

## Management of stress and enhancement of emotional intelligence in IT professionals through positive therapy

Preetha Menon and Shivasakthi K

Department of Psychology, Avinashilingam University for Women, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

From a software company in Coimbatore, forty five IT professionals were screened using Case Study Schedule, S.I. (Stress Inventory, Natesan and Menon, Revised 2005) and Emotional Intelligence Test (Chadha & Singh, 2004). Out of them, 40 (22 male and 18 female) were selected by Purposive Sampling. As psychological intervention, Positive Therapy, a package combining the Eastern techniques of Yoga and Western techniques of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy was used. The sample was divided into 3 batches of around 13 in a batch, for Positive Therapy. Six sessions of Positive Therapy were given in two weeks, with each session lasting for one hour. After two weeks, the subjects were re-assessed using the Case Study Re-assessment Schedule, S.I. and Emotional Intelligence Test. After Positive Therapy, there was a significant reduction in the mean stress from 'High' to 'Low' after Positive Therapy. There was a significant increase in the mean emotional intelligence from 'Moderate' to 'High' after Positive Therapy. There was a negative correlation between stress and emotional intelligence in the sample. The major causes of stress reported by the sample were lack of time for socialization, adjustment problems at home, lack of recreation, work overload, responsibilities and technological uncertainty. Some of the common symptoms of stress identified in the sample were short temper, confusion and restlessness. Majority of the sample had back pain and head ache. The common negative emotions reported by the sample were anger, fear, worry and anxiety. After Positive Therapy, there was a significant reduction in the symptoms, pain and negative emotions experienced by the sample.

Keywords: stress, emotional intelligence, IT professionals

A career in IT is increasingly marked by struggles against deadlines, rapid mobility in projects, frequent differing reporting relationships, collapsing interpersonal relationships at work, the shock style of conflict management, temporal dissociation, the 'night here, morning there' syndrome (since most Indian software companies are clients of US based concerns, they have to work at night in India whereas it is day in the US), misuse of free time, and growing infectious cynicism that can lead to despair, distress, pressure and stress (Vimala & Madhavi, 2009).

Information technology and the consequent change in the job culture affect the mental health and quality of life of the IT professionals. This is particularly relevant because jobs in information technology is the most coveted one in modern India, and the most brilliant section of the youth are going for it. While each job has its own stress, IT jobs are somewhat different from our traditional and typical concept of secured employment: IT jobs are mostly contractual with less job security but high pay, and entail strong competitiveness, along with a globalized life style. There are research evidences that IT jobs are offering an elevated standard of life, but taking tolls on the mental health and relationship aspects of the professionals. Moreover, the IT discipline is subject to continuous and fast-paced changes that require continuous upgrading of knowledge on the part of the professionals. This also plays a significant part in contributing to stressful situation (Bhattacharya & Basu, 2007).

In a study done by the Hay Group (2009) on 44 Fortune 500 companies, it was found that salespeople with high emotional intelligence scores (EQ- Emotional Quotient) produced twice the revenue of those with average or below average scores. In another

study, technical programmers demonstrating the top 10 per cent of emotional intelligence competency were developing software three times faster than those with lower competency. These cases prove the value of having highly emotionally intelligent employees making up the workforce if one wants a competitive advantage in this highly competitive business world.

Researchers have widely identified poor coping skills to stress as impediments to success and emotional intelligence as predictor of success in IT careers. Stress and emotional intelligence are the variables addressed in the present study.

IT professionals are constantly under pressure. They work long, hard hours to complete projects. Enhancing their emotional intelligence skills helps them manage their own emotional reactions to people and situations and build interpersonal skills. Sound emotional intelligence skills ensure that projects are completed on schedule and that they incorporate the best innovative thinking (Stock, 2010).

Work related behaviours like anger, burnout, poor performance etc. are closely associated with high scores on anxiety. Workload beyond one's capacity, ambiguity in duties and responsibilities, lack of support from superiors, lack of authority to control resources, absence of autonomy in taking decisions etc. are some of the sources of stress in organizations which in turn lead to mental and physical illness of employees (Chirayath & George, 2009).

Feeling stressed and harried is a normal state of affairs for many people in their workplace. But the reality for IT professionals is even more intense as their skills are continually depleted as opposed to accumulating over time. Studies highlight the importance of monitoring the stress that results from the constant demand on IT professionals to update their technical skills. Moreover, the threat of technical obsolescence may result in a higher rate of absenteeism, work burnout and a desire to change careers. One major factor contributing to the turnover of IT professionals is the work

exhaustion triggered by constant changes in technology (Media release, 2007). So it becomes inevitable that stress be checked to ensure better coping at work. Increasingly, studies have stressed the importance of emotional intelligence, manifested as interpersonal skills and leadership skills. As IT industry is all about competition, an enhanced emotional intelligence is the need of the hour. The organizations need to develop intelligent systems that that will facilitate an atmosphere of excellence where every member is driven by creative energies. At the same time, organizations should also address the needs of the people and equip them with skills that will help them handle their emotional disturbances in a more productive way than ignore it or suppress it.

Several action researches using Positive Therapy have been successfully conducted in managing stress in varied professionals. Earlier researches have also proved the efficacy of Positive Therapy in the management of stress, depression, anxiety, anger etc. and in the enhancement of general well-being, emotional intelligence etc. on a variety of samples such as teachers, nurses, IT professionals, students, patients etc. Hence in this research, an attempt has been made to help the selected IT professionals manage their stress and enhance their emotional intelligence through Positive Therapy.

### Objectives of the study

- To assess the level of stress of the selected IT professionals
- To help the sample manage stress through Positive Therapy
- To assess the level of emotional intelligence of the sample
- To help the sample enhance emotional intelligence through Positive Therapy
- To ascertain the relationship between stress and emotional intelligence of the sample
- To identify the causes of stress in the sample
- To identify the symptoms of stress and pain in the sample
- To identify the negative emotions of the sample
- To identify poor health habits of the sample

## Method

### Participants

From a software company in Coimbatore, forty IT professionals (22 male and 18 female) were selected by Purposive Sampling to serve as the sample of the study. They were in the age range of 22 - 29 years.

### Instruments

- Case Study Schedule
- S.I. (Stress Inventory)
- Emotional Intelligence Test
- Case Study Re-assessment Schedule

The Case Study schedule was designed to collect the personal details of the subjects such as name, age, sex and education. The Case Study Schedule supplements S.I. in identifying the symptoms of stress of the sample. It also identifies pain, negative emotions and poor health habits of the sample.

*S.I. (Stress Inventory Revised 2005)*: constructed and standardized by Nandini Menon and Hemalatha Natesan, consists of 30 items, followed by two alternatives, 'Yes' or 'No'. The scoring key and norms are provided by the authors. The validity score of S.I. is 0.80 and the reliability score by test re-test method is 0.95.

*Emotional Intelligence Test*: constructed and standardized by Chadha & Singh (2004), consists of 15 situation questions, followed

by four options that specifies the different emotional reactions to the situations. The scoring key and norms are provided by the authors. The validity of Emotional Intelligence Test is 0.78 and the reliability by test re-test method is 0.94.

Case Study Re-assessment Schedule is similar to the Case Study Schedule except personal details.

### Procedure

From a software company in Coimbatore, forty five IT professionals were screened using Case Study Schedule, S.I. and Emotional Intelligence Test. Out of them, forty IT professionals (22 male and 18 female) were selected to serve as the sample through Purposive Sampling. The sample was divided into 3 batches of around 13 in a batch for Positive Therapy.

### Psychological Intervention -Positive Therapy

Positive Therapy is a psychological intervention evolved by Natesan (2004). It is based on the eastern techniques of Yoga and western techniques of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Positive Therapy has four strategies namely, Relaxation Therapy, Counselling, Exercises and Behavioural Assignments. In this action research, all the techniques were used.

*Relaxation Therapy involves 3 steps:*

- Deep Breathing Practice,
- Relaxation Training and
- Autosuggestion.

In Positive Therapy, Counselling involves the following techniques:

- Rational Emotive Therapy
- Thought Stopping
- Symptom Stopping
- Cognitive Restructuring and
- Assertiveness Training

In the present research, Individual Counselling was given using all the techniques except Symptom Stopping.

Positive Therapy involves three exercises to help people get rid of their stress and develop a cheerful state. They are,

- Tension Releasing Exercise,
- Smile Therapy and,
- Laugh Therapy

Behavioural assignments were given to the subjects to develop a daily routine with good health habits and to ensure positive thinking and healthy behaviour.

### Duration of positive therapy

Positive Therapy was given to each batch consisting of 13 subjects thrice a week on alternate days for two weeks. On the whole, six sessions were given to all the subjects. The duration of each session was one hour. Individual counselling was also given.

### Re-assessment

After 2 weeks of Positive Therapy, all the subjects were re-assessed using the Case Study Re-assessment Schedule, S.I. and Emotional Intelligence Test.

### Experimental design

A single test group without control group was used in this study. The dependant variables 'Stress' and 'Emotional intelligence' were measured both before and after Positive Therapy, the independent variable.

## Results and discussion

Table 1: Level of Stress of the Sample, N=40

Level of stress	Before Positive Therapy		After Positive Therapy	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Very High (20 and above)	5	12	0	0
High (10-19)	23	58	0	0
Moderate (5-9)	10	25	9	22
Low (1-4)	2	5	31	78
Total	40	100	40	100

Table 1 shows that initially, majority of the subjects had 'High' (58%) / 'Very High' stress (12%). The sample of the study had stress because of the pressure to perform better and meet tight deadlines. Most of their work was target-oriented and when targets were not met, it led to stress. Moreover, insecurity about the job also added up to their stress.

After Positive Therapy, most of the sample (78%) had only 'Low' stress and the remaining (22%) had 'Moderate' stress. None of them had 'Very High'/'High' stress.

Table 2: Significance of difference between mean stress before and after Positive Therapy N = 40

Condition	Mean	Standard Deviation	Critical Ratio
Before Treatment	12.68	4.99	15.50**
After Treatment	3.68	1.72	

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

It appeared that, based on the perception of the problem, the coping strategies could be chosen to reduce stress in the sample. Hence an attempt was made to change the perception of the sample using Rational Emotive Therapy and Cognitive Restructuring, in order to handle the future stressors as well.

Table 2 reveals that, on the average, the sample of the study had 'High' stress. After the administration of Positive Therapy for six sessions, the mean stress reduced to 'Low'. The mean difference in stress before and after treatment is statistically significant at 0.01 level.

Table 3: Level of emotional intelligence of the sample N=40

Level of emotional intelligence	Before Positive Therapy		After Positive Therapy	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Very High (285 and above)	0	0	8	20
High (250-284)	4	10	22	55
Moderate(200-249)	24	60	10	24
Low (150-199)	11	28	0	0
Very Low (>149)	1	2	0	0
Total	40	100	40	100

A person's ability to perceive, identify, and manage emotions provide the basis for the kinds of social and emotional competencies that are important for success in almost any job.

Furthermore, as the pace of change increases and the world of work makes ever greater demands on a person's cognitive, emotional, and physical resources, emotional intelligence will become increasingly important.

Table 3 reveals that, initially, most of the subjects had 'Moderate' (60%) emotional intelligence. Rest of the subjects had 'Low' (28%) and 'Very Low' (2%) emotional intelligence. Though 10% of the sample had 'High' emotional intelligence, none of them had 'Very High' emotional intelligence. It can also be noted that (Table 9) the sample had various negative emotions like anger, worry, fear and anxiety. They seemed to have less control over their emotions, when they were stressed. This probably resulted in adjustment problems at workplace and at home as well.

According to Goleman (2003), upbeat moods, make people view others or events in a positive light. That in turn makes people feel more optimistic about their ability to achieve a goal, enhance creativity and decision making skills, and predispose people to be helpful.

Hence it could be predicted that positive emotions would enable better coping in the IT professionals. According to Positive Therapy, negative thoughts lead to negative emotions and it is assumed that when negative thoughts are replaced by positive thoughts, the person would develop positive emotions.

After Positive Therapy, none of the sample had 'Very Low'/'Low' emotional intelligence. Most of them had 'High' (55%), 'Moderate' (25%) and 'Very High' (20%) emotional intelligence. In the counselling sessions, the advantages of having emotional intelligence in career success was discussed and stressed. According to Positive Therapy, emotion and reason are like two pans of a balance. When one becomes highly emotional, one cannot think rationally. By appealing to their reason, the subjects were helped to try removing their irrational beliefs and thoughts and to replace them with rational and self-enhancing thoughts. The subjects were also asked to observe and emulate successful CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) and entrepreneurs who are the epitomes of emotional intelligence.

Table-4: Significance of difference between mean emotional intelligence before and after Positive Therapy. N=40

Condition	Mean	Standard Deviation	Critical Ratio
Before Treatment	211.00	32.07	-19.65**
After Treatment	255.38	25.05	

\*\*Significant at 0.01 level

Table 4 shows that on the average, the sample of the study had 'Moderate' emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage and use one's emotions in positive and constructive ways. Hence it is important to develop positive emotions in the workplace for better job satisfaction. An attempt was made to help the sample attain the same by applying Positive Therapy.

After the administration of Positive Therapy for six sessions, the mean emotional intelligence increased to 'High'. The mean difference in emotional intelligence before and after treatment is statistically significant at 0.01 level.

Table 5: Correlation between stress and Emotional intelligence of the sample. N = 40

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	r
Stress	12.68	4.99	-0.561 **
Emotional Intelligence	211.00	32.07	

r=correlation

\*\* Significant at 0.01 level

Table 5 shows the coefficient of correlation as -0.561, which is significant at 0.01 level. This is indicative of a negative correlation between stress and emotional intelligence of the sample.

Individuals with better stress tolerance and coping skills have more emotional intelligence and vice versa. When a person is stressed out, he/she would have less control over the emotions. Awareness of one's own emotions and channeling the emotions in a more productive way would help a person handle stressful situations with a positive approach and use better coping and problem solving strategies.

Table 6: Causes of stress in the sample N=40

Personal factors	Number	Percentage
Lack of time for socialization	18	45
Adjustment problems at home	17	43
Lack of recreation at home	9	23
Internal/External locus of control	8	20
Health Problems	6	15
Financial problems	5	13
Occupational factors	Number	Percentage
Overload	15	38
Responsibility	12	30
Technological uncertainty	12	30
Improper communication	11	28
Reaching office on time	11	28
Frequent appraisals	7	18
Economic uncertainty	7	18
Job insecurity	6	15
Rules	6	15
Attitude of your boss	6	15
Lack of freedom	5	13
Role in the policy matter	3	8

Table 6 depicts the various personal and occupational factors that caused stress in the sample. The selected IT professionals have rated personal factors slightly more stressful than occupational factors. Lack of time for socialization and adjustment problems at home seemed to be bogging nearly half of the sample. Overload and responsibilities at work too bothered a lot of them. As they worked beyond the office hours and sometimes in the week-end, they do not find time for socialization and recreation. Adjustment problems at home might be because of their stress at work and less control over

their emotions like anger, frustration, etc.

The subjects were also concerned about their health and financial conditions. During the period of economic depression, there is no job security in IT field. The rules of the company and the attitude of the boss, if the project is not completed in time or if the employees are not punctual in reaching the office would also add up to the stress.

It seemed that, the causes of stress reported by the sample are inherent to the IT field. They could only be managed and confronted over the time, as complete deletion of the factors seems impossible. After Positive Therapy, though the factors causing stress in the sample remained the same, it was found to have less physical and psychological effects, as their perception of the situations had changed from negative to positive.

Table 7: Symptoms of stress in the sample. N=40

Symptoms	Before Positive Therapy		After Positive Therapy	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Short temper	22	55	3	8
Confusion	15	37	3	8
Sleep disturbances	14	35	3	8
Restlessness	12	30	2	5
Loss of interest	7	17	1	3
Irritability	6	15	2	5
General weakness	6	15	3	8
Loss of appetite	4	10	1	3
Indigestion	4	10	1	3
Swelling of hands/legs	3	8	1	3
Fatigue	3	7	0	0
Coldness	2	5	0	0
Vomiting	1	3	0	0
Nausea	1	3	0	0

The signs of stress vary from person to person, depending on the particular situation, how long the individual has been subjected to the stressors, and the intensity of the stress itself.

As it is seen in Table 7, the sample suffered from a number of symptoms. Short temper (55%), confusion (37%), sleep disturbances (35%) and restlessness were some of the most common symptoms reported by the sample. Losses of interest, irritability, general weakness, loss of appetite etc, were also observed in the sample. The presence of these symptoms could be attributed to the stressors inherent to IT field and to the subjects' perception of the stressors.

After Positive Therapy, there was a significant reduction in the percentage of subjects reporting various symptoms.

The sample of the present study sat in cubicles and worked for long hours without break, which was not only bad for their back and joints but also for their eyes and physical fitness. The mental stress was more harmful than the physical labour.

As depicted by Table 8, the sample suffered from back pain (38%), headache (35%), pain in the neck (18%), pain in the legs (13%), stomach ache (8%) and pain in the hands (8%). After Positive Therapy, only 10% of the sample had back pain, 10% had head ache, 10% had pain in the legs, 5% had pain in the hands, 3% had pain in the neck and none of them had stomach ache.

Table 8: Pain in the sample. N=40

Pain	Before Positive Therapy		After Positive Therapy	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Back	15	38	4	10
Headache	14	35	4	10
Neck	7	18	1	3
Legs	5	13	4	10
Stomachache	3	8	0	0
Hands	3	8	2	5

Relaxation Training ensured complete relaxation of the whole body, which facilitated physical and mental relaxation. According to Taylor (2003), relaxation helps in the release of opioids, which are natural pain inhibitors in the body. Behavioural Assignments were very helpful for the sample to develop a routine of doing physical exercises and playing outdoor games during the weekends. They were also advised to maintain a right posture when they work and to take rest in between, while working for long hours.

Table 9: Negative emotions of the sample. N=40

Negative Emotions	Before Positive Therapy		After Positive Therapy	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Anger	22	55	3	8
Worry	16	40	2	5
Fear	13	33	2	5
Anxiety	11	28	2	5
Depression	4	10	0	0
Hostility	2	5	0	0

In recent years, the organizations have realized that employee emotions are pervasive in the work place. The emotions are not only a deep-seated part of work life but have an important role to play in one's job performance. An employee's emotions and overall temperament have a significant impact on his job performance, decision making skills, team spirit, leadership and turnover. It is believed that employees bring their feelings of anger, fear, love and respect with them when they come to work.

Table 9 predictably shows the various negative emotions experienced by the sample. More than half of the sample experienced anger (55%) and the other negative emotions experienced were worry (40%), fear (33%), anxiety (28%), depression (10%), and hostility (5%). The negative thoughts and beliefs like 'My future is uncertain', 'I cannot face the competition', etc. might have also led to negative emotions such as anger, worry, fear, anxiety, depression, and hostility. These negative emotions could well affect their well-being.

Positive Therapy is aimed at modifying negative thoughts, beliefs, emotions and behaviour. In the individual counselling sessions, the subjects were made to understand that worrying about the future was unnecessary and unwanted. The counselling techniques namely, Rational Emotive Therapy, Thought Stopping and Cognitive Restructuring replaced debilitating negative thoughts with positive, self-enhancing thoughts. Tension Releasing Exercise, Smile Therapy and Laugh Therapy helped them control their negative

emotions.

Negative emotions of the sample had reduced significantly after Positive Therapy. Moreover, after Positive Therapy, none of them had depression and hostility.

Table 10: Poor health habits of the sample. N=40

Poor Health Habits	Before Positive Therapy		After Positive Therapy	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Lack of physical activity	19	48	4	10
Eating junk food	18	45	6	15
Skipping food	15	38	4	10
Less than 7 hours of sleep	14	35	3	8
Smoking	13	33	7	18
Pain killers	13	33	2	5
Drinking	7	18	4	10
Excessive coffee consumption	2	5	1	3

In the sample, the major causes for stress were found to be lack of time for socialization, adjustment problems and lack of recreation at home. Taking time off from their busy schedule, taking up recreational activities, better sleep and eating patterns are bound to help them.

Table 10 reveals that the sample had poor health habits such as lack of physical activity (48%), eating junk food (45%), skipping breakfast/lunch/supper (38%), less than 7 hours of sleep (35%), smoking (33%), taking pain killers (33%), drinking (18%) and excessive coffee consumption (5%).

Counselling helped them gain better awareness regarding the ill-effects of the poor health habits. They had a very negative perception that smoking and fast foods helped them reduce stress and anxiety. Using the Rational Emotive Therapy, their negative perception was changed by appealing to their reason. They were also encouraged to develop personality traits such as courage, confidence, optimism and the communication skills needed for assertiveness by Assertiveness Training. They needed assertiveness to say 'no' to the peer pressure in drinking and smoking. Behavioural Assignments helped the sample have continuity in therapy and also to avoid poor health habits.

According to the article by Info-Tech Research Group (2009), physical activity like exercise lowers stress, increases blood flow to the brain, and releases endorphins (neurotransmitters that makes one feel good). Hence the importance of physical activity was also emphasized in the counselling sessions with the sample.

In the re-assessment after the six sessions of Positive Therapy, only fewer subjects had various poor health habits.

### Empirical findings

- Initially, 70% of the sample had 'High'/'Very High' stress. None of them had 'High'/'Very High' stress after Positive Therapy
- There was a significant reduction in the mean stress from 'High' to 'Low' after Positive Therapy. The mean difference is statistically significant at 0.01 level, proving the efficacy of Positive Therapy in the management of stress.

- Initially, 60% of the sample had 'Moderate' emotional intelligence. None of them had 'Very Low'/'Low' emotional intelligence after Positive Therapy.
- There was a significant increase in the mean emotional intelligence from 'Moderate' to 'High' after Positive Therapy. The mean difference is statistically significant at 0.01 level.
- The coefficient of correlation between stress and emotional intelligence in the sample is significant at 0.01 level and indicated a negative correlation between stress and emotional intelligence in the sample.
- The major personal factors that caused stress in the sample were lack of time for socialization, adjustment problems at home and lack of recreation at home. The major occupational factors of stress were overload, responsibility, technological uncertainty, improper communication and reaching office on time.
- The symptom of stress reported by the majority of the sample was short temper. The other symptoms of stress suffered by the sample were confusion, sleep disturbances, restlessness, loss of interest, irritability etc. After Positive Therapy, short temper was experienced only by. The percentage of subjects experiencing the other symptoms also reduced significantly.
- Majority of the sample suffered from back pain and headache. They also had pain in the neck, pain in the legs, stomach ache and pain in the hands. After Positive Therapy, the percentage of the subjects experiencing pain reduced significantly.
- More than half of the sample reported anger. The other negative

emotions experienced were worry, fear, anxiety, depression and hostility. The negative emotions of the sample had reduced significantly after Positive Therapy.

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