

How to recognise workplace stress

Is stress just a sign of the times?

Stress and its repercussions came to the medical forefront during the eighties, and have since gone from strength to strength - We live in times when we are expected to perform multiple roles with superhuman abilities. We rush from one task to another, living life at an ever-exhausting pace... and not without cost: In an ever-changing world, stress has become a major cause of absence from work and we increasingly see headlines announcing large cash compensation settlements for cases of work-related stress. The urgency felt by to companies and individuals to recognise the symptoms and minimise stress in the workplace, is now greater than ever.

What are the immediate signs of stress?

Any of the "fight-or-flight" responses are the direct signs of a stressful situation, including:

- rapid pulse
- increased perspiration
- pounding heart
- tightened stomach
- tense muscles in arms and legs
- shortness of breath
- gritting of teeth
- clenching of the jaw
- inability to sit still
- racing thoughts
- inability to concentrate
- emotional tension ("keyed up")

Why is stress bad for us?

Recent evidence suggests that sustained stress is as bad for the heart as smoking, and can cause everything from cancer to mouth ulcers and infertility. Stress is thought to induce physical illness through two main pathways. It causes hormonal changes that raise blood pressure and heart rate, accelerating damage to the delicate linings of blood vessels that leads to heart attack and stroke. It also weakens the immune system, increasing the risk of a number of different illnesses, including cancer.

Can stress be good for us?

It's not all bad news. Some stress is good for us - indeed, it's essential for good health. Our minds and bodies need some form of challenge and are very effective at rising to the occasion - short-term stress caused by issues that can be dealt with and resolved can be healthy. Not only does it supply motivation, it can enhance and hone bodily responses, including those of the immune system.

What are the symptoms of on-going stress?

There is a wide range of physical, emotional and behavioural symptoms indicating unhealthy or unacceptable levels of chronic stress. Even if you only exhibit one or two, they could be a warning sign to take action:



Physical signs include:

Palpitations; pain/tightness in the chest; indigestion; breathlessness; nausea; muscle twitches; tiredness/chronic fatigue; vague aches and pains; skin irritation/rashes/susceptibility to allergies; clenched fists/jaw; fainting; frequent colds/flu/infections; constipation/diarrhoea; rapid weight loss/gain; alteration of menstrual cycle; reduced perceptual abilities/motor co-ordination; accelerated aging process

Emotional signs include:

Mood swings; increased worrying; irritability; feeling tense/drained; no enthusiasm; feeling anxious/nervous/apprehensive; feelings of helplessness; loss of confidence; lack of self-esteem; lack of concentration; job dissatisfaction; suicidal thoughts/actions

Behavioural signs include:

Accident prone; poor performance at work; increased smoking; increased dependence on drugs/alcohol; overeating/loss of appetite; sleep disturbances; loss of interest in sex; poor time-management; impaired speech; withdrawal from supportive relationships; too busy to relax; taking work home; not looking after yourself; impaired judgement; reduced creativity; pessimism; poor/impaired decision-making ability

NB: Although all the above can be caused by stress, it is always advisable to consult your doctor in the first instance: to confirm that they are not symptoms of a more serious illness, and to check whether they require medical attention.

At what level does stress become hazardous?

There is no reliable way to predict the impact of stress. Identical stressors produce different reactions in different people - one person's stress is another's motivation. However, harmful stressors do share a number of characteristics: they tend to be pronounced, long-term and beyond the individual's immediate control.

The latter is the most important characteristic, because it makes resolution of a stressful problem almost impossible. Which explains why stress is less of a problem in high-flying executives than in men and women on the factory floor - the MD may work long hours and have huge responsibility, but he or she is often better resourced/authorised to deal with the root cause.

What are the causes of stress at work?

There are a number of situations and triggers, which are commonly cited as the cause of stress at work:

- **Intrinsic to the job** - Poor physical working conditions; work under/over load; time pressures; unpredictable workload; physical danger; under/over supervision; lack of variety/boredom; job interferes with personal life
- **Career development** - Under/over promotion; lack of job security; thwarted ambition; inadequate feedback re: performance; incentives unrelated to performance; promotion opportunities unclear
- **Relationships** - Poor relations with boss/colleagues; difficulties with delegation/teamwork; regular conflicts; bullying
- **Role in the organisation** - Ambiguous role; conflicting role boundaries; responsibility for others; mismatch with personal interests / skills
- **Organisational culture/structure** - Organisational goals ambiguous/conflicting; little participation in decision making; office politics; blame culture; prohibitive / dictatorial hierarchy; motivation by punishment culture

What are the financial costs of stress?

According to surveys by the "experts", stress related illness (SRI) is responsible for 40 million lost working days, and costs British industry around £80 billion a year. That bill could soon be swollen by substantial legal costs - trade union Unison alone has 7,000 members seeking compensation from their employers for work related SRI.

Management Consultants look for a number of commonly experienced symptoms of stress within the workplace including:

- Increase in sickness and absenteeism
- Decline in morale
- Increase in incidents of bullying and disputes
- High accident and compensation rates
- High grievance rate
- Missed targets and deadlines
- Lower and uneven productivity/profitability
- Increase in staff turnover



Is relaxation really the best way to deal with stress?

Those members of society most prone to stress are also those least likely to be in a position to resolve their problems. Here, relaxation comes into its own; it helps minimise the impact of stressors and research has proven that the benefits can be measured using physical parameters such as blood pressure, pulse rate and stress hormone Cortisol. However, if resolution never occurs, the stress continues, and the longer it goes on, the more likely it is to do damage, relaxation or no relaxation.

What are the other options?

You might have thought about: "doing a Reggie Perrin", going for "The Goode Life" "jumping ship", "quitting the rat race" or "downgrading" - all effective ways of alleviating the pressure in the short-term. But it tends to be an option only for the privileged and can cause even worse problems in the long-run. (Especially if your neighbours are likely to object to you keeping chickens in your back garden!)

It is widely accepted that tackling and resolving the problem is the best stress-buster of all. We all know how it feels to deal with a niggling problem - how many times have you felt the weight lift off your shoulders when you finally make the telephone call you have been avoiding? The resolution approach really is the only way to remove root cause of the stress, and therefore to alleviate the symptoms. As long as the problem has not been left for too long, and as long as the resulting symptoms have not caused irreversible damage, there is a good chance that resolution will eliminate stress and its symptoms for good.

Would you or others in your team benefit from training in stress management?

We hope that you'll find these tips useful. However, most people derive huge additional benefit from the interaction, practical exercises and valuable feedback that face-to-face training gives. H2 offers:

- A 1-day scheduled Time and Stress Management course from £175 + VAT per person
- Bespoke training in stress management from just £62 + VAT per person per day

Here's what some satisfied customers said after attending our training in stress management:

- *"Great course - excellent course materials and exercises"*
- *"That was really helpful - I now know how to spot the early signs of stress in myself and in others and what to do to help prevent them from escalating."*
- *"Thanks for a good, constructive day. The trainer was very accommodating and encouraged everyone to contribute with their own experiences"*
- *"I found the course very useful and interesting. I am now much more aware of where and when I might be putting undue stress on others - and how I can avoid doing it in future!"*

Contact H2 Training & Consultancy: Freephone: 0800 0015 151 or Email: h2@h2training.com