

Is stress the new 'bad back'?

Stress isn't 'all in the mind'—it's a real illness which can stretch people to breaking point. And with the Health and Safety Executive preparing to audit stress at work – along with more tangible hazards – it's an issue that employers ignore at their peril, reports LESLEY JEFFERSON.

It's true that stress has taken over from the bad back as the most commonly reported reason for absence. The statistics don't paint a pretty picture. For example:

- Work-related stress accounts for over a third of all new incidences of ill health.
- Each case of stress-related ill health leads to an average of 30.9 working days lost.
- More than 13 million working days are lost annually to stress, depression and anxiety.

That's a serious consideration, although it shouldn't really come as a surprise – the UK continues to work the longest hours in Europe. Only our US counterparts are as dedicated. And let's not forget the impact of high divorce rates, extensive personal debt, and so on. Circumstances outside work affect performance, whether we like it or not.

However there's good news too – if the figures are turned on their head, we also know that those organisations prepared to tackle stress can gain a competitive edge through positive effects on: Employee commitment to work; staff performance and productivity; staff turnover or intention to leave; staff recruitment and retention;

customer satisfaction; organisational image and reputation.

So what is stress...is it an illness? The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as 'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them'.

It's not all in the mind. Stress reaction is actually a physiological response to perceived danger. It's a very primitive response, not much changed from hunter-gatherer days when we humans had to be constantly on the look out for danger and be ready to act. The 'fight or flight' reaction is one where adrenalin and other stress hormones prepare our bodies to deal with the enemy.

So our heart rate and breathing go up in order to get oxygen to our muscles. Sugar is released into the blood stream to give us energy and our blood thickens so that it will clot in the event of injury. We sweat more to keep us cool. Our digestive system closes down until the threat passes.

But because the physiological response is so primitive, we react in the same way to challenging work situations as we would to a tiger attack!

It doesn't take much imagination to make the connection to stress related illnesses...heart disease...strokes...ulcers...diabetes....

Is stress always bad? Let's be clear about this - pressure is good. Human beings are motivated by pressure. It's often what gets us out of bed in the morning. At work, most of us need goals, objectives,

deadlines, targets and the expectations of others to push us to give our best. This is shown by the chart below, which plots the relationship between pressure and performance.

But when the pressure gets too much, we quickly move into the burn-out zone. Unfortunately, many of us don't even recognise what's happening. We think it's 'just a phase', and certainly in our macho motor industry we are reluctant to admit to feeling overwhelmed.

The clear message from the HSE and current behavioural research is that we all have a breaking point. And it's up to managers especially to be alert to negative behavioural changes in team members, because there's a surprisingly small window between peak performance and stress related absence.

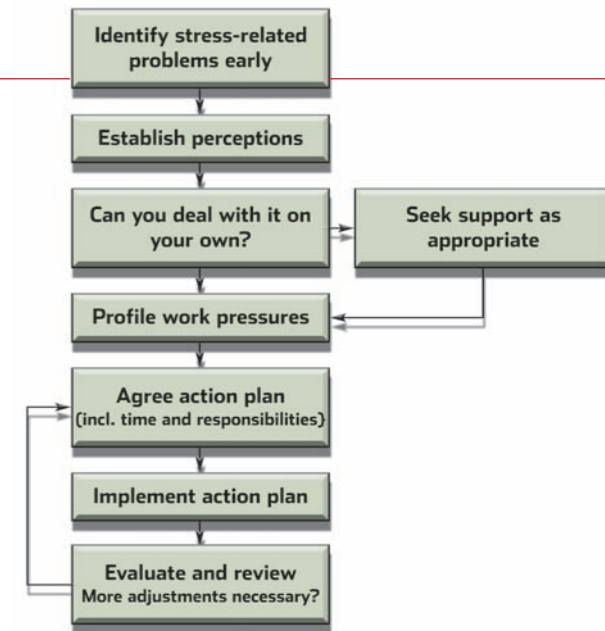
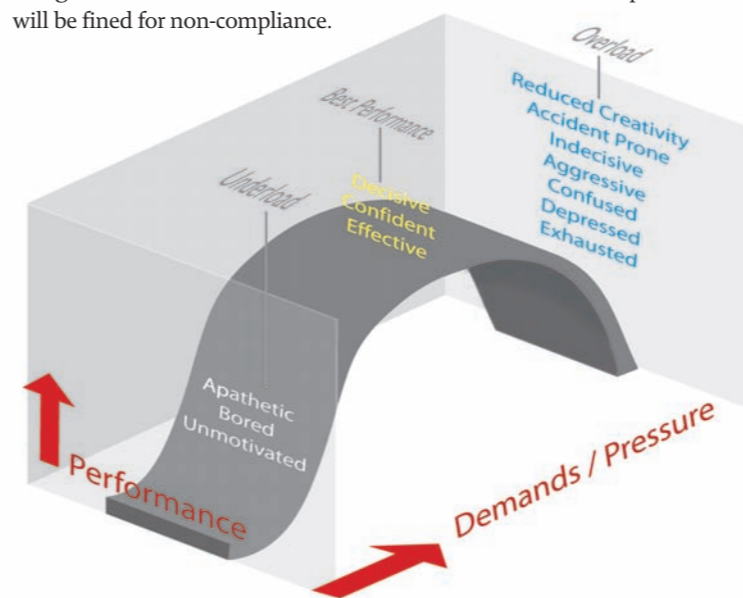
The Health and Safety Executive is turning the spotlight on stress. The bad news for some is that in 2008 HSE will be auditing stress along with other hazards, and firms will be fined for non-compliance.

The good news is that HSE has helped to promote a common language of stress and a methodology for risk assessment which removes a great deal of the 'slippery' uncertainty that has surrounded the issue.

The HSE Stress Management Standards (see summary in box) provide a useful tool which can be used flexibly to audit the organisation or to profile the pressures on an individual.

The flow chart (above right) shows how to approach stress from a risk management perspective. This helps us to deal with the evidence in an objective way. Which isn't at all to say that we shouldn't empathise with stressed colleagues, but it offers a methodical and fair way to incorporate stress management into existing human resource performance management practices.

And perhaps significantly in these days of litigation, it ensures that full records are kept. **MIM**



HSE Stress Management Standards

Demands: 'Demands' covers a number of potential sources of pressure at work. Having too much to do (overload) or too little to do (underload) are both examples of demands. Shift-work may be demanding. There could also be demands in the physical environment, such as noise, lack of space, cold/damp or a dry atmosphere. Risk of aggression or violence is another example of a demand.

Control: Examples of 'lack of control' pressures include not feeling involved in decisions, not having a say, or that your opinion doesn't count. Another example would relate to lack of flexibility. Pressure can increase if people feel that they don't have choices, for example over when to take breaks or the way work is scheduled and organised.

Support: Support comes in different forms. For example, support from other people is often referred to as 'social support'. Another form of support is 'practical support', such as having the right resources or equipment. Training is an example of practical support and is very important as it provides the skills you need to do your job.

Relationships: Poor working relationships can be a significant pressure at work, particularly when they are associated with conflict or negative behaviours such as bullying or harassment. Strong relationships help to combat other pressures.

Role: Sometimes people aren't clear about what they should be doing, or who they are answerable to. This is called 'role ambiguity'. Role can also be a problem if someone feels that they are 'wearing too many hats'. This results in 'role conflict' where people find it difficult to prioritise.

Change: Change at work can increase the pressure on people, particularly if it is not managed well. Poorly managed change can make people feel uncertain, anxious and insecure. What can add to pressure is where people don't feel consulted or involved, and where communication has been poor.

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