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**COPING STRATEGIES AND STRESS MANAGEMENT:  
MANAGERS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE 'ART OF LIVING'  
IN SINGAPORE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Studies have identified stress as a central factor that shaping the well-being of employees and organisational performance. As a result many organisations have implemented stress management programmes to enable employees to cope with and reduce stress. However, despite efforts and investment in stress intervention programmes, there is little literature that examines the benefits and impacts of the stress management coping strategies for employees. Using qualitative research methodology, this study examines a sample of working professionals who had attended a specific stress management programme run by the Art of Living (AOL) foundation in Singapore. The study focuses on the ‘transactional’ model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) that explains the negative psychological state resulting from stress. The findings highlight a preference for stress management coping strategies that can be adopted flexibly to fit the time constraints and lives of workers. The participants identify coping strategies that are helpful, but remain embedded within an organisational and societal context that is the source of stress and remains unchanged. Implications for further research are discussed.

**Keywords:** stress management, coping strategies, Art of Living, Singapore

## INTRODUCTION

Many organisations worldwide offer stress management programmes in an acknowledgement of stress as a factor that affects organisational performance and the well being of employees (Dolan 2007). Stress management has been a credible area of Human Resource Management (HRM) study for over twenty years, partly because of its impact on both organisations and employees (Dewe 1997). HRM implications for organisations include avoidance of company claims, health care, absenteeism and productivity costs (Murphy 1995). Employee implications include stressed employees who can impede HRM strategies by resisting change (Vakola & Nikolaou 2005). As Dolan states, stress is “directly responsible for the most common and most lethal psychological and physical illnesses affecting mankind, and hence the importance of its study within organisations” (2007, 44). Whereas research has demonstrated that stress has consequences to physical and psychological ill health, there is an absence of literature on individual coping strategies in the organisation and management literature. Accordingly, this study posed the following question: how does a particular stress management intervention result in simultaneous multiple coping responses at the individual level? To address this, the study aimed at examining the perceived positive effects of reduced stress (e.g. coping with multiple roles and a feeling of wellness) attributed to stress management intervention.

In this study the focus is on a specific stress management programme in Singapore that is offered by the Art of Living Foundation (AOL). The aim is to examine the perceived benefits of the stress management techniques taught in this course so as to contribute to the literature on stress management and coping strategies. This study forms the foundation for further research into AOL programmes for practitioners and academics, and contributes to the knowledge base of stress management and organisational intervention programmes.

This paper is organised as follows. First, a literature review of stress and coping strategies is provided and the transactional approach to stress adopted by this research is outlined. Second, stress management interventions are discussed, followed by a discussion of the case and (AOL) stress management course, which is the focus of analysis in this paper. Third, the methodology is outlined. Fourth, the central part of the paper addresses the research findings and lastly, the paper concludes by posing implications for further research.

**STRESS, WORK AND ORGANISATION**

In exploring stress, Cooper and Marshall (1976) provide a model that focuses on the nature and detail of work stress and its individual and organisational outcomes. Sources of stress can be related to intrinsic characteristics of the job, one's role in the organisation, work relationships, career development, organisational structure and climate and the home-work interface (Baehler & Bryson 2008; Cox, Griffiths & Rial-Gonzalez 2000). Specifically, lack of work-life balance is shown to be a key source of stress commonly reported in the literature (Muna & Mansour 2007; Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper & Ricketts 2005), particularly in the context of modern day work in Asian countries (Retna & Varatharaju, 2010).

Three different, but overlapping, approaches to defining stress have been discussed in the literature (Cox et al 2000; Lazarus 1966): 'engineering' (stress as the environmental cause of ill health, namely a noxious characteristic of the work environment), 'physiological' (stress as common physiological responses to a wide range of noxious stimuli in the environment) and finally, 'psychological' – the definition adopted here. The psychological approach defines stress as a dynamic interaction between an individual and their work environment. Stress is studied in terms of cognitive and emotional processes and the reactions which underpin those interactions (Cox et al 2000).

Developed by Lazarus and his colleagues (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman 1984) a particular subset of the psychological approach is the 'transactional' model, the focus of this paper. This model is distinguished through its primary concern with cognitive appraisals and coping with stress. Within the transactional model stress is defined as a negative psychological state (involving both cognition and emotion) that is the "internal representation of particular and problematic transactions between the person and their environment" (Cox et al 2000: 41). Broadly speaking, stress involves the interaction of the person with their environment which can produce positive or negative effects for that person (Baehler & Bryson 2008; Cox et al 2000). This picture of stress is part of the theoretical developments suggesting that stress cannot be identified in any single variable, but instead results from the interplay between a broad system of variables (Hart & Cooper 2001). Transactional models of stress highlight the concept of coping as a central feature of contemporary understanding of stress processes. Nevertheless, it is argued that coping is the least well understood part of the stress process (Cox et al 2000; Edwards 1992; Gaziel 1993). Coping is a process - what a person thinks and does in a stressful situation - and should be understood independently of whether it is successful or not (Cox et al 2000; Lazarus 1993; Lazarus & Folkman 1984). The assumption is that people are "actively responsive" to stressors as they impact on them (Pearlin & Schooler 1978). In seeking

to understand coping, research has sought to classify and produce taxonomies (Cox et al 2000; Dewe 2000; Gaziel 1993). Due to the variety and volume of such work (Cox et al 2000; Parker & Endler 1992) it is beyond the scope of the paper to review it; rather, this paper focuses on Lazarus' work and is informed by his transactional model.

### **ORGANISATIONAL STRESS MANAGEMENT INTERVENTIONS**

Another body of research that adds further insight is the literature on programs or interventions taken by organisations with regarding to the management of stress (Murphy 1984). According to organisational literature, Jackson (1983) pioneered the first stress reduction intervention study that reported a significant positive effect on those who participated in the programme. Since then, there has been an increase in studies on stress interventions (Simmer, 2003; Clegg, 2005; Bond & Bruce, 2003). One of most common interventions was implemented in the form of 'stress management training' (Murphy 1996) targeted at workers, but not the work environment. Some studies report that stress management training helps to alleviate stress symptoms such as anxiety, but others find no effects. Another issue related to interventions is that organisations took a generic perspective of stress interventions (for example, effects on health) thus limiting or excluding organisational or environmental factors that may cause stress to employees (Ganster & Murphy 2000). Also, some studies have reported that organisational interventions have failed to produce significant effects in reducing stress associated symptoms like anxiety (Briner & Reynolds 1999). However, a lack of understanding regarding the effectiveness of stress management programmes remains one of the main shortcomings in stress research (Cox at al 2000). Within the picture of stress as the interaction between environment and individual, stress management interventions can be divided into two types: those which are focused on the environment and those which are focused on the individual (Cox et al 2000; Hardy & Barkham 1999). This research focuses on the individual, specifically self-reported aspects of outcomes resulting from a specific stress intervention programme.

### **'ART OF LIVING': AN APPROACH TO MANAGING WORK STRESS**

The AOL is said to be one of the world's largest volunteer-based Non-Government Organization (NGO) and is active in over 151 countries (Art of Living 2010). It was founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in 1982 (Avdeeff 2004). The goal of the AOL Foundation is to "provide people...with practical and effective tools, derived from the ancient yogic science of breath, to alleviate stress, improve health and increase wellness" (Art of Living 2010). However,

despite keen interest in AOL techniques in the medical literature (e.g., Seyal, Mull & Gage 1998) there have been no studies conducted in the organisational literature.

The AOL movement offers courses based in yoga, yogic breathing techniques and meditation centred around philosophical teachings. In particular, it offers stress elimination and self-development courses (Avdeeff 2004; Art of Living 2010). The course is conducted on a part-time basis (evenings and weekends) and is designed to provide twenty-five hours of experiential learning on the tools and techniques required for stress reduction. Central to AOL is a breathing technique known as the *Sudarashan Kriya* (SK) and Ravi Shankar had established the Foundation to spread this rediscovered ancient technique around the world. It is said to trigger “the mind and body to release stress” (Avdeeff 2004) and its central technique constitutes cyclical breathing exercises of slow, medium and fast rates. Daily practice of SK takes about 10 to 15 minutes. Another technique which the Foundation teaches is a meditation technique (*Sahaj Samadhi*) with the goal being to “bring peace to the mind” (Avdeeff 2004). To teach these techniques course programs have been set up using both theory and philosophy as well as the practical techniques of pranayama (a three part breathing yogic technique), the bhasatika and the Sudarshan Kriya (Avdeeff 2004). Courses have included: specialist training for prisoners (Art of Living 2010) as well as programs to deal with trauma for local Iraqis in Baghdad (Biswas 2004), the Hurricane Katrina victims, the 2004 south-east Asian-tsunami victims, as well as other conflict and natural disaster situations (Gerbarg & Brown 2005).

Research into the AOL has largely been conducted with a medical focus, for example exploring the utility of AOL in dealing with addiction (Vedamurthachar, Janakiramaiah, Hegde, Shetty, Subbakrishna, Gangadhar & Sureshababu 2006), mental illnesses such as depression (Descilo et al. 2010 et al. 2006) and other various physiological indicators of health (Sharma, Datta, Singh, Sen, Bhardwaj, Kochupillai & Singh 2008), such as immune system strength (Kochupillai et al 2005). Beyond the stated *raison d'être* of the AOL closely associated with stress (Biswas 2004; Art of Living New Zealand 2010), some research has also explored this link (Brown & Gerbarg 2005). This has mainly been done in extreme scenarios, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Descilo et al. 2010).

Despite the AOL strong presence and following world-wide, the movement remains largely unexplored in scholarly circles (Avdeeff 2004). In particular, it has not been explored within the organizational context. However, a more general link has been made between yoga (Gura 2002) and meditation (Alexander, Swanson, Rainforth, Carilsle, Todd & Oates 1993) generally, and the management of work stress. Both are outlined as general stress management techniques within the work stress literature (Murphy 1988). While it has been applied and

explored in extreme cases (e.g. trauma in Iraq, prison life, mental illness) the utility of AOL's for everyday stress management in people's daily lives within organisations has not been researched. This paper adds to the knowledge base of stress management and intervention programmes by presenting the results of a qualitative study focussing on a specific program offered by the AOL.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study took place in Singapore for two reasons. First, there are a growing number of organisations in Singapore that are investing in work place stress management programmes to help employees cope with stress (Wolfe & Parker 1994). Second, access to research participants in the research was enabled through Singaporean AOL course instructors. Qualitative research over a period of seven weeks (November 2009-January 2010) was conducted, using in-depth interviews as a primary source of qualitative data (Smith, Thorpe & Lowe 1997). The inductive method of inquiry (Burgess 1991) was appropriate for this research which aimed to understand how individuals perceive, and make sense of, stress and the coping strategies that were taught to them during the AOL course.

Face to face, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 60 to 100 minutes were conducted with 22 staff members from public and private organisations to gather information about their perceptions of issues ranging from their understanding of stress management to the benefits they gained from the AOL course. Initially a list of 8 participant's names was provided by two course instructors. With participants consent, using snowballing, through these eight participants other contacts were made possible for participation in the research. The participants were from a broad range of industries and had attended the AOL stress management course of their own accord. Though it was not an organisational effort, all participants attended the course with the aim of being productive in both work and family roles. Out of the 22 participants, 18 held middle management positions and the remaining four held senior management positions in their organisations. Fifteen interviewees were female and seven male. All participants in this research were married with children. The central criterion is that they attended the AOL stress management course at least a year ago, in order to explore whether the course enabled long term benefits. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. The data was analysed using Constan (1992) category development approach.

## **FINDINGS**

In the following sections, perceptions about stress and AOL course-related outcomes are discussed using perceptions of stress, the driving factors of course attendance and its role in enabling positive re-appraisal, self-control strategies, and individual and organisational benefits as experienced by the participants.

### **PERCEPTION OF STRESS:**

#### **Interaction between work and social context.**

The understanding of the concept of stress among participants is characterised by various factors such as: inability to cope with work and domestic issues, lack of motivation, lack of time for sleep and rest, unhappiness, frequently feeling unwell, high-levels of anxiety and impatience in dealing with people. The responses did not convey a clear theme of an understanding of stress as defined by theorists, but did contain elements underlying the physical effects and psychological effects of stress. For example, a female manager's interpretation was:

*I get stressed when there is too much to do at work and office in too short a time and the priorities are conflicting. Working long hours and taking care of children is really stressful. The situation gets worse when the children are sick or they have examinations. I have a very stressful job, though I like my job. But I wish I have more time for both work and family.*

The experience of stress, as perceived by the participants, was reflected uniformly by a majority of them through two main issues. First, long work hours and unreasonable work demands made by employers were identified as the main cause of stress. Second, all participants stated that taking care of children who are in school is an added pressure and stress for them. Working long hours was perceived by the majority of participants as causing stress on a day-to-day basis. Though the participants acknowledged that they are aware that stress is part and parcel of life, they expressed feeling that it is beyond their control and hoped that their organisations could understand and not stretch their limits and working hours. The findings show that stress was interpreted by the participants as the result of long work hours and family demands. This is in line with several studies that have reported a link between working conditions and employee stress (De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman & Bongers 2004; Grawitch, Gottschalk & Munz 2007).



### PREFERENCE FOR THE AOL COURSE

Participants were asked their main reason for attending the AOL stress management programme. Their responses were categorised under three factors: experiencing a high level of stress, attending a programme that did not require them to take leave from work and recommendations by others of the programme. Though three factors were given, participants' foremost motivation was their experience of high levels of stress at work and the effects it had on their personal life. This is explained by a participant:

*I was feeling very tensed up in my daily life due to work and I needed some help to cope with the multiple demands on my time. I was suffering from constant headaches and was under stress most of the time. My boss recommended me to attend a time management course which I attended. After attending the 2-day course, I landed up with more stress as my work piled in my absence.*

According to a majority of the participants, they had attended several courses that were offered in their organisations, (namely, time management, stress management, coping with difficult people, etc) that were meant to teach people some coping strategies to reduce stress. Most of the participants perceived these courses as reducing stress temporarily, but as lacking long term effects. In contrast, all participants claimed that the AOL stress management course had helped them to reduce stress longer term and enhance their quality of life. One of the participants described her satisfaction in the following way:

*It was the best course I have attended in my life. I feel very calm, happy and peaceful. I feel extremely energetic on a daily basis and able to handle and cope with various demands at work and home. I wish I had known about this course when I started my career. It would have made a great difference in handling life and stress.*

This and other comments project that participants were overwhelmed with the perceived positive effects of the course, which helped them to reduce stress and enabled them to cope well with their work and family life. Also, there was a strong signal that other courses, provided by employers, helped to deal with stress only on a temporary basis. Findings of several studies (Connor & Worley 1991; Murphy 1984) likewise indicate that employers provide stress management programmes with a focus on the organisational environment, and not on the employee. Most stress management programmes are customised for organisational requirements and are provided as a means of enhancing organisational performance (Wyatt

1996). In the broader context, the lack of focus on employees, and meeting individuals' needs for overall well-being, is still a tall order for most organisations.

#### **ENABLING POSITIVE-REAPPRAISAL AS A COPING STRATEGY**

The question of techniques that were helpful for coping with stress aimed at finding out more about the focus of the AOL course. According to all participants, the breathing exercise named as 'Surdan Kriya' (SK) is the main highlight of the course. Though meditation, yoga and theoretical aspects of these techniques form the foundation of the course, all participants mentioned that the most important element was learning and practicing SK. The following comment from a participant is representative of the majority of the participants:

*I had never known Sudarshan Kriya (SK) before. I have attended a stress management in my office that includes breathing exercise which is very different from SK. This breathing technique (SK) was absolutely amazing. It removed so many emotional and physical blocks from me. I attended the course about 1 year 7 months ago and because of that I understand myself, my work environment and home better. I enjoy doing SK because I feel good and I deal with any kind of demands very calmly.*

A senior manager explained his experience since he took the AOL course:

*Although we were told to practice SK every day, I don't really follow. I do it at least 3 to 4 times a week and I feel physically and emotionally good. The wonderful thing about SK is you can practice it for 15 mins anywhere; your home or office. Sometimes, I do the breathing exercise in my car while waiting for my daughter in the school carpark.*

It is clear from the findings that participants perceived SK as an effective coping strategy that made a difference in enhancing their overall quality of life. The core positive experiences included understanding self and others, positive attitude towards life, coping with multiple demands with less anxiety and tensions, and improved relationships with working colleagues and family members. The findings show that most of the participants realised their ability to cope with stress by practising SK. All the stories and examples narrated in this research pointed to positive and adaptive mental states such as "happiness", as well as viewing work and life from different perspectives. It appears from these findings that the AOL course had a significant impact on managers' well-being at both physical and psychological levels.

**SELF-CONTROL AS A COPING STRATEGY**

Other techniques in the AOL course include meditation and Yoga. In the past, meditation and Yoga were associated with spiritual practices. However, the literature points out that both these techniques are now considered as relaxation and are included in most stress management programmes offered by consultants or training providers to employees (Giga, Faragher & Cooper 2003). Specifically, meditation has gained popularity in most self-improvement courses, including stress management, as it enables individuals to tolerate negative emotions (Smith 1986). Despite its popularity and wide practice by people, the majority of participants considered it as a common technique and preferred SK as unique:

*I think meditation is good and has its benefits. Not everyone knows how to meditate properly. It takes a long time to learn the proper way of meditation. I have tried doing it and it is good. I still prefer SK because I can feel the effect immediately and also throughout the day I feel good.*

The expression of meditation and yoga as being good but requiring much time and effort to learn was voiced throughout the interviews. Though everyone highlighted that these techniques were good, their preference was fixed on only one technique, SK, in terms of effectively reducing their stress levels. There was no clear comparison of techniques but a strong view in support of SK was expressed. One senior manager stated:

*Everything taught in the course is good. The course instructor explained that meditation, yoga and SK must be practiced every day to experience the peace and happiness in life. Immediately after the course, I tried all three [mediation, Yoga, SK]. It didn't work for me. Naturally people will do what makes them feel good. For me, SK is the best and I practice it as often as I can because it helps me to cope with work and family with less stress.*

Meditation and Yoga have received considerable support in improving health and reducing stress (Kaplan 2001; Richardson & Rothstein 2008). However, in this research, participants indicated their preference for SK. This highlights that stress management techniques need to allow for flexibility so as not to add stress through the additional time and energy required to incorporate them. However, the tension is that it is possible that this limited the potential within the integration of AOL techniques to manage stress. As the research was aimed in exploring the effects of the AOL course as a whole, the differential effects of each technique was beyond the scope of this research.

### INDIVIDUAL AND ORGANISATIONAL BENEFITS

Participants were asked whether they would recommend the AOL course to their work colleagues and others. They expressed a high level of enthusiasm about the course and they also spoke very passionately about promoting it to their work colleagues, their families and friends. Three of them had also recommended that the organisations sponsor anyone interested in attending the course. One participant explained:

*I work in small private organisation with shift working hours. After 2 months of completing the course, I spoke and recommended the course to the HR manager about its benefits. She attended first and then after 3 months we had a discussion and announced to all employees that the organisation will pay for anyone who wants to attend the course. I am not sure how many have attended right now. This course is now a 'hot topic' in my department. I am confident that people who attended have benefited from it.*

Another participant explained that his department has sent 2 employees to evaluate the course:

*My senior manager was convinced by me but he wanted more evidence that the course is beneficial for others in my department. Two staff were sponsored and they too highly commended by saying that the course has helped to manage their stress levels. We were told by the senior manager that he is looking into the possibility of an in-house training for all staff.*

These and other positive comments show that participants perceived AOL to be an effective intervention for managing their stress. The majority of them had also successfully persuaded their friends and family members to attend AOL. The findings show that all participants perceived benefits from attending the AOL course and some of them had also attended some follow-up courses, such as AOL Part 2.

## CONCLUSION

Stress has been identified as a major factor contributing to psychological and physical ill health. As a result, many organisations provide stress management programmes to reduce absenteeism and related organisational costs. However, a link between specific management interventions (such as AOL) and individuals' coping strategies has been largely absent in the literature. Accordingly, this study has used the transactional model and examined how a particular stress management intervention results in simultaneous multiple coping responses at the individual level, that for HRM practitioners may also have organisational benefits.

The findings suggested that Sudarshan Kriya (yogic breathing exercise) was the most influential technique contributing to participants' ability to cope with their multiple roles across work and family. Specific factors that enabled coping were positive-reappraisal, positively engaging with responsibility, and self-control. This paper therefore concludes that the AOL course can be relevant in attempts to reduce stress and cope with work and family related demands. The point to note is that while the experience of stress is outlined as outcomes of a societal and organisational context, such coping strategies are focused on an individual's capacity to cope rather than the cultural and social sources of stress themselves (Baehler & Bryson 2008; Cox et al 2000). This is consistent with Ganster and Murphy's (2000) argument that individual coping approaches are easier to implement and as effective as job redesign and other HRM approaches. The study has its limitations. First, are its exploratory nature and the use of a limited sample (due to access). Second, some of the participants were selected by the AOL instructors which could lead to possible respondent bias. Finally, the responses by participants were self-reports which may lack an understanding of the difference between individual and organisational stress. Further study is needed for post-participation in order to examine short and long term impacts on coping and stress.

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