

Prime minister Gordon Brown may have made a "slip of the tongue", according to his spokesman, when he recently referred to the recession as a "depression", but there is no confusion about the association between economic problems and poor mental health.

An increasing number of studies are linking the recession to ill health – particularly anxiety, heart disease and stress. For example, academics at the University of North Texas have found that three to five years after periods of job loss and financial insecurity, there was a marked increase in the number of heart attacks.

Meanwhile, researchers at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine report that surveys following the break-up of the Soviet Union showed that the regions with the highest rate of job loss also had the highest death rates.

Dramatic increase

More recently, the Capio Nightingale Hospital, an independent mental health hospital in London, has reported a "dramatic" increase in stress-related cases in 2009. The hospital saw a 20% rise in the number of people seeking advice for stress-related problems in January.

And The Priory Group, an independent provider of addiction services, has also reported seeing more patients from the finance sector who are suffering from stress-related illnesses.

According to Dr Wolfgang Seidl, executive director of employee assistance programme provider The Validum Group, such statistics are not surprising. Job insecurity and financial worries are related to feelings of powerlessness, reduced job satisfaction and lower levels of trust. "This goes to the heart of what Freud believed we want from life – the ability to work, and the ability to love," he says. "We fear that if we lose our job, not only do we lose our status, but we may also be unable to provide for our families."

There is a clear role for employers here. Rather than cutting back on wellbeing schemes, in the recession employers should recognise the value of building 'resil-



Recession depression

Sally O'Reilly looks at the increasing evidence linking the economic downturn to workplace stress and mental ill health.

ience' among staff, Seidl believes. These are the mental, physical and emotional resources and strategies that people can draw on in challenging times.

Bursts of activity

Short, intense bursts of activity can also boost both productivity and morale. "Creating a ritual at work of working for 120 minutes followed by a 15-minute break is the most effective way of working," says Seidl.

This 'sprinting' approach is described by Loehr and Schwartz in their 2004 book, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, is the Key to High Per-*

formance and Personal Time, and is also endorsed by Tal Ben-Shahar, who lectures on the psychology of happiness at Harvard University.

Jessica Colling, product manager at workplace health consultancy Vielife, agrees that employers can boost their own performance as well as that of staff if they stick to healthy management practices even when times are tough. "HR and employers should be clear about what is acceptable and normal behaviour," she says.

"It makes far more sense to ensure staff are taking time out to exercise and having proper breaks throughout the day than it does to have them sitting at their desks for 10 hours at a time," she says. "They will be performing to a very low level for at least four hours of that time."

Williams Johnston, commercial manager of research and management consultancy Great Place to Work, believes that employers have much to gain from taking a proactive approach and providing appropriate support for staff.

Duty of care

"It is important for organisations to address mental health and stress-related conditions in the workplace as part of their duty of care to employees, but also to maximise business efficiency during the current economic downturn," he says.

Great Place to Work has just produced a new paper, *Beyond Stress: A Guide to Mental Health and Workplace Wellbeing*, which sets out guidelines for dealing with stress at work, and includes case studies and suggestions for an employer's action plan.

Key points for employers include: raising awareness of mental health and stress-related issues in the workplace; acknowledging the vital contribution made by stressed or depressed staff, and the fact that these are problems which can affect anyone; promoting health and wellbeing at work; and managing sickness absence effectively so that patterns of stress and ill health are quickly recognised and addressed.

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wellbeing brief...

Lack of understanding about health issues revealed

■ A study by the NHS Information Centre has found that more than two-thirds of men and women do not know how much exercise they should take to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Less than one-third of men and women know the maximum amount of alcohol they can safely drink each day, and only 14% of men and 11% of women know what equates to one portion of fresh fruit or vegetables.

Open-plan offices bad for employee wellbeing

■ Open-plan offices are more likely to create illness among workers, according to a study carried out by Queensland University. The study found that 90% of employees who worked in open-plan spaces reported adverse effects. Lack of privacy, catching infections and low work productivity were key issues. Other problems included higher levels of stress and faster staff turnover.

Business travellers warned about 'lap-top shoulder'

■ Staff who travel on business are being warned to watch out for 'lap-top shoulder', caused by carrying or working on their lap-tops in an awkward position. Research by Crowne Plaza Hotels & Resorts concluded that a large number of its business guests suffer from pain in their backs, necks and shoulders as a result of using their lap-tops. More than half – 57% – suffered from severe pain and discomfort while travelling on business.

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