

STRESS MANAGEMENT

THE FINE LINE BETWEEN PRESSURE AND STRESS

The public sector has traditionally had a higher rate of sickness absenteeism compared to the private sector and much of this is stress related. What can be done to combat this?

THE FIRST THING most people need to clarify is the meaning of the term 'stress'. Stress is one of those words that everyone uses but it seems to mean something different every time it is used. People talk about experiences being 'stressful' - everything from getting up late to getting divorced. They describe themselves as 'stressed' when they often mean busy or being prevented from doing what they want to do.

The International Stress Management Association (ISMA) in conjunction with the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) defines stress as "the adverse reaction people have to too much pressure". The key word in this definition is 'adverse'. An adverse reaction is not good, especially when related to health.

Needless to say, stress is not good for you. In ISMA training sessions delegates are asked if they think stress is good for them and around 80 per cent think it is - until they read the definition. This poses the question of what they think is good for them? The answer to this is 'pressure'.

THAT'S LIFE

Challenges and pressures are part of life and we need them to motivate and stimulate us. Interestingly, some people really thrive on pressure and feel low and below par (stressed) if they are not being pushed or pushing themselves. We can, however, all experience too much pressure and this is what most people regard as stress.

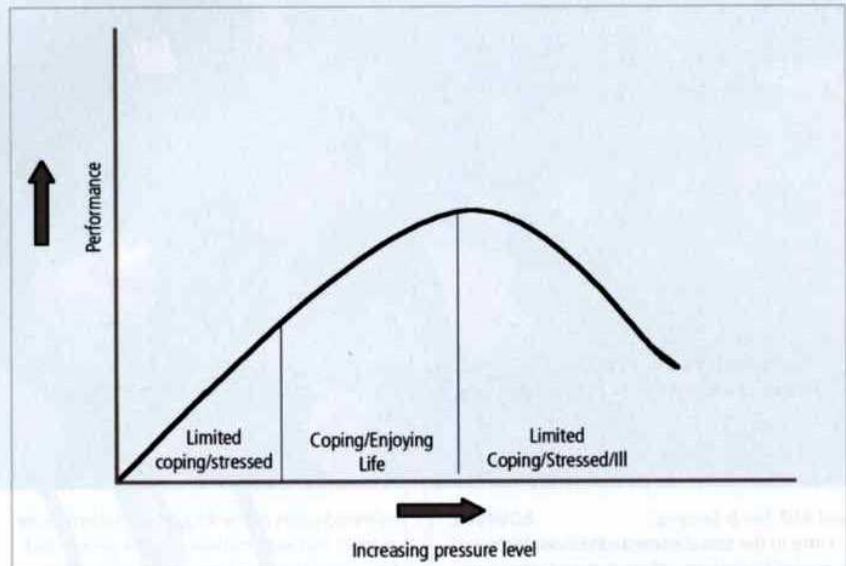
The graph, based on the work of Yerkes and Dodson (1908), indicates how this works:

- Not enough pressure: limited coping/stressed
- Just the right amount of pressure and challenge: coping and enjoying life
- Too much pressure: limited coping/stressed/ill.

LEGAL COMPLIANCE

There is no specific law relating to stress. In 1974, the Health and Safety at Work etc Act placed duties of care on employers and employees. For example, section 2 (1) placed the duty on employers to ensure the health and safety of all employees at work, as far as is reasonable and practicable. In 1988 a further amendment to this stated "ill health resulting from stress caused at work has to be treated the same way as ill health due to other physical causes present in the work place".

1999 saw The Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations, which required all employers of five or more people to carry out regular risk assessments, identify hazards and



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take action. In 2001, HSG 218 was produced which offered practical advice on dealing with workplace stress and identified the key workplace hazards that would become the basis for a risk assessment.

Responsibility for managing stress was placed on managers. This means that managers need to be aware of the effect of too much pressure on their staff. The Management Standards were introduced in 2004 and act as guidance for managers at all levels to focus on the six workplace risk factors and further guidance was issued in 2007.

THE COST OF STRESS

Absent employees cost organisations money. Ben Willmott, employee relations adviser at the CIPD, said: "Employee absence is running at eight days per employee, per year, at a direct cost to business of £600 per employee, per year." Indirect costs are estimated to be twice the direct costs (Norwich Union 2001) - making a total of £1,800 per employee per year.

Public sector organisations have a higher

absence rate than the private sector and at an average of ten days per annum, sickness absence among the 523,000 civil servants costs over £375m per annum. Similar levels of sickness absence exist in other parts of the public sector, which employs around five million people, or 18 per cent of the workforce.

It has been estimated that a 30 per cent reduction in civil service sickness absence alone would save up to 1.7 million days, equivalent to more than 7,000 additional employees being available for work. Not all sickness is due to stress but a typical symptom of stress is susceptibility to minor ailments like headaches, migraines, irritable bowel, anxiety and musculoskeletal problems.

PRESSURE VS. STRESS

Make no mistake – pressure and work are good for you. There has been much research to validate this statement. The workplace should be a stimulating, positive environment, where employees work with their managers to enable the work to be done. Too often it is a place of strife, excessive demands, limited control and



unclear lines of communication. This leads to dissatisfaction and negativity, which in turn lead to stress, ill health, unproductive staff and reduced retention of all levels of staff.

TACKLING THE PROBLEM

The HSE has clearly indicated how work related stress (WRS) should be tackled in its publication HSG 218. A strategy is planned from the top and cascaded throughout the organisation based on a sound stress management/wellness policy. A risk assessment is initiated based on the six workplace risk factors identified:

- Demands - include workload, work patterns, environment
- Control - the amount of involvement an employee has in the pace and method of work
- Support - includes level of encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues
- Relationships - include promoting positive behaviour to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour
- Role - clarity of role and responsibilities
- Change - how organisational change is managed and communicated within the organisation.

An audit or questionnaire can provide an indication of how these risk factors are

perceived by staff and this can be benchmarked against the top 20 organisations in the country using the HSE audit or similar tool. Examination of absence records, retention levels, accidents and other HR records all add up to a clear picture of the well being of the staff and the organisation. The audit is anonymous so it can be useful to initiate focus groups to validate and explore issues pinpointed by the audit. Once all the information has been gathered actions are planned with staff and implementation is begun and reviewed after a suitable period of time.

In 2007, Donaldson-Fielder (RR553), funded by the HSE, produced a useful set of management competencies for preventing and reducing stress at work. These provided clear guidelines for managers on how to deal with issues that arise from any of the six risk factors above.

ABSENCE MANAGEMENT

Absence management procedures have become very popular recently with useful guidelines being produced by the CIPD. It is important not to demonise sickness but to provide support and encouragement towards health and wellness. Unfortunately, this is not always the outcome when a computer runs the procedure.

Employee assistance programmes or crisis telephone lines provide confidential support to

all staff, however, the usage of such a provision needs to be monitored to ensure value for money. Referral to occupational health/counselling is another effective route of support for members of staff that are showing signs of stress. Stress awareness training for all staff enhances knowledge and hopefully results in the use of the word stress to mean regularly experiencing excessive pressure and not a description of every day life hassles.

Training managers who apply the Management Standards (based on the six risk factors) encourage managers to take stress seriously and look at the work factors that may be causing too much pressure. Sometimes just a discussion about perceived pressures is enough to clarify a situation. For many years stress has been seen as a weakness, but the many case studies and legal cases clearly indicate it can happen to anyone in the pressurised workplace of the 21st Century.

REFERENCES

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