

Breaking the connection between Work and Stress¹

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Have you ever noticed the conversation between two working individuals when they meet outside in a social gathering or in a temple? Have you similarly observed two students talking to each other about the school routine? Do you know what the basic complaint two ladies share is when they meet? In all these cases, there is a common theme to the discussion. This is about the enormous stress they are going through in carrying out their day-to-day work. Is it such a universal phenomenon that work will always be very stressful? If work is causing so much stress what is the reason behind it? These are some of the questions that run in every one of our minds and we need some clarity to sort out this issue. On the other hand, have you noticed sometime people commenting “I got lost in the work that I did not notice time passing by”? All such work does not create any stress at all. It is therefore curious for us to know the difference between the two.

Why do we experience stress in work?

Irrespective of the nature of work, every work is characterized by five elements: a purpose, a doer, resources, a target or a goal to achieve, and an outcome of the work. For example, a student studying for his/her examination is the doer and the work has the purpose of clearing the examination. The student may have a goal of obtaining 95% and will be required to make use of the resources at his/her disposal to carry on the work (of preparing for the examination and appearing for the exam eventually). While these issues appear normal, the root cause of work induced stress is the *tight linkage* that we make in our minds between the goal and the outcome. There is nothing wrong in setting goals and targets for an activity that each one of us undertake. After all they can serve as a reference point for the effort that we may want to make. The problem lies in developing an imaginary expectation that in 100% of the cases we will meet or even exceed the targets. Further, we also have inherited a mindset that any performance below target is the greatest of the sins. In this example, what it means is that the student develops expectations around the outcome and believes strongly that eventually he/she will obtain 95%. Working executives suffer from a similar problem. Organizational leaders and CEOs also develop a similar mindset and expect that the subordinates will deliver as per targets that have already been set. Parents suffer from a similar expectation set about their children and their life goals.

Try to sleep with an objective of having a 6 hour sound sleep and work for the result, you will not get sound sleep. Your mind will work very hard to find out how to ensure 6 hours of deep sleep and in the process you will get tired. May be after some time when the analytical and result oriented mind gets fatigued, you will slip into deep sleep. Therefore, it is amply clear that

¹ Mahadevan, B. (2011). “Gita Way of Life: Breaking the connection between work and stress”, *Sadguru’s Blessings*, Vol. 9 (2), October 2011, pp 16 – 17.

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the tight linkage between outcome and expectations is the biggest villain in creating stress. Many of us with some work experience will be able to relate to these side effects:

- At every moment, we will start worrying about the possibility of reaching the target or otherwise. Vary of potential failures, many of us will end up not making the required efforts in the first place.
- We have a tendency to excessively focus on “ends” instead of “means”. This is what most working in today’s private firms are busy doing. Modern day managers spend significant time to manager “performance reports” rather than “performance” itself.
- In order to be good in managing the performance report, “process orientation” must give way for “result orientation”
- Furthermore, getting the results at any cost will become the governing principle behind doing work. People will resort to short cuts and unfair means to get the results with its attendant risks.
- This fixation on results is fundamentally unscientific. Work is in the “present” and the results are in the “future”. Worrying about the results and constantly thinking about the results is akin to “dreaming”. So we end up escaping the dynamics of the “present” and go after the “future”. How can the mind distracted with such thoughts focus and deliver the best with respect to the work on hand?

Work as envisaged in *Gītā*

In *Bhagavad Gītā* Lord Krishna provides an anti-dote to this problem by suggesting that the solution to this problem lies in delinking work and the outcome (fruits of the action performed). According to *Gītā* there are four aspects to work: *you have some locus of control with respect to the work that you do, but never to the fruits of the action, you do not have the locus of control to the root cause of the fruits of action. Finally, you do not have the right to remain in the society without performing any work.*

कर्मन्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूः मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥ 2.47

*karmany-eva-adhikāraḥ-te mā phaleṣu kadācana
mā karmaphalaheturbhūḥ mā te saṅgo’stvakarmaṇi*

The apparent confusion that we have in understanding this *śloka* is that when we say you have no right to the results, it merely suggests that take off your pre-occupation with results and have a process orientation. Results must follow automatically. Further, you may ask, why do we want to take the fixation from results and instead concentrate on the work itself? The simple answer to it is that by doing do it lets you literally “get lost in work”. When one gets lost into work, the traditional barriers of efficiency and motivation are broken and the individual treads into extraordinary performances borne out of inspiration. Perhaps, that is how our ancestral

sages, current day Nobel Laureates or great scientists or a visionary leader would have spent several years of his/her time.

This is neither an unknown or impossible idea to the mankind. We often say when we do very interesting things in life that “I never know how time passed?” That is a good indication of our ability to practice *karmany eva adhikāraḥ te mā phaleṣu kadācana* . What we need to do is to train our mind to this way of approaching work. We will produce great results for our own benefit and to the benefit of the society. Above all, work related stress will become a thing of past. Let Lord Krishna endow us with this frame of mind.