

HOW TO MANAGE STRESS AT WORK

By Ruth McGuire, BSc

Work-related stress is costly in terms of both health and finance. It has been linked with such illnesses as heart disease, and employers have had to make large compensation payments for neglecting stress in employees.

This article looks at how to recognise symptoms of stress in ourselves and others, and how to manage it



An estimated 6.5 million workers are affected by work-related stress, costing employers £370m per year and industry in the United Kingdom over £3.7bn annually. The most “stress-prone” are said to be teachers, nurses, managers and other professionals, with those between the ages of 35 and 44 thought to be at most risk. Stress was also recorded as the key health and safety priority for two thirds of the 9,000 safety representatives polled by the Trades Union Congress in December 2000.

Stress can be costly not only in terms of its effects on other members of staff, but also in compensation payouts if employees can show that they have suffered stress as a direct result of conditions at work. Employees who can prove that they have suffered from a clinically recognised psychological injury, such as depression, have grounds for making personal injury claims. For example, in October 2001, a nurse who had a mental breakdown because of stress and overwork was awarded £140,000 by the High Court.

An additional cost identified by stress management experts Stephen Williams and Lesley Cooper is the loss of “intellectual capacity” when there is a high turnover of good staff. They argue that “high rates of staff turnover are one of the clearest organisational signs of stress”. Employers should also be concerned because stress has been associated with poor performance, poor time keeping, absence and even customer complaints.

THE SYMPTOMS

Work-related stress is defined by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”. In other words, stress is not so much about feeling pressured, but about having an adverse reaction to pressure. It is about the response of the individual.

Although stress itself is not defined as an illness, it can lead to physical and psychological problems. Physical symptoms include tension headaches, feeling faint, migraine, nausea, nervous twitches, backache, altered sleep patterns and excessive sweating. New evidence also suggests that stress lowers the production of the some of the cytokines involved in the early stages of wound healing. Psychological and behavioural symptoms include reduced self-esteem and self-worth, anxiety, poor decision-making, mood swings, depression or feeling low, feeling out of control or helpless, poor concentration, irritability and anger.

WORKPLACE PRESSURES

The type of workplace pressure that can lead to stress varies. Working long hours and having an excessive workload are common sources of stress for employees. However, it has also been found that some employees feel stressed if they are not given support at work or if they do not feel appreciated for the work they do. If an organisation is undergoing change and employees are not given the opportunity to contribute to how the change will be managed, this can also be a source of stress.

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STRESS MANAGEMENT AND LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

The first action to take if you have self-diagnosed workplace stress is to talk to your employer. Health and safety regulations require employees to tell their employers about any shortcomings in health and safety measures, and this includes measures to tackle stress. Employers have a statutory duty, as far as is reasonably practicable, to ensure that your health is not harmed by work-related stress, and should have measures in place to achieve this. For example, you may have access to an employees’ assistance programme that offers the services of a counsellor whom you can approach confidentially, usually both during and outside work hours. However, you do have some personal responsibility for your own health, so if you are feeling stressed you should also talk to your GP. He or she may not be able to help directly, but can refer you to appropriate professionals.

One simple but effective management strategy for dealing with stress is to relax. Try deep-breathing techniques or, if possible, take time out from your work by spending five minutes each hour just not thinking at all. If you take a lunch break, for total privacy, tell your colleagues that you do not wish to be disturbed during this time. And switch off your mobile telephone. Going for a walk during lunch breaks can also help to reduce stress. Outside work there are various activities that you could try to help you to relax, eg, aromatherapy. You should also take better care of your overall physical health and stamina by eating healthy foods and by exercising regularly. Stress expert Dr Cary Cooper suggests two further strategies for dealing with stress in addition to improving your physical health: change your thinking and change your behaviour.

Change your thinking When you are stressed you tend to blow things out of proportion and focus on the negative rather than the positive. Placing things in perspective will help you to be less critical or judgemental about your performance at work. Thinking of where a perceived problem fits into the bigger picture of life can help to minimise its importance. It will also help you to avoid being hyper-critical of mistakes. If you try to focus on the specific problem that is the source of your stress rather than thinking of yourself as being the problem, this too can help you keep things in perspective. If you are feeling stressed at work, Dr Cooper suggests that you ask yourself challenging questions such as:

- Will it seem this bad in one, three, six or 12 months’ time?
- Am I exaggerating the importance of this problem?
- Am I thinking in all-or-nothing terms? (Is there any middle ground?)
- Is it really as bad a problem as a serious accident or a close bereavement?

Researchers in the United States have found that writing therapy can be another effective way of dealing with stress. They found that expressive writing reduces intrusive thoughts about negative events and improves working memory. Being able to articulate and express yourself in writing can help you to clarify your thoughts. You can use writing not only for diagnosing the source of your stress, but also as the basis for an action plan to deal with your stress.

Change your behaviour Being assertive and confident about saying “no” is a significant strategy for reducing excessive workloads that often lead to stress. Assertiveness is non-aggressive behaviour based on your right to express your feelings in a non-offensive manner. A common strategy suggested by assertiveness trainers is the “broken record” method of stating and restating your views repeatedly and clearly when faced with someone who is trying to persuade you to do something you really do not want to do. For example, consider a scenario where you have decided to have a family day out on Saturday but your line manager would like you to come to work:

Manager: “We’re short staffed on Saturday and I’d really like you to come in and help.”

You: “Well, I’ve made other arrangements for Saturday.”

Manager: “Well, things are going to be difficult because I don’t know whether I can get any cover so I really could do with you coming in to help out.”

You: “As I’ve said, I’ve already got a commitment on Saturday.”

Manager: “But it’s one of our busiest days, you do realise that don’t you?”

You: “I realise that, but I’ve made other arrangements for Saturday.”

You will also feel more in control if you manage your time effectively. Set clear goals and priorities for each week. These will then break down into daily goals and priorities. With a clear idea of what you hope to achieve by the end of the day, you are better equipped to stop other people from imposing their priorities on you.

MANAGERS’ AND EMPLOYERS’ RESPONSIBILITIES

If you are working as a manager or employer as well as a pharmacist, then you obviously have a duty to look after both your own health and the health of the people you work with. The HSE suggests that you carry out a risk assessment to find out whether you are doing enough to prevent stress, and has identified seven factors for assessing work-related stress hazards:

- Culture of the organisation, eg, how does your organisation approach work-related stress?
- Demands such as workload and exposure to physical hazards, eg, is work sensibly scheduled so that workload levels are right?
- How much control people have over the way they work, eg, are your staff given a say?
- Relationships, eg, how do you deal with issues such as bullying and harassment?
- How organisational change is managed and communicated.
- Whether the individual understands their role in the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles, eg, do you provide a clear definition of roles?
- Support and training from peers and line management for the person to be able to undertake the core functions of their job, eg, do you cater for individual differences?

There are various methods you can use to identify whether there is a problem. These are strategies that require you to take a holistic look at your organisation, and can be a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative analyses. For example, you can talk to staff informally to try and gauge whether they feel stressed or under pressure, or the issue of health may emerge during performance appraisals. Many organisations now perform a follow-up interview if an employee is frequently absent due to sickness. This gives managers the opportunity to explore with the employee whether work is actually the source of a health problem. If however, the “sick leave interview” is not common practice at your workplace, closer monitoring of sickness absence records could help you to determine whether an employee’s sickness is related to stress. For example, is there a pattern to when sickness occurs?

Once you have identified problems whether for yourself or for your staff, you have to take action. There are of course, different levels of intervention that can be taken. For example, if your organisation has a “demands” problem you could provide training, move

PANEL 1: CHECKLIST FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

1. Do you have a clear policy to deal with stress?
2. Are your staff involved and committed to dealing with stress?
3. Have you planned and set standards considering the seven HSE factors?
4. Have you assessed, actioned, audited and reviewed?

people between jobs, redefine roles, ensure the work environment is properly controlled, provide stress management training or even provide access to a counselling service.

As a manager you need to be aware that stress management is not only about taking remedial action. It is about doing all you can to remove sources of stress from work in the first place, ie, prevention. Closer monitoring of workloads is a preventive measure that all managers can take. In some cases, it is not just the volume of work causing a problem, but the complexity of work. Employees may not have received adequate training for a specific task. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 make it clear that employees should not be given tasks that exceed their capabilities. It says: “When allocating work to employees, employers should ensure that the demands of the job do not exceed the employees’ ability to carry out the work without risk to themselves or others.”

It is not enough to assess and take action. Reviews must be performed whenever you think that an assessment is no longer valid. If an employee does allege that work-related stress is the cause of his or her ill-health, you and your systems will be examined. How will your organisation stand up to scrutiny? Panel 1 provides a checklist to look at whether you have managed stress hazards reasonably. Stress is often seen as a sign of weakness so it is also important to ensure that you are approachable and to reassure your staff that their information will be treated confidentially. Ignoring health and business costs, ask yourself how you would feel if one of your staff became ill due to work-related stress that was under your control.

SUMMARY

Stress should not be part of a job to the extent that it causes physical or mental illness. The solution is good management on both sides. Research involving heart patients has found that the benefits of stress management seem to exceed those of exercise and usual heart care.¹ The study found that average costs for patients who used stress management were significantly lower than for those who received usual care. “These results extend our earlier work that showed stress management programmes reduce cardiac events in the short term, and now we can demonstrate a long-term benefit,” says psychologist James Blumenthal who led the study. “One of the benefits of a stress management programme is that once you’ve learned how to recognise and handle the stresses of everyday life it tends to stay with you.”

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FURTHER READING

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