

Are you taking stress seriously? (FIB)

Is stress something you recognise and have support systems in place to help tackle stress and its related problems?

Why should you worry? Have you worked out what it is costing (in financial and personal terms)? Figures from the CBI suggest that the actual number of days lost to stress related absence went down last year, for the first time in many years, but the cost to business and the economy went up by a further £1bn to £13bn. This equates to £531 per employee in lost working days!! The knock-on effect to the business goes beyond this “visible” cost too. Once people are feeling a “negative” stress some or all of these will start to appear:

- Lower levels of commitment to work*
- Performance and productivity diminish*
- Absence levels increase*
- “Presenteeism”, ie, they are present but do not do much*
- Staff turnover increases*
- Customer service levels suffer – with ensuing problems*
- Quality of work is affected*
- Problems attracting the right staff*
- Reputation of the business suffers*
- Risk of litigation*

When these begin to happen they will cost the business in many ways. So, it is something you need to deal with, ideally proactively rather than just reacting.

There is another very good reason why you need to consider the implications. Should someone suffer from stress or a stress-related problem and it affects them seriously they have legal redress. The owners, directors and managers may be liable under the “duty of care” legislation as part of the Health and Safety at Work Act (1999) and also because stress can now be considered under the Disability Discrimination Act too. So, there are commercial and personal reasons for putting stress higher up the top team agenda.

You can see there are many potential consequences and risks which can have a severe impact on your people and your business performance. My suggestion is that your organisation makes the issue something which you look to address proactively and take a preventative approach. If this cannot resolve all of the possible occurrences make sure you have set in place the appropriate support mechanisms.

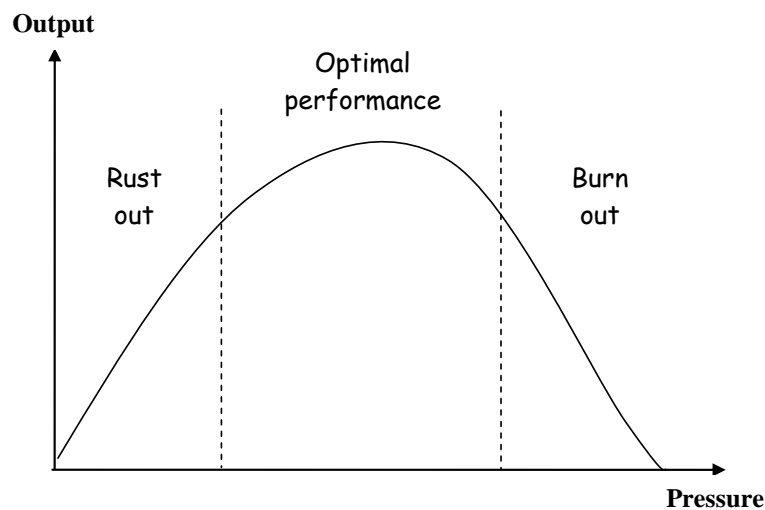
What is stress?

The HSE definition is “*the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.*” A simpler option is to think of it as “*the internalisation of pressure – where it exceeds your ability to cope.*” When we hear people say things such as “We all need some degree of stress” (as was reported recently in a survey which was in the UK press), what is really being said is that we need some level of pressure to galvanise

us to action. These pressures can come from a range of sources in our work and personal lives – and within ourselves too.

The figure below, “The Pressure Curve” shows what we mean by this. If the amount of pressure is not high enough, we do not feel the need to respond and so performance is likely to be down. (Wonderfully called “rust out” in certain circles.) Have you ever gone into a shop, restaurant or somewhere on a very quiet day? What was the response and service like? This end of the scale can lead to problems from the boredom level!

Get the pressure “right” and we are triggered to respond in the most effective way – and will operate at our “optimal performance” level. Moving along towards the end, the pressure levels increase and when this is too much the response is what most people think of as the classic stress problem, “burn out”



This rarely just “happens” suddenly. The pressures build up, the symptoms will become more and more obvious, the physiological and behavioural clues will be more noticeable. If the situation does not change, and the pressure become more manageable, the person who is at this end will probably start to become ill as the body sends out signals to say it needs to protect itself against this burnout.

The challenge facing managers with this concept is to identify the “optimal” amount of pressure for each person in their team. We each interpret pressures in different ways. What one of us may shrug off, another will think of as a crisis and vice versa. Add to this, we all have various pressures influencing us which are external to our work. These can range from personal relationships to financial, environmental to practical such as travelling. Then there is the human capacity to create pressure on ourselves through having unreasonable expectations or by finding things to worry about over which we have no control! How well do managers know their team members to assess their personal “negative” and “positive” pressures?

What are some of the clues that a problem may exist?

There are a number of behavioural clues which often indicate that a person is feeling that the pressure is becoming too much. Other things, which can often be taken for granted, might also be implying that everything is not perfect. However, they may be actions which you think are demonstrating staff, and management, loyalty and commitment.

- Over 5m employees work an average of 7hr 24min overtime per week – unpaid! (Effectively an extra day.)
- 20% of employees in the UK work over 48hr per week – as we are the only EU state to allow workers to opt out of the Working Hours Directive. (I am sure some readers in other countries will feel that their workforce do long hours too!) Long hours can build up to create stress.
- The extra hours put in save employers £23bn (!! in salary, yet the UK is only 8th in productivity per worker out of 25 countries.
- Managers “leave” 19m days of untaken holidays to their employers
- The average manager works through over 20% of their holiday – “donating” 4.1 days to their organisation = £3.5bn
- 63% of managers fail to take their holiday entitlement – despite most encouraging their staff to take their breaks
- Many of the managers surveyed contact their offices and check e-mails when they are away

The attitudes underpinning the behaviours leading to these figures do not help. Many workers (and bosses) feel that colleagues not doing overtime or taking work home are not pulling their weight. Managers struggle to delegate, let go or even say “no” to their peers and some feel they are indispensable. Yet these figures can indicate that there are deeper problems which may lead to stress. As employers, ask yourself whether it really is fair to be taking advantage of staff or managers who are doing any of the things listed above? In the short-term it may help you to achieve what you want, but our work suggests that in the medium and long-term it is less useful.

The other clues can be many and varied, in addition to the list at the beginning. Behavioural changes can range from someone becoming quiet and withdrawn through to irritable and even bad tempered. They may change to being uncooperative or indecisive. Some may begin to act more emotionally, or timekeeping and appearance slips. We could go on. The real issue is whether managers spot these clues – and do something about them.

What can you do?

There are a number of ways to tackle stress within your organisation. The first thing is to acknowledge that it is, or might be, a problem. A good point from here is to carry out a risk audit (as compared to a stress audit.) using the HSE standards which highlights where issues may occur.

- The culture of your organisation - how does it approach work-related stress?

- Demands on people, such as workload and exposure to physical hazards.
- Control over their work and the way they do it – how much say do staff have?
- Relationships – how do you deal with issues such as bullying or harassment? (Another point, up to 1 in 5 people report they have been bullied at work.)
- Organisational change – how is it managed and communicated?
- Understanding of role – do individuals understand their role in the organisation?
- Support and training from peers and line managers for the person to be able to do the core functions of the job.

How well would you score? Which areas could do with some attention? Remember, prevention is usually preferable to cure in most things. Pay attention to these factors and the organisation can start to address stress early on, preventing it becoming a problem.

We would always recommend that you start from the top down. Working with the management to give them greater knowledge about stress, the clues, the consequences and the implications will help them to deal with their own teams more constructively. They will know how to take action earlier, when they spot the need. At the same time, they can assess themselves and learn to manage the pressures in a positive way to prevent them becoming stressed – or to avoid being a stress carrier to others!

Offering support to the workforce on fundamental stress awareness and management can have a significant return on investment both directly and indirectly. Yes, cover coping strategies to deal with peaks of pressure – and also a more rounded, holistic approach and people will be able to handle themselves much better. As an organisation, you can also consider offering further support by investing in an Employee Assistance Programme with an organisation such as Validium where staff can have access to a range of services. (One piece of advice we would offer in this context is that you will get what you pay for with EAP, do not make false economies!)

Wherever you are based, and whatever your market, stress is possibly an issue. Remember, everyone's response to pressure is unique. Just because you do not feel it is a problem, another may do. Make stress prevention an item for the top team to deal with and keep it on the agenda. Invest in managing the challenges proactively, develop your people to handle pressure, put in support programmes for those returning to work and for all staff. Combine these and you will find it pays dividends in morale, productivity, customer service and staff retention.

Graham Yemm works with a wide range of organisations helping them, and individuals, to Manage Pressure and deal with stress issues more effectively. He can be contacted at www.managingpressure.com

