

Transfer of Stress Through
Verbal and Written Communication

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Lexington, Virginia
1974

Abstract

Since variations in the voice are perceived by the listener to reflect different emotions, it is tenable to suggest that these emotions might affect the emotions of the receiver of the communication, and the concurrent possibility that the written word could affect the emotions of the reader to some degree. A Psychological Stress Evaluator (model PSE-1) was used to check the hypothesis that variations in voice qualities, specifically volume and pitch, affect the stress level of the listener and that high stressed communication will produce matching stress in the listener. In the first experiment, twenty subjects were presented with five neutral words and five emotional words and instructed to read each word and respond with a one word free association. The second experiment was similar except that the stimulus words were played from a tape recorder. The experimenters analyzed the tape recorded responses in each experiment to attempt to distinguish the responses.

A blind analysis of the subjects' responses attempted to distinguish between the neutral and emotional stimuli. Selection from responses to written stimuli was only at the chance level for each experimenter, but highly significant results were obtained from the responses to vocal stimuli. There was also a highly significant level of agreement between the independent experimenters.

Results indicate that in clinical, as in other situations, perceived tone of voice as determined by volume and pitch, may result in significant changes in the stress level and consequently, the emotional "set" of the listener, and may influence the effectiveness of the speaker. Also indicated was that a written word, even one of high emotional content, may not reliably elicit a stressful response, while a word extremely low in emotional content may elicit a very highly stressed response according to the method of pronunciation.

This study places in question the validity of certain word association tests where stimulus words are assumed to be stressful to the subject on the basis of the content of the response alone (Note: This finding is under further investigation and research).