes (41.70%), that are ‘accomplishment’, ‘appreciation superior’, ‘appreciation client’, ‘leisure time’, ‘influence & responsibility’, ‘rewards’ and ‘other’. Of these, the code ‘accomplishment’ was used the most often (28 times) compromising that the employees particularly experienced eustress when either finishing a task or achieving a goal. Finishing a task for example was described as *“Basically, when you complete a task positively”*. Achieving a goal was also labeled as *“When you have certain experience of success”*. These job aspects often were said to be related to a lot of work or stress which has been managed, but also to a positive emotion at the end, for example:

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“On the one hand, you had a lot of work to do and maybe even after that you have a lot of work to do [...], but then it is just a good feeling, when you achieved something. Even when you have a lot of work in such a moment... or in such a phase”

As well, the code ‘appreciation client’ was applied often (26 times), which was repeatedly described by the participants as the client or patient the work like *“the appreciation of the work in the form of a praise”*, the client thanked the employee like *“when my customer says ‘thank you for helping me’”* or the participants could satisfy the clients. This was often mentioned to be worth the work, as in the following example:

“Eustress at work I experience when my clients give me a good feedback and say ‘You did great, you are the right person for that’. Then you realize that the effort and stress were worth it”

Despite the appreciation by clients, also the codes ‘appreciation by superior’ (10 times) and ‘rewards’ (7 times) emerged from the data. Appreciation by superior, for example, was often described as being praised by the superior or a positive feedback. Rewards were described as praises from the superior or clients as well or as financial rewards like a payment, the wage in general or a wage raise.

The code ‘influence and responsibility’ was coded 17 times and refers to descriptions of having influence on someone and/or someone’s life, like *“maybe changing the life of someone, improve it”* and helping someone, like *“helping them to live a better life”*. On the other hand, this code referred to having a certain responsibility and control over others as *“being the main contact person”* or autonomy *“In agreement with my colleagues I can set my own goals”*. Helping someone, having influence and feeling responsible can occur at the same time, as in the following example:

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“But when I am able to help them and can explain it, and then they do their work and they do it good and we make progress... then at first appearance it seems like extra stress, but at second appearance it was worth it, the time.”

Finally, the code ‘other’ was created and applied 15 times. This code included a range of factors that were only individually perceived to influence eustress and could not be conceived in one of the other codes. Job resources related to eustress were then described more personally and individually as *“having great empathy”, “looking forward to work”, “pleasure at work”, “solving problems”, “taking time to appreciate the accomplishment”, “generating eustress on my own”, “doing the right thing and being at the right place”* and *“learning something new”* One example was:

“Partly, it is due to the circumstances, that sometimes things happen to me, that I want to do or I must do, but which I then work out and which have a certain allure in it or which I want to work for, because afterwards I want to experience something positive. Then somewhat I bring off the situation. Maybe eustress is more about making choices and controlling it on your own, in contrast to distress”

Also, the code ‘leisure time’ arose five times, where participants related to eustress in the leisure time. However, as the study investigates eustress at work, the experience of eustress in leisure time is not relevant at this point.

Suggested improvements to enhance eustress. The participants were also asked about improvements of job aspects that could be made to enhance eustress in their daily work life. The four codes ‘delegation’, ‘leisure time’, ‘planning’ and ‘other’ belonging to the subcategory ‘improvements’ represented 10.04% of the applied coding. To more often delegate tasks to colleagues like *“asking someone else”* or *“hire another employee”* was mentioned two times. ‘Planning’ was explained three times to be improvable regarding *‘time*

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management, *“prioritizing”* and *“planning in a buffer for emergencies”*. The code ‘Other’ was mentioned 15 times covers a range of individual improvements the employees wished like to change, either their workplace, like *“communication”*, *“goal setting”*, *“appreciation”* and *“control”* or personally as *“challenge myself”* and *“working with clients”*. Individual improvements at workplace and personal improvements that could be made were also described in once, for example:

“I would like to have more challenges on the daily basis. And I personally search them for myself and when I may presume them and may face these challenges, then I was ‘eustressed’”.

Co-occurrence of codes. It was typical that in the descriptions of eustress job demands and job resources co-occurred. For example, the job demand ‘contact to clients’ frequently co-occurred with the job resource ‘appreciation by client’ (13 times and 26 times), as contact to clients logically is required to get appreciation from the client. However, the job demand ‘contact to clients’ (17 times) and ‘influence/responsibility’ (13 times) did also co-occur. Hence, experiences of eustress often included both job demands and job resources.

Perceived Outcomes of Eustress

The findings referring to the second sub-question *How do the employees perceive outcomes of eustress?* are represented in the following section.

Perceived outcomes of eustress. In the context of the defined job demands and resources, participants described eustress to occur. In relation to these experiences of eustress, also different perceived outcomes were explained in 30.89% of the applied coding. The subcategory ‘outcomes’ comprised four codes, specifically ‘behavioral’, ‘emotions’, ‘mental thoughts’ and ‘physical’. Behavioral outcomes of eustress were either related to the work as *“reporting about the achievement”*, *“high five”*, *“involve the colleagues”*, *“better contact to*

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the associates and superiors” or personally as *“smiling”* or *“eating and drinking less”*. Mostly participants described emotional outcomes of eustress (30 times), for example *“pleasure”*, *“delight”*, *“relaxing”*, *“satisfaction”*, a *“good mood”*, *“proud”*, *“happiness”*, being *“motivated”*. Satisfaction was most often mentioned as emotional reaction, as well as a good mood, pleasure or in general a positive feeling. To ‘mental thoughts’ were belonging self-motivating statements and self-soothing statements like *“doing it for those kinds of situations”* and *“the world does not collapse”*. Physical outcomes were reported when experiencing eustress were on the one hand reactions related to excitement and pleasure as *“higher adrenaline and endorphin”* and *“to blush”*, reactions indicating tension in the body like, a *“positive tension”*, *“exhausted”*, *“vital, vigorous and energized”* and *“sweating”*, but also reactions linked to the performance like *“better focus”* and being *“more concentrated”* and on the long-term being *“maybe healthier”*. These four categories of outcomes did also seem to occur at the same time when experiencing eustress and were experienced to cover up the negative outcomes of distress, like in the following quotation:

“In such situation, I say to myself “Look, for those kinds of situations you come here”. And to experience that and to see all that, maybe even changing the life of someone, to improve it, that makes me forgetting all the negative stress.”

Co-occurrence of the codes. In the described experiences of eustress different outcomes of eustress seemed to come together. Frequently, the outcome codes ‘mental thoughts’ and ‘emotions’ co-occur (25 times and 30 times), which means in experiences of eustress the described outcomes of mental thoughts and emotions often are perceived together by the employees. Eustress thus was mostly indicated by psychological states as emotions and thoughts. The code ‘mental thoughts’ (25 times) also had a co-occurrence with the ‘physical’ (20 times) in the description of eustress, thus mental outcomes came along physical outcomes in the accounts.

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Perceptions and Outcomes of Eustress

Finally, the additional findings in reference to the main research question *How do individual employees perceive job demands and job resources ensuing eustress and which outcomes of eustress are perceived?* and the conclusions of all findings will be represented.

Co-occurrence of the codes. Regarding the relation of perceived job resources and demands, and perceived outcomes it seems that job resources were mentioned more often in the context of different outcomes than job demands. For example, the code ‘accomplishment’ from the subcategory ‘job resources’ co-occurred with the code ‘mental thoughts’ from the subcategory ‘outcomes’ (25 times and 25 times), as well with the code ‘mental emotions’ from the same subcategory (30times and 25 times). Thus, an account of job resources surrounded descriptions of outcomes of mental thoughts and emotions in relation to eustress. The outcomes mental thoughts and emotions were described positive by the participants, which suggests a relation between job resources and positive mental and emotional outcomes in the context of experiencing eustress.

In conclusion, a range of job demands and job resources related to experiences of eustress were described. As the employees mostly worked with clients, the contact to clients and appreciation by them seemed to be an important job demand and a job resource of eustress. As well, the appreciation by the superior, having accomplishments, having influence & responsibility, getting rewards for the own work and other job resources were described in the context eustress. A high workload and tight planning in turn was described as another job demand. The different job demands and resources also seemed to co-occur, as well as job resources of eustress came together with positive behavioral, emotional, mental and physical outcomes. Clearly, there were more job resources found in the descriptions of eustress by employees than job demands. In an experience of eustress, job resources frequently co-occurred with the positive outcomes. Improvements in job demands that could be made at work

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to enhance eustress were delegating tasks, recover planning or others, like creating new challenges or more employee participation.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this study, the perceived experiences of eustress by employees were investigated with special interest in job demands and job resources which were described in relation to the experiences of eustress at work. Furthermore, the perceived outcomes of experiencing eustress were examined to consider the research question: *How do individual employees perceive job demands and job resources ensuing eustress and which outcomes of eustress are perceived?* To determine the job demands, resources and outcomes of eustress an explorative analysis in the form of interviews with a diversity of employees was conducted.

Perceived Job Aspects and Outcomes Related Eustress at Work

Firstly, the findings of the study showed a common understanding of the concept of eustress between the employees as well as comparable experiences of eustress. The participants defined eustress as having a high workload associated with positive emotions and feelings. The definition of eustress by the participants conforms with the understanding of the concept by Simmons & Nelson (2001) who defined eustress as ‘the positive psychological response to a stressor, indicated by the presence of positive psychological states’ (p.9). Equally, the holistic model describes positive psychological indicators like positive affect to designate a positive response to a stressor, thus eustress. Furthermore, a high workload associated with positive emotions and feelings also indicates a combination of job resources and job demands following the JD-R-Model, which suggests that job resources and job demands indeed are related to the experience of eustress (Frey, Jonas, & Greitemeyer, 2003; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Following the definition of the participants, the employees experienced eustress in average four times in a workweek, thus the most participants experienced eustress great part of their worktime.

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Based on the JDR-model, the job aspects identified in descriptions of experiences of eustress could be categorized, grounded in the assumption that job aspects can be divided into two general categories, namely job demands and job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands in relation to experiences of eustress represented both the social aspect of the job, thus contact to clients, and the actual work aspect, thus high workload and tight time schedules.

The job resources identified to be related to descriptions of eustress at work were making an accomplishment, the appreciation by the client, appreciation by the superior, having influence and/or responsibility, getting rewards and other personal and individual aspects, for example to take opportunities of learning something new. The job resources were often associated to the social aspect of the job (e.g. appreciation by client/superior) while job resources related to the work self (e.g. accomplishments) seemed to occur less often in the descriptions of the employees. This finding could be explained by the fact that most participants worked in the social sector and that for social workers the social aspect of the job may be of greater importance than the actual work aspect of the job.

The described job demands and resources do not entirely fit into the categories of demands of the holistic stress model, which describes the five categories role demands, interpersonal demands, physical demands, workplace policies, and job conditions (Barnett, 1998; Quick et al., 2000). The JD-R model locates job demands and resources at the four different levels, namely the level of the organization at large, the interpersonal and social relations, the organization of work and the level of task (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which seems to better fitting to the demands and resources found in this study. This further suggests that not only the social and the job aspect which were described in this study in the context of eustress are job aspects related to eustress, but that job resources and demands are also related to eustress at the level of the organization of work and the organization at large.

Suggested improvements of the job demands described to enhance eustress at work

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were most often individual changes that can be made personally, like communicating better or seeking new challenges. Other common improvements were to delegate tasks, e.g. either to a colleague and hiring a new employee, or to improve planning, e.g. improve the time management. Whereas the existing job resources emphasized the social job aspect, in the case of improvements the findings suggest that the job aspect related to the work may be more important than the social aspect of the job. These proposed improvements propose changes that can be made at the workplace to decline possible job demands and enhance job resources so that eustress can be supported. This is not only important for employees, but also for employers who have influence on the workplace and work policies and therefore on the employees' experience of eustress as these possible improvements may also pertain to other workplaces.

Regarding the relation between job resources and demands and the perceived outcomes in experiences of eustress, it is notable that in the descriptions of experiences of eustress more job resources than job demands were described. This could mean that job resources are more important for the experience of eustress at work than job demands, for example by aiding the achievement of work-related goals and decreasing the physiological and psychological costs of job demands, as described in the JD-R-model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Thus, to experience eustress probably a higher number of job resources than job demands is needed. The JD-R-model also demonstrates that job resources particularly influence motivation or work engagement when there are high job demands (Frey, Jonas, & Greitemeyer, 2003; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004). Thus, the co-occurrence of job resources and job demands in the descriptions of eustress could also lead to a higher motivation or engagement at work. The ensued experience of eustress in turn leads to the positive outcomes described above. Job resources on their own seem to be linked to all described positive outcomes, whereas job demands solely were not related to positive outcomes of eustress at all. Earlier literature even suggests that job demands are associated with negative outcomes for employees' health (e.g. Halbesleben and

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Buckley, 2004) when occurring on their own. Based on the holistic stress model it could be said that it is the cognitive appraisal of stressors as job resources that results in simultaneous a higher positive response (Nelson & Cooper, 2007). Thus, it is the combination of the appraisal of job aspects as job demands and job resources which leads to eustress and associated outcomes.

Regarding the perceived outcomes, experiencing eustress was described as having no negative but only positive emotional, mental, behavioral and physical outcomes in relation to the described job aspects. Even long-term effects of eustress at work on health were proposed by the participants. These outcomes seemed to be not present separately, but emotional and mental outcomes appear to co-occur, as well as physical outcomes arise with mental thoughts. As indicators of eustress, the holistic stress model similarly includes positive emotions or states (Simmons & Nelson, 2001) which arranges with the positive outcomes on the emotional and mental well-being found in this study, for example a general positive feeling and using more self-soothing and self-motivational self-talk. Therefore, the emotional and mental outcomes described by the participants, but also the behavioral and physical outcomes could conceivably function as indicators of eustress, which could also be considered as indicators for measuring the presence of eustress.

Furthermore, literature suggests that eustress is associated with healthy, positive outcomes (Quick, J.C., Quick, J.D., Nelson & Hurrell, 2000). As we have seen above, in our study only healthy and positive outcomes were described, including an enhancement of the work performance, which was also ascertained in the work of Nelson and Cooper (2007). However, literature often refers to more general positive effects of eustress on physical and psychological health, growth and well-being, as well as on hope and self-reported perceptions of health and well-being (Deary et al., 2003; Howard, 2001; Nelson & Cooper, 2007; Simmons & Nelson, 2001). In this study, the participants reported minor positive effects on health, but a

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range of other short-term positive effects of eustress were described. As the described outcomes of eustress were mostly short-term outcomes, it may be the case that the accumulation and frequency of these outcomes may indeed have a positive effect on the health in the long-term too. Moreover, the outcomes of eustress were described to decline the outcomes of distress, meaning eustress could function as a buffer to the negative consequences of experiencing distress at work. This also agrees with the work of Bakker and Demerouti (2007) who did also designate a buffer effect of eustress against distress. In this way, the described outcomes do not only function as indicators of the presence of eustress, but also seems to have short-term and long-term effects on the health and well-being of employees arranging with earlier literature.

Limitations

Despite the promising findings of the study, there are limitations of the study influencing the validity and reliability of the findings. First, due to the collaboration of research the interview scheme was developed rather broadly to gain more general information which was suitable for both research topics. This does also mean that the development of the interview scheme was not based on the JDR-Model on which this study was mainly based on. So, the participants were not directly asked about job demands or resources, but more general about sources and the emergence of experiences of eustress at work. The job demands and job resources found in this study were subsequently identified by the researcher and not by the participants. The findings of this study therefore could be manifest differently if the participants were directly introduced to the topic of job demands and job resources related to eustress in the interview. However, by formulating the interview rather broadly than specific, it was possible to generally explore the research topic, which in turn delivers more information of how employees perceive eustress at work without directing them in a specific way.

Another limitation of the study is that solely the experience of eustress was investigated without relation to the experience of distress. As the Holistic Stress Model by Simmons &

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Nelson (2001) suggests, these concepts are related and do have an influence each other. So, as experiences of eustress and distress should be illuminated concurrently, it may be of interest for further research how the job aspects and outcomes of the experiences of eustress are related to experiences of distress at work.

Recommendations

For further research, it is recommended to investigate in how far the subjective experience of eustress is related to the experience of distress, as in this study only the first concept was investigated and literature suggests that the two concepts do not function distinct from each other. For example, the Holistic Stress Model (Simmons & Nelson, 2001) states that the appraisal of a stressor is usually a combination of positive and negative response, but never pure. The response to the demands then has either a higher positive or negative valence. Thus, it is impossible to experience only eustress or distress, but it is usually a combination of both. Furthermore, positive and negative responses differentially affect valued outcomes of work and health. So, the findings of this study might differ if also the experience of distress is incorporated.

Furthermore, in the context of eustress at work, the participants did also mention leisure time as an important factor of eustress. However, as this study purely focused on the work and not on the private life, leisure time was left out of further analysis. For further research, it is suggested to also investigate the effect of leisure time on eustress at work. For example, it could be the case that by experiencing more eustress and the related positive outcomes in leisure time, the positive outcomes could even have a positive effect on the work life as the Holistic Stress Model states that eustress generally leads to higher positive emotions, positive attitudes and positive behaviors (Simmons & Nelson, 2007) and literature in general suggests positive effects of eustress on health and well-being. These positive responses might also influence and transfer to the work-life and enhance the work-life-balance of employees.

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Moreover, it is believed that the job aspects do not only influence the experience of eustress, but that also individual differences may play a role. This assumption is based on the assumptions of the Holistic Stress Model (Simmons & Nelson, 2001) which emphasizes the role of individual aspects and on the suggestions of different participants who said to influence or generate eustress by themselves through their own attitudes and beliefs. For example, the Holistic Stress Model (Simmons & Nelson, 2007) in general incorporated the traits of interdependence, self-esteem, optimism/pessimism, locus of control and hardiness to influence the response to demands or stressors. As the individual characteristics were left out in this study, in further research the individual characteristics are recommended to be considered to gain a more holistic understanding of experiences eustress at work related to the suggested job demands and job resources.

Additionally, a great number of the participants in this study worked in the social sector and their work was shaped by the contact to clients, patients or customers. The job resources and job demands related to eustress of work highlighted the valence of the social aspect of the job. Therefore, for further research it would be interesting in how far these job resources and demands can be found to influence the experience of eustress of employees in other sectors or which other job demands and resources can be found in relation to eustress. For example, it may be the case that outside the social sector the social aspect loses valence in experiencing eustress for the employees.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest a great range of specific outcomes of eustress. In relation to the Holistic Stress Model (Simmons & Nelson, 2001) these positive outcomes described by the participants, for example a general positive feeling and using more self-soothing and self-motivational self-talk, can be seen as positive psychological states. Following the Holistic Stress Model, positive psychological states function as indicators of eustress and in turn the outcomes described in this study could conceivably function as indicators of

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eustress. As till now there seems limited opportunity of measuring eustress, these indicators might function as a basis for the development of an instrument to measure eustress, for example in the form of a questionnaire. Therefore, the findings of this study should be considered in further research regarding on how to make eustress measurable.

Conclusion

In order to gain further understanding in the subjective experience of eustress at work and its outcomes, obtaining a more holistic and detailed understanding of the concept, this study examined job resources and job demands related to eustress and associated outcomes perceived by employees. The findings do not only highlight the job demands contact to customers and workload and planning, but also the importance of job resources as accomplishments, rewards, appreciation by client and superior and influence or responsibility. Both job demands and resources underlined the importance of the social aspect of the work in social workers. However, job resources seemed to be more present in the experience of eustress at work than job demands. Eustress seemed to result in a range of positive outcomes, especially emotional and mental, but also physical and behavioral effects, which are suggested to have a long-term effect on the health and well-being and function as a buffer for distress. Furthermore, these outcomes could be considered as indicators of the presence eustress. These assumptions are important to be considered by employees and employers to further enhance eustress at work and increase the assumed positive outcomes, therefore making a step forward towards better job conditions. As well, these findings can provide a basis for further research to gain a more complex understanding of how eustress is generated and developing an instrument making eustress measurable.

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Appendix

The Interview Scheme

Introduction

Hello! First of all, my colleague and I would like to thank you, that you made time for participating in our study. We are conducting interviews with different participants; you are one of them. Of course, your answers will be treated anonymously, but it is your choice, which questions you answer and to what extent. There are no right or wrong answers. You can abort this interview at any time if you don't feel comfortable. This interview is scheduled to endure about 60 minutes, but this depends on how much you can or like to tell us.

Our study within the scope of our Master study "Positive Psychology and Technology" at the University of Twente deals with the topic of work stress and how it is perceived and experienced by employees. Our aim is to determine in which situations and to what extent employees perceive stress in their daily working lives. Therefore, we try to examine strategies and conceptions, how this stress can be avoided and productivity and wellbeing can be enhanced. You as participant are an important part of this study.

Also, we focus on the positive part of stress. This means, that one can take positive aspects out of stressful situations as well. To this more information later on.

Distress

In the following, I will ask you some questions to the topic stress and when and how you experience it. It is important at that point, that we differentiate between two types of stress, namely negative stress, the so-called distress and positive stress, also referred to as eustress.

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When we talk about “stress” in our daily lives, mostly we mean a negative, unpleasant perceived state of tension, the so-called distress. Distress is defined by Hans Selye (1976) as a state of overload, for example overextension at work, thus negative stress.

1.1. So far, is the concept of „Distress“ clear to you?

1.1.1 If no: Okay, then I will give you another example of distress. Distress emerges when you are in a situation in which you have the feeling, that it is asked too much from you. For example, if you have many things to do at work, but no sufficient time to finish them. In such a situation, you can experience negative tension. Then, we refer to it as distress. Is it clear now?

1.2. Could you give me your definition of how you would define distress?

1.3. How many times do you experience distress per week?

1.4. Could you tell me about some situations, in which you experienced distress?

1.4.1. (optional) Could you give us a detailed explanation of a situation in which you experienced distress?

1.5. How does distress influence your daily life?

1.6. How do you react to distress?

What happens to your body? Your thoughts? Your feelings? Your behaviour?

1.7. What do you personally do to reduce the effects distress has on you?

1.7.1. Can you cope with distress in this way?

1.9. In your opinion, what makes you experience distress in certain situations?

1.9.1. What exactly is the reason for distress in these situations?

1.10. In your opinion, what could be changed in your daily life in order to reduce distress?

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Eustress

Now it is time to look at your experiences with positive stress. As already mentioned, when we talk about stress, we do not always mean distress by that, but eustress as well. In how far straining situations become negative stress does depend on the length of tension, as well as on the individual coping strategies and experiences from earlier situations, but also on your perceived coping abilities, thus the perceived self-efficacy. If the ability and skills are existent to manage the demands and if you have the opportunity, to release the physical and mental energies, then we talk about positive stress, thus eustress.

2.1. So far, is the concept of „Eustress“ clear to you?

2.1.1. If no: Okay, then I will give you another example. Eustress can occur when you have the feeling that you can handle all your responsibilities well. For example, when you have a lot to do at work, but you are able to finish all your tasks with satisfaction. In such a situation, you can experience a positive tension. In that case, we refer to eustress. Is it clear now?

2.2. Could you give me your definition of how you would define eustress?

2.3. How many times do you experience eustress per week?

2.4. Could you tell me about some situations, in which you experienced eustress?

2.4.1. (optional) Could you give us a detailed explanation of a situation in which you experienced eustress?

2.5. How does eustress influence your daily life?

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2.6. How do you react to eustress?

What happens to your body? Your thoughts? Your feelings? Your behaviour?

2.7. What do you personally do to enhance maintain the amount of eustress? Does it work?

2.8. In your opinion, what makes you experience eustress in certain situations?

2.8.1. What exactly is the reason for eustress in these situations?

2.9. In your opinion, what could be changed in your daily life in order to enhance?

Questions about work

So much for stress. Now I would like to ask you some questions about your profession and your work. This information can help us to identify factors that possibly are related to the experience of eustress and/or distress at your workplace.

4.1. For this purpose, I would like to you know how long you are already employed?

4.2. In which profession?

4.3. And which position?

4.4. Since when?

4.5. How many hours do you work in an average work week?

4.5.1. Overtime as well?

4.6. How many vacation days do you have in a year?

4.7. How do you experience the working climate at your work place?

4.8. On a scale from 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your work?

PERCEIVED ASPECTS AND OUTCOMES OF EUSTRESS

4.8.1. Why?

At the end, I would like to ask you some general questions.

5.1. How old are you?

5.2. What is your marital status?

5.3. What is your living and housing situation?

End

We are now at the end of the interview.

5.1. How did you experience the interview?

5.2. Do you have any remarks?

5.3. What do you take home from the interview?

5.4. Would you like to be informed about the findings and conclusions of our study?

→ If so: Then I will add you to our e-mail list.

Thank you very much for your participation. Have a nice day!