

“I’m Having a Mental Health Day...”

“When I got up this morning I felt like I’d spent the night in a tumble dryer. After a sullen farewell from my teenage offspring, I entered the rat race. They all seemed to have it in for me. Road rage, road works, red lights, mad cyclists....!”

My wonderful planning went awry as soon as my boss and colleagues sensed I was an easy target to interrupt and for dumping on [sorry delegating!]....It’s the same old story, too much to do and too little time....staying focussed and concentrating on priorities proved almost impossible....completely worn out I staggered into my home to be greeted with “you think you’ve had a bad day!”

Do you recognise this as an all too familiar experience? At times it feels you have no influence of what you are caught up in, the stressed condition that comes from the pressures of work and everyday living.

If these situations become a “normal” pattern there are serious personal and business implications. We have observed a number of very common outcomes:

- ❖ Recurrent illnesses such as constant colds, headaches, back pain and low levels of energy. These can escalate into more serious illnesses, so that colds become influenza, bronchitis or even pneumonia; headaches become regular migraines and back pain develops into a constant chronic state.
- ❖ Growing emotional distress leads to unpredictable mood changes, sudden aggression and possibly feelings of hostility toward family and friends. Worries evolve into constant anxiety, sadness and even depression.
- ❖ It becomes difficult to make decisions and mistakes happen more regularly.
- ❖ Highly dissatisfied and de-motivated, most people’s performance suffers and this is often accompanied by loss of self confidence and lowering of self-esteem.

So what do most people do about this deteriorating state? Individual responses are often isolated and insufficient. Sometimes a quick fix seems to be the most favoured course of action:

- A trip to the GP for sleeping pills or anti-depressants provides short-term relief, but is often accompanied by lethargy and tiredness.
- The odd excursion to the gym to “recharge the batteries,” in many cases creates more soreness than relief.
- Working longer hours or taking work home to clear the backlog buys time yet too often creates family pressure.

These will only work if they are part of an integrated approach which is addressing the real causes of the pressure.

What does an integrated approach mean? Think about this as looking after your mental health! Start by considering all the areas of your total health including your work, intellectual, physical, emotional and social pressures. Most stress

issues are interrelated. Only by putting together plan to address issues in each area will a real shift to the pattern occur. This plan must be committed to and followed through to ensure real change sticks.

So where can you start to make a change? Our top 10 tips to make each day a good “mental health day” are;

1. Make your diet higher in fish, vegetables and fruit, and lower in carbohydrates, red meat and sugars. This will give you the natural energy you need.
2. Notice early warning signs such as colds, excessive tiredness, and lack of concentration and mood changes - ease back and take a break.
3. Take regular breaks from your work during the day, even 10 minutes will help! Take times to recharge your batteries – including lunchtimes or weekends. Take holidays of sufficient length to provide a change which is relaxing, fun and stimulating or inspiring. (Leave your laptop and mobile at home. You are not indispensable and it is good practice to educate others to manage without you.)
4. Find ways to switch your mental state from work mode to home relaxation. Your family do not appreciate you bringing home your anxieties and locking yourself away every night! Develop a closure ritual to signify to you and others that you have stopped working. Use your journey to change mode, and when home focus on your family.
5. Get sufficient sleep to allow your body to recover. Eating earlier, doing exercise well before sleep, stopping TV viewing or computer exposure earlier will all help to create a sleep state. Developing pre-sleep rituals involving bathing, listening to soothing music or reading, ready your body for sleep.
6. Unfinished business and putting off things we do not want to deal with are often the biggest causes of anxiety. Towards the close of the day it is important to get closure on tasks, deal with unresolved issues with others and take actions to move forward with projects.
7. Ensure you are spending time with the people who matter and on the tasks that are important. Your time is precious!
8. Commit to specific times when you will get some exercise that you enjoy and meets your needs. Physical stamina, deep sleep, emotional energies and sexual desires are all increased by the right forms of regular exercise.
9. Spend time with people who are interesting, stimulating, positive and optimistic. They will restore your energy, encourage during the tough times and provide an appropriate escape valve when it all gets too much. They will also help you celebrate and maintain the feel-good factor.
10. Create a work and home environment which calms, soothes, rejuvenates, excites, stimulates and can be a haven of rest or a source of creative energy.

The best five things you can do straight away are;

- Book some holidays, spaced throughout the year
- Reduce your travel by using your technology more effectively
- Stop using, or reduce, stimulants [coffee, alcohol, drugs]
- Leave work at a time that allows family and social commitments to be met
- Take some time out each week to do things just for you!

We all experience days of real pressure and stress. We know these can become a pattern and we face serious health risks if we do nothing. There are things we can do to cope and to protect and build up our energy reservoirs. Only by producing an integrated plan for tackling the situations we face will we really live and work in a consistently healthy state.

Written by Bruce Hoverd, fit4business and Graham Yemm, Solutions4Training, who specialise in helping people to deal with pressure by devising integrated plans and creating ways of sticking to them over time.