

Stress "A Silent Assassin"

At one time or another we all experience stress, whether caused by work demands, factors in our personal life or a combination of both. Stress is an unavoidable fact of life and if you think you don't suffer from stress think again.

We all need stress, it can be a good thing, the buzz of a new challenge or relationship, the thrill of a scary movie or ride, without a little stress our lives would be far less interesting and many things are good for us in moderation.

The effect of suffering from too much stress is where the problem lies and it's something that appears to be getting worse. In the UK stress related illness is set to increase dramatically over the next decade.

Stress has become the biggest cause of absenteeism in the workplace, overtaking the common cold. Unless action is taken to alleviate the pressures employers place on staff this trend will escalate further and get a lot worse.

What is Stress?

It's an odd thing stress, you go to the doctor, who may suggest your suffering from stress, but is often unclear on what stress is or what causes it. To better understand how to combat stress we first need to look at what stress is.

Our reaction to stress is a primitive response dating back to our caveman ancestors; a quick rush of adrenaline to help escape that hungry wolf is perhaps one reason we sit atop of the food chain today.

Unfortunately in today's modern world there aren't many wolves (not real ones anyway), instead lots of other things can trigger a similar response from inside our bodies such as being in a traffic jam, supermarket queue, a phone call at work with an urgent request, an important meeting with the boss, even an appraisal. These events and many more are easily capable of triggering a very real stress response inside our body.

When faced with stress event our body puts itself on alert by producing more hormones and chemicals, this can lead to the classic symptoms of stress, including high blood pressure, increased heart rate, restricted blood flow to the skin, hyperventilation, reduced stomach activity (the feeling of butterflies) as well as increased perspiration. At the same time the hormone cortisol is produced which can release more sugar and fat into the system and over time may reduce the efficiency of the immune system.

These changes are useful in certain situations, they prepare organs and muscles such as the legs and heart for action in an emergency by diverting supplies from non-essential organs like the digestive system. This gives us extra drive to think and move fast. But when the body reacts like this when you are stuck in a queue or overwhelmed with meetings, it's not helping you deal with the situation.

The dangers of stress come from when the body stays on alert for a prolonged period of time, this boosting of some parts of the body at the expense of others is what begins to affect our physical and mental health. Failure to recognize or tackle stress can lead to some major long term health issues.

Doctors can prescribe a form of sedative to relax a stress sufferer and/or beta blockers (a type of drug that blocks adrenaline production) for stress related anxiety. Beta blockers are also used for treating high blood pressure, another potential symptom of prolonged exposure to stress.

What are the Warning signs?

Stress manifests itself in a variety of ways, if you ignore the warning signs the effects of stress can build up over a time. Fortunately there are some simple warning signs to look for, when they appear perhaps that long weekend away from it all is long over due. Some classic symptoms of stress include:

Physical changes to look for include:

- Trouble sleeping
- Loss of appetite
- Suffering from back pain
- Trembling
- Sweating
- Suffering from more, infections or headaches
- Constantly feeling lethargic and tired.
- Over breathing (hyperventilating) and or palpitations
- Tingling in arms or legs

Mental changes to look for include:

- Feelings of panic or anxiety
- Becoming more irritable
- Becomes quiet and withdrawn
- Finds it hard to concentrate
- Have difficulty-solving problems usually found easy.
- Becoming depressed easily
- Feeling dizziness and or disorientation

When you recognise symptoms of stress, remedies for tackling it appear to work equally well for men and women.

Some useful therapies for dealing with stress include:

- Talking to someone — whether a friend, partner or professional counsellor
- Taking frequent breaks from work (i.e. a weekend or longer away)
- Breathing or relaxation exercises
- Making time for activities you enjoy
- Taking regular exercise

Employers Take Note You Could Be Liable:

There are no single or specific laws governing workplace stress. But employers do have responsibility for their workers' stress levels under general health and safety at work regulations and through common law principles which have been determined by a number of court actions. The bedrock of statutory duties was laid down in 1974 with the Health and Safety at Work Act. This gives employers a 'duty of care' to ensure that employees are not made ill by their work.

Employers are also required, under the 1992 Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations, to assess the nature and scale of risks to health in the workplace and put adequate control measures in place. The EU Working Time Directive also impacts by limiting the length of the working week and requiring employers to adjust conditions to suit the worker - not the other way round.

Legal landmarks:

An Employers' legal requirement to protect employees from stress was underlined in a landmark court case in 1996. Northumberland County Council was ordered to pay £175,000 in compensation to a former employee who had suffered two nervous breakdowns as a result of stress at work. There have since been other high profile cases, but proving a stress case against an employer is still not easy. In the case involving Northumberland County Council, the case against the employer was watertight.

To win compensation in court, a victim of workplace stress must do more than prove that they have been injured by stress. They must also establish:

- The employer breached the duty of care.
- Employer negligence caused the stress. Factors outside work, such as marital problems do not count.
- The stress was reasonably foreseeable.

How stress can affect organisations:

- Your staff make more mistakes
- You receive an increase of customer complaints
- There is an increase of referring problems onto others to sort out
- Your staff being less prepared to tolerate uncertainty
- Your staff are less caring about customer complaints
- Staff become less inclined to listen and empathise with management decisions and customer needs
- You begin to notice higher levels of absenteeism and staff burn-out

Conditioned for stress:

According to the HSE, some conditions leading to stress include:

- Too much/little work to do.
- Work is mundane or repetitive
- Confusion surrounding the role and duties of an employee
- The employee feels they have no control
- Poor levels of communication and consultation between management, departments etc.
- There is a blame culture where nobody takes responsibility for mistakes
- Your staff feel there is a lack of support for individuals to develop their skills
- Inflexible work schedules
- There are poor working relationships with others and or low staff morale
- Someone is suffering from bullying or discrimination.
- Working environment poses physical danger (such as risk of violence) or poor working conditions.

Bullying At Work:

- People who are bullied at work are absent due to sickness 50% more than non-bullied colleagues.
- Victims of bullying at work are more likely to suffer from long-term illnesses such as diabetes and asthma and are likely to weigh more than their colleagues.

- If you thought it was just the victims of bullying who suffer think again, the research has also discovered that sick rates among all staff were abnormally high in places where bullying was occurring.

Technology the Friend of Stress?

Technology may make us more efficient, but dealing with a deluge of e-mails, phone calls and being constantly available has now appearing as a driver behind some forms of workplace stress. Research by ICL has found that technological breakdowns and problems with photocopiers, faxes, computers and other workplace equipment have are also guilty of causing workplace stress.

In a recent survey one in eight people sited computer failure at work as more stressful than being left by a partner and one in 10 rated it worse than missing a holiday flight. Nearly 50% of those surveyed stated that computers were the biggest factor in stress at work with printer problems, e-mail and Internet access failures close behind.

Going MAD:

Stress in the workplace is the most common cause of mental health problems according to a survey carried out by the mental health charity MIND.

The survey discovered that there is a perception of weakness and embarrassment associated with stress so much so that a high percentage of those surveyed would rather lie to their employers than admit to suffering from stress.

When asked what they believed to be the biggest causes of mental illness they replied:

Work stress	61%	Loneliness	59%
Bereavement	55%	Traumatic events	52%
Pace of modern life	50%	Redundancy or unemployment	50%

Five of the six causes listed above could be related to work issues and modern management methods are not geared to covering these issues.

What employers can do to reduce stress?

- Investigate stress levels their likely causes
- Make sure individuals are well matched to their jobs
- Set clearly defined objectives for staff
- Provide training in interpersonal skills
- Have proper procedures for investigating complaints
- Introduce flexible working hours
- Provide opportunities for staff to contribute ideas
- Provide support for staff experiencing high stress levels
- Encourage shorter hours

Stress Some Facts and figures:

- One in five workers (over five million people) suffers from high levels of stress at work.
- Between five and six million working days are lost every year due to workplace stress and its effects.
- Sickness absence for stress and mental disorders costs more than £5 billion a year.
- Stress is now the number one reason for sickness from work - overtaking the common cold as the biggest cause of absence.
- In the UK we work the longest hours in Europe.
- More than 50% of people say they find it hard to cope with the pressure of work.
- The average employee works seven hours a week for nothing.
- Only one in eight people who work long hours say they do so because they genuinely enjoy their jobs.
- One third of employees suffer sleepless nights due to stress.
- 55% of full-time employees say that work-related stress makes them bad-tempered at home.
- More than two million workers say their bosses are so overworked they don't really have time to manage their staff properly.
- Most managers think that working long hours is unacceptable but necessary for their career.
- There are currently over hundreds of stress cases being handled by law firms.
- Stress at work is the number one health and safety issue for union members.
- 35 per cent of employers have set up some kind of scheme to tackle stress, according to a survey of 1,700 organizations.

Figures from:

1. TUC
2. Chartered Institute of Personnel Development
3. The Quality of Working Life 1999 survey, the Institute of Management.
4. The HSE
5. Institute of Personnel And Development
6. The Department of Health