Checkmate organizational stress

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I changed stress, stress changed me, you can not separate stress form life and you can not separate stress from me, because stress became life and by that stress has influenced all life. But what is stress? I don't know….

Stress represents one important problem not only from an individual perspective, but also from an organizational point of view. Last decades have known many stress researches but the nature of stress is still an open question. And because stress is everywhere and, as I said before, stress become life, the idea of this editorial is how we can 'befriend' stress and how can we turn it from a foe to an ally… In my previous work I have talked about stress from the perspective of eustress (positive stress) reactions versus distress (negative stress) reactions and this distinction will be the starting point here because it is particularly useful for both explaining the phenomenon of stress and for designing strategies that would optimize our stress reaction.

The literature in the field is underlining the complexity of stress which can not be reduced to one single factor or dimension, but represents a conglomerate of relationships and connections between aspects and valences. Did you ever think about stress as a game? Have you ever thought of chess as a stress factor? Carried by our imagination in the middle of a chess game we will discover a battlefield between the black and white chessmen. It is important to realize though that this fight is very organized and very dynamic as any chess player can testify. When playing with the white set for example, we have first to understand the strategy of the game and to be sharp and clever enough to anticipate all the moves of your opponent, as this is the only way of winning.

For capturing and explaining the complexity of stress I therefore proposed utilizing the model of the "chess game". The reason why I have chosen this "game"

metaphor is because I consider that both games and complex psychological phenomena such as stress share the use of processes and rules. Chess is the most complex game and stress is an equally intricate phenomenon so the first connection between chess and stress is based on the "complexity" criteria. In this way a new model of stress took shape, one that is based on a very creative approach considering every chess piece as representing one dimension of stress. The model proves to be useful not only in capturing the dual character of the stress reactions (positive / negative just as the there is a white and black chess-set), but also in representing the multidimensionality of stress reactions using the chessmen: the queen is associated with the adaptive stress reaction, the king represents the motivational stress reaction, the horse symbolizes the action stress reaction, the bishop the affective stress reaction, the tower represents the cognitive-architectural stress reaction and the pawns are all specific mediators and moderator factors for stress. The chess metaphor interpretation facilitates a multi-stage analysis. Each level of the game has a "diagnostic" and "prognostic" value for both the person and the organization. One primary analysis after the first "moves" of the game already allows us to make estimations about how we can raise eustress and reduce distress. A secondary analysis, made at a more advanced stage of the game, will offer further solutions about how we could attenuate the negative effects of stress or how we could use the positive effects of stress. This metaphor also offers us the possibility of thinking about the "end" of the game. A chess game can result in tree situations: a) win; b) lost; c) drawn game. The model is both structural, looking at each component of the stress processes, and dynamic, since it pays special attention to each step of the game for surprising the specificity of every particular stress reaction.

If the game metaphor opens for us a new standpoint of understanding stress in a more comprehensive way, let's turn now to the applicative perspective and briefly comment on two programs for transforming stress into a "friend". The first program is focused on changing the social representation of stress. Without doubt, nowadays the phenomenon of stress has a clearly negative social representation and it is very easy to make it the "guilty on duty" for almost everything. The premise underlining the strategy of this program is that of working with small groups and introducing their members to the notion of eustress, offering arguments for the existence of "positive stress" and asking each participant to find examples for sustaining this new representation of stress. Generally speaking the beginning is always difficult, especially when working with such a controversial concept. But little can be gained in this world without hands-on work so that by the end of the program the participants will be familiarized with some advantages of stress. In implementing such programs I was able to capture also the dynamic stages of

building new representations of stress. First stage, named "crash", is the stage in which the role of the moderator of the program is essential, because his/her input and examples are the first to challenge the negative representation of stress. The second stage of the program can be called „haggle" because is represents the moment in which the participants begin to operate with the positive representation of stress. They have to find out examples from their own life experience in which stress acted as a positive element. This moment of the program is very important because now participants get used to the new notion, everyone is bringing his/her own contribution and by the end of this stage from the interaction between all members new and sometimes "hybrid" representations of stress emerge. The last stage of the program named "rise" is characterized by the rising of the new representation of stress and each participant becoming at least aware of the positive effects stress can have.

At this stage, after considering stress also as a social representation, positive and negative, it is important to return to the chess game metaphor and to "learn" some efficient stress reactions because only in this way we can be successful in managing actual stress. So in a working group each participant will have, during several meetings, to consider different roles, from the black king to the white queen, and different scenarios, all of them built around situations and factors producing distress in organizations. The utility of the program goes in this case beyond thinking through and learning "healthier" stress reaction, but can also be used in teambuilding and for enhancing personal and organizational efficiency. The "therapeutic" character of the program is based on the fact that it can be designed to include both people who are suffering because of stress and persons that would like to avoid such situations than to be confrunted with them later on.

This editorial aims to stimulate reflection about personal strategies used to face stress and also encourage the active search for better distress-reduction strategies. It is also my hope that this will be the beginning of more in-depth explorations of eustress / distress and my strong believe that anyone interested in analyzing stress as a "chess game" (and paying attention to types of "important" or "typical" games) will discover many strategies not only for managing stress but maybe even life problems at a more general level. Another reason why we should investigate as many games as possible is to be able to reveal the social influences on the process and by this build more comprehensive intervention programs. After all, stress is a life problem and we have to be able to live with it inside and around us, but without stress we wouldn't be able to describe the society today. We have to keep playing the game of stress and finish with a checkmate and not just a drawn

game. It is important to be ready at anytime for starting a new game. Only practicing we'll have the power and knowledge for moving on successfully.

About the author:

Ana Moise has obtained her PhD in Psychology, her MA in Organizational and Economic Psychology and BA in Psychology from the University of Bucharest. She is currently a Lecturer in Psychology at the National Information Academy, Romania, teaching courses on the psychology of personality, differential psychology, and motivation techniques. She is also an instructor in applied psychology. Her research interests include the psychology of stress, organizational psychology and social and personality psychology.