

A study of acceptance, work stressors and occupational wellbeing in health industry in India.

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Abstract:

In the present study acceptance was examined as a protective factor against the aversive effects of daily work stressors. We hypothesized that the habitual tendency to be accepting of one's negative emotions would be associated with better daily well being. Daily well being was operationalized as low negative affect, low end of day fatigue and high work engagement. Furthermore, we predicted that acceptance would buffer the aversive impact of work stressors on the three variables. A micro longitudinal study was carried out to gather the data of 92 employees of the health care sector on 10 working days. Multilevel modeling was used to analyze the data. Acceptance emerged as an important predictor of lower negative affect, lower end of day fatigue and higher work engagement across the day diary period. Furthermore, acceptance moderated the effect of stressor occurrence on daily well being. Specifically, accepting individuals experienced less change in negative affect and work engagement after experiencing at least one stressor during the day than less accepting individuals. However, no moderation effect of acceptance was identified for the prediction of end of day fatigue. Our findings emphasize the benefits of accepting negative emotional states. For practice, it appears sensible to teach employees acceptance skills that can help them deal with work stressors and ultimately increase wellbeing.

Keywords: acceptance, stress, negative affect, end of day fatigue, work engagement, wellbeing, emotion regulation.

Introduction:

In everyday life, people are constantly faced with stressors. Problems in relationships, concerns at work or at home, caring for other people, or malfunctioning electronic devices are examples of daily hassles that represent constant challenges to our day to day routine (Almeida, 2005). Negative daily events have been found to be related to negative consequences for the individual like daily ill being or anxiety and depression (Lazarus, 1999). Numerous studies have shown that the job is by far the biggest source of stress for adults (American Association of Stress, n. d.): Occupational stress is strongly associated with negative outcomes for the individual (Cooper, Dewe, & O' Driscoll, 2001; Nixon, Mazzola, Bauer, Krueger, & Spector, 2011; Schaufeli, Martinez, Marques Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Considering the detrimental effects of work stress, it appears theoretically and practically relevant to identify factors that protect people from the aversive consequences of stress.

The current study contributes to research in two domains: First, it adds to the growing body of literature regarding acceptance and its numerous positive outcomes. Second and even more important, it examines acceptance as a potential protecting factor of work stress, which might open up perspectives to help employees improve their stress management.

Work Stressors and Emotions

According to the American Institute of Stress (n. d.), work stress in the US causes costs of nearly \$300 billion dollars a year as compensation for absenteeism, decreased productivity, or as direct medical and insurance costs. Work stress has a negative effect on general physical (Nixon et al., 2011) and mental health (Iliceto et al., 2013) by significantly increasing the risk of developing burnout or depression (Cooper et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Furthermore, it contributes to fatigue (Zohar, Tzischinski, & Epstein, 2003) and, importantly, work stress has a spillover effect on family life: individuals who face occupational stressors have been shown to have a lower parent-child relationship quality (van Roeters, & Kluwer, 2010) and are more likely to divorce (Poortman, 2005). However, while certain situational working conditions are likely to trigger stress responses in most employers (Karasek & Theorell, 1990), stress is a highly personalized phenomenon. Therefore, the individual response to a stressful event is even more predictive of negative outcomes than the event itself (Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979).

Acceptance and Well-Being

Being accepting of one's emotions and thoughts forms the positive counterpart of experiential avoidance, a concept that describes the unwillingness to face aversive experiences like negative emotions or situations (Hayes et al., 1996) and has often been found to increase psychological distress (Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Acceptance is a two step process: Firstly, it involves consciously and non judgmentally dealing with one's emotions no matter whether they are positive or negative (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). As such, any internal state is accepted the way it is. Secondly, acceptance involves not attempting to regulate or control feelings and thoughts, an action that is suggested to interfere with pursuing one's goals and values (Hayes et al., 1996). These two processes help individuals to divert attention from controlling internal states towards controlling overt behavior that is consistent with individual values and goals. According to Hayes and colleagues (1999), acceptance promotes mental health by reducing the impact of negative stimuli and by maintaining a focus on pursuing personal goals and values, a process usually referred to as commitment. It is important to note that acceptance does not mean to give up or to tolerate unpleasant experiences like psychological distress. The crucial point is to be aware of negative mental states, while not letting these experiences determine one's actions and behaviors.

The Present Study

The present work investigated the relationship between the habitual use of acceptance, daily work stressors and occupational well being. Occupational wellbeing was operationalized by lower negative affect and end of day fatigue and higher levels of work engagement. At first, participants' levels of acceptance were assessed at baseline making use of a questionnaire. Subsequently, participants were asked to fill out a diary after work on

10 working days, in which they reported the frequency and intensity of negative work events. In the same questionnaires, negative affect, end of day fatigue and daily work engagement were assessed. To ensure demanding job conditions and the occurrence of stressors, the study was conducted with employees from hospitals, who have been shown to experience higher levels of stress than other workers.

Negative affect. In line with previous findings linking acceptance to decreased levels of negative affect (Campbell & Sills et al., 2006; Shallcross, et al., 2010), we expected that higher acceptance is related to lower daily reported negative affect. Importantly, acceptance has been found to be especially beneficial in times of elevated life stress. As such, acceptance was hypothesized to buffer the detrimental effect of stressors on affect.

Hypothesis 1 : Acceptance is related to lower levels of daily negative affect.

End-of-day fatigue: End of day fatigue is defined by depletion of resources at the end of a working day (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). As mentioned above, negative events drain cognitive resources and thus are strongly related to fatigue (Zohar et al., 2003). Acceptance, however, by definition entails drawing on fewer resources and allows engagement with the task, as emotions are not attempted to be controlled or changed (Hayes et al., 1996). Furthermore, empirical research has shown that acceptance requires fewer resources than other emotion regulation strategies (Alberts et al., 2012). Consequently, cognitive effort that is usually invested in controlling or avoiding emotions is saved and can be devoted to other tasks. It is thus conceivable that acceptance, firstly, is negatively related to end of day fatigue and, secondly, moderates the relationship between work stressors and fatigue, such that higher acceptance reduces the impact of stressors on fatigue.

Hypothesis 2 : Acceptance is related to lower levels of daily end of day fatigue.

Work engagement: Engaged employees have an active and positive work related state (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). They tend to direct all their attention towards organizational goals, feel connected to their work, and sense that they can deal with the demands of the job (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalezoma, & Bakker, 2002). Work engagement is a three dimensional concept that entails vigor (i.e., energetic and resilient work attitudes), dedication (i.e., strong involvement in one' s work and experiencing enthusiasm and challenge) and absorption (i.e., being able to immerse in one' s work; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Work engagement is often considered the opposite of burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2002), which denotes a syndrome of emotional exhaustion that to a large extent results from job demands (Halbesleben, 2010). Given that acceptance has been negatively associated with burnout (Shallcross et al., 2010), it seems conceivable that acceptance is positively associated with work engagement denoting the opposite of burnout. Furthermore, work engagement has often been linked to personal resources like self esteem or optimism. Given the positive effects of acceptance, this state of mind might serve as a personal resource that is positively associated with work engagement. Additionally, work engagement is related to commitment (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008; Kanste, 2011), which forms an important aspect of acceptance. Concluding, we predict acceptance to be positively related to work engagement.

Hypothesis 3: Acceptance is related to higher levels of daily work engagement.

Recently, it has been suggested that work engagement varies from day to day depending on daily events. Xantholoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2009) showed that positive daily events like supervisor coaching or team atmosphere contribute to personal resources like self esteem or optimism, which again add to daily work engagement. As such, positive events were related to increased work engagement. Similarly, negative events should lead to decreased daily work engagement, which forms the pre-requisite for our next hypothesis: Acceptance as a personal resource - is expected to buffer the negative effect of stressors on work engagement.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 95 adults working in five multi speciality hospitals in Chennai city of Tamil nadu, India. Of these participants, we obtained a total of 901 diary entries. Participants' age ranged from 17 to 64 years with a mean age of 43 years. 18% of the sample was male. In order to participate in the study, respondents had to be employed in the sample hospitals and have daily customer contact. The participants were recruited by contacting different health care organizations like private practices, pharmacies and institutions offering services like ambulant nursing, physiotherapy, or dietary advice. Furthermore, the private social network of the researchers was used to recruit participants. Some participants were referred by colleagues or friends who heard of the study or participated themselves. In exchange for participation respondents received personal feedback about their emotion regulation.

Three respondents dropped out of the study after completing the baseline questionnaire and were excluded from the analysis. Of the sample, 50% finished Higher secondary school, 14% completed diploma and degree education, and another 30% indicated as highest education a college or university degree. Organizational tenure ranged from 0 to 32 years, with an average of 9.61 years ($SD = 8.10$). Participants interacted with clients on average 5.59 hours a day ($SD = 2.36$). The mean working time was 8.74 hours per day ($SD = 6.66$).

Procedure

The participants were asked to maintain a diary with entries of daily events during their working for ten days. Demographics and acceptance were assessed with the baseline questionnaire. The diary phase started at the first working day after completion of the baseline questionnaire. Participants were instructed to fill out the surveys after work but before going to bed. The number of completed diary entries ranged from 2 to 17 ($M = 10.05$, $SD = 2.39$).

Measures

Acceptance. Acceptance was measured using the acceptance and action questionnaire (Bond et al., 2011). This instrument measures habitual acceptance and has been shown to have strong psychometric properties (e.g., Bond et al., 2011;

Gloster, Klotschke, Chaker, Hummer, & Hoyer, 2011). Participants rated their agreement with 10 statements on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 1 "*never true*" to 7 "*always true*". Examples of items are "I am afraid of my feelings" or "It's OK if I remember something unpleasant". Cronbach's alpha indicated high reliability ($\alpha = .84$).

Daily events. To assess affective work events, we asked participants to list events of the working day that they considered 'straining' or 'pleasant'. We explicitly asked for negative as well as positive events to counteract a possible negative bias that would arise when only negative events would have been made salient. Participants were asked to shortly describe the events and then rate their valence on a five point Likert scale ranging from "*very negative*" to "*very positive*"; this was done to categorize events into positive, neutral, and negative ones. On average, 2.25 events were listed on each day, with more frequent report of positive ($M = 1.25$) than negative events ($M = .71$). Neutral events were reported least often ($M = .21$). Examples of reported negative events are "I am sick but I still went to work" or "I made a mistake today". Positive events were "Today, I only had friendly clients" or "I was able to finish a long lasting task today", which will not be considered in the analysis.

Daily negative affect: To measure negative affect, we used a self report measure that assesses emotions explicitly (Kessler & Staudinger, 2009). Participants were asked to indicate for represented low arousal (e.g., "down", "lethargic", "droopy", "sluggish") and high arousal negative affect (e.g., "annoyed", "nervous", "worried", "anxious"). Current affect has been shown to be less prone to bias than assessing affect in retrospection (Robinson & Clore, 2002), which is why we decided to measure current negative affect after work. The ratings were given on a five point Likert scale ranging from "*very slightly or not at all*" to "*extremely*". Internal consistency across 12 days² was satisfactorily high ranging from .62 to .84 ($M = .74$).

End of the day fatigue. After work, state fatigue was assessed with a measure by Nitsch (1976), which has shown good psychometric properties (e.g., Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). This six item measure was presented as part of the affect checklist. The items were "spent", "exhausted", "in need for recovery", "rested" [recoded], and "recuperated" [recoded]. Reliability across the 12 days was sufficiently high with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .83 to .91 ($M = .86$).

Work engagement. To measure daily engagement in working, we used a shortened version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Each day after work, participants indicated for three items the extent to which they agreed with them ("Today, I immersed in my work", "Today, I felt strong and vigorous at my work", "I am proud on the work I did today"). Ratings were given on a five point Likert scale ranging from "*not agree at all*" to "*agree completely*". The Cronbach's Alpha measures for each day ranged .73 to .93 indicating high internal reliability ($M = .85$).

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed with multilevel modeling making use of MLwin (Rasbash, Charlton, Browne, Healy, & Cameron, 2005). Days (Level 1) were nested within individuals (Level 2). The count of negative and positive events per day was strongly right skewed. In order to tailor the variable to the demands of a multilevel analyses, the variables were dichotomized so that "1" represented at least one negative (positive) event experienced on that day and "0" represented that no negative (positive) event was

experienced. The three outcome variables for well being (negative affect, end of day fatigue, work engagement) were predicted in three separate models. For matters of simplicity, only the model with negative affect as outcome will be depicted here. The Level 1 model below illustrates the variability within individuals in the relationship between daily work stressors and daily negative affect, controlling for the number of diary entry. The Level 2 model incorporates acceptance as a predictor of daily negative affect:

Results

Preliminary Analysis

Negative affect, end of day fatigue, work engagement and stressor occurrence were averaged for individuals across all measurement points to obtain the between person correlations of all variables. Acceptance was moderately negatively correlated with reporting negative affect and end of day fatigue and positively associated with reporting high work engagement. Furthermore, levels of acceptance were positively related to age. However, acceptance was largely uncorrelated with stressor occurrence (i.e., reporting to have experienced at least on negative event on a given day, $r = 0.13$). Men and women reported equally high levels of acceptance ($t(90) = 0.40$, 95% CI [0.61, .40]). Acceptance was unrelated to educational level ($F(4,84) = .32$, $p = .87$, partial $\eta^2 = .01$).

Acceptance, Daily Stressors and Well being

Before the analysis, we calculated null models to assess the proportion of variance that is accounted for by person and day level, respectively. These revealed that between 45% and 49% of the total variability were due to person level in the three models, indicating that multilevel modeling is an appropriate procedure for analyzing the data (Nezlek, 2001). A prerequisite for the analysis was that stressors are related to a drop in the wellbeing variables. This was indeed found. Experiencing a stressor was related to increased negative affect ($Y = .33$, $p < .001$), to increased end of day fatigue ($Y = .31$, $p < .001$) and to decreased work engagement ($Y = 0.70$, 95%CI [0.84/0.56]).

The relationships between stressor occurrence and acceptance and the three outcome variables showed significant variance in intercepts across participants. However, the slopes varied only slightly across participants. Including the cross level interaction in the models reduced the slope variation further. Only with negative affect as the outcome variable slopes and intercepts covaried significantly.

Regarding Hypothesis 1, acceptance was negatively related to daily negative affect ($Y = 0.14$, 95%CI [0.22/0.06]). The simple slope analysis revealed that the effect of a stressor on daily negative affect was lower for participants with relatively high levels of acceptance ($Y = .25$, 95%CI [.15/.33]) than for participants with low levels of acceptance ($Y = .40$, 95%CI [.32/.49]).

Furthermore, it was predicted that acceptance would be associated with lower end of day fatigue (Hypothesis 2). The results indeed showed a negative association between acceptance and daily end of day fatigue ($Y = 0.21$, 95%CI [0.37/0.05]). Finally, diary entry emerged as a significant predictor of end of day fatigue ($Y = 0.05$, 95%CI [0.07/0.03]).

With regard to the outcome variable work engagement, the results supported our predictions: Acceptance emerged as a predictor of daily work engagement ($\gamma = .15$, 95%CI [G .03/.33]), which is significant only for the one sided significance test for $\alpha = 5\%$. The simple slope analysis revealed that a stressor had a weaker effect on work engagement when acceptance levels were high ($\beta = G.51$, 95%CI [G67/G.34]) than when acceptance levels were low ($\beta = G.89$, 95%CI [G1.05/G.72]).

Discussion

Acceptance involves facing and not avoiding emotions - even the negative ones - while maintaining a focus on goal oriented behavior (Hayes et al., 1999). Somewhat paradoxical, accepting negative emotions has been associated with a range of positive outcomes including decreased negative affect, depression or anxiety. In this research it was investigated whether acceptance is beneficial for dealing with daily stress at work. Firstly, we hypothesized that acceptance is positively related to daily well being. High well being was operationalized by low negative affect, low end of day fatigue and high work engagement. Secondly, we predicted acceptance to buffer the aversive effect of work stressors on the three outcome variables negative affect, end of day fatigue and work engagement. The results support our hypotheses to a large extent, suggesting that acceptance is indeed related to daily wellbeing and a protecting factor in face of elevated daily stress.

For all three measures of daily wellbeing, acceptance emerged as a significant predictor. The correlations between acceptance and averaged negative affect, end of day fatigue and work engagement, were of moderate effect size according to Cohen's classification (1992). Furthermore, accounting for variance within individuals, the multilevel analysis revealed that high levels of acceptance significantly predicted daily well being. It is important to mention, though, that the 95% confidence interval of the predictor of acceptance on work engagement includes zero, while the one tailed significance test on the 5% Alpha level is significant. Notably, the general pattern of the results emphasizes the beneficial associations with acceptance and bolsters our confidence in the identified relationships. Furthermore, given prior research that has related a habitual tendency to accept negative emotions to immediate decreased negative affect (Shallcross et al., 2010) or less emotional exhaustion (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2012), it is reasonable to conclude that individuals with high acceptance are likely to experience better well being.

Secondly, acceptance buffered the detrimental relationship between stressor occurrence and negative affect and work engagement such that the outcome variables were less affected by stressor occurrence when acceptance was high. However, acceptance did not buffer the relationship between stressor occurrence and fatigue. We did not find a moderation effect for acceptance, which is rather surprising as previous research found individuals exhibiting high levels of acceptance experience less daily emotional exhaustion in response to stressful work events (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2012). Replication studies are needed to disentangle the relationship between stress, acceptance and fatigue. Finally, to summarize the overall pattern of findings from our study it appears that acceptance protects individuals from the detrimental effects of daily work stressors. As such, findings

are in line with previous research identifying acceptance as a protecting factor in face of elevated life stress (Shallcross et al., 2010). The present study extends prior findings by investigating relatively short term effects of specific work stressors as opposed to long term effects of general life stress of, for instance, over periods of 4 months (Shallcross et al., 2010) or one year (Bond & Bunce, 2003).

Controlling for different possible confounders like gender, education, tenure, number of events reported or reporting positive events did not change the results. Importantly, baseline acceptance was unrelated to reporting a stressor, suggesting that high accepters do not simply experience fewer negative events, which would explain higher well-being outcomes.

Conclusion

The present study investigated the buffering effect of acceptance on the aversive effects of daily work stressors. Firstly, acceptance was associated with positive outcomes, such that it was negatively correlated to negative affect and end of day fatigue, but positively correlated to work engagement. Furthermore, work stressors had a lesser impact on individuals with a stronger tendency to accept negative emotions. The body of findings strongly suggests that acceptance is related to daily wellbeing and serves as a protecting factor in face of daily work stress. As such, they add to the existing body of literature emphasizing the beneficial effects of acceptance. Applying these findings to practice, it seems reasonable to learn acceptance in order to develop greater stress resilience. Given that it has been proven that acceptance can be learned during workshops or therapies, it seems beneficial to teach employees acceptance skills that can help them deal with work stressors and ultimately increase well being.

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