

# MANAGING STRESS AT WORK

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[http://www.channel4.com/health/microsites/0-9/4health/stress/saw\\_manage.html](http://www.channel4.com/health/microsites/0-9/4health/stress/saw_manage.html)

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Imagine a world in which work was pressure-free, office politics were a thing of the past, colleagues were always nice to each other and job security was guaranteed. Nice work, if you can get it.

The reality is that every job comes with responsibilities, people are often competitive and pushy and jobs are no longer for life. No matter where you work and for whom, work can be stressful.

On one level, pressure at work can be healthy. Feeling the excitement of new but reasonable demands helps motivation, as the adrenaline that stress produces pushes us to perform better. But when workload is excessive we cross the dividing line from 'positive' to 'negative' stress and start to feel out of control.

## **The long hours culture**

One of the big factors creating modern workplace stress is long hours. The *Quality of Working Life Survey*, published by the Chartered Management Institute, in 2001 revealed that 91% of managers regularly exceeded their contracted hours. Three-quarters of the managers asked said working late or at weekends was the only way to deal with their workload, while two-thirds believed it was a part of their organisation's culture.

But although long hours can be counter-productive, many people still feel that being the last to leave the office is going to enhance their job prospects – no matter that past a certain time of the day most of us have very little left to give.

The longer you stay at the office, the less time you give to your personal life. The less time you give to your personal life, the more likely domestic problems can set in, leading to stress at home on top of stress at work.

It's a vicious cycle. But it is one that a few pioneering and progressive employers are now striving to break.

So how have we got to this position and what are employers doing to counteract the effects of stress in the workplace?

## **Stress busting companies**

### **Flexible working**

Banking company Lloyds TSB recently introduced a work options policy, which gives its employees more choice over working patterns. Staff can now opt for job shares, shorter working weeks and teleworking.

The company has recognised that a burnt-out workforce is an unproductive workforce. Employees who are consistently working beyond a certain time of day are encouraged to discuss why.

The bank isn't simply being paternalistic. It believes that creating a less stressful, more flexible working environment is a recruitment and retention tool too.

Lloyds TSB senior manager Jon Witeley explains: 'Research has told us that graduates don't want to go down the same road as their parents, whose stressful working lives had a negative impact on their home lives. They're telling us that how much we're going to pay them is not their most important criteria.'

Research among the existing workforce confirmed that staff had had enough of working long hours. 'Our staff were saying we only get one crack at this thing called life and we want to have a bash at it.'

### **The holistic office**

At ?What If!, a London-based inventing consultancy, stress in the workplace is minimised by creating a fun and supportive working environment that emphasises the idea of staff bringing their 'whole self' to work.

Each employee has a mentor, usually their manager, with whom they can discuss work as well as any domestic sources of stress.

Company partner Helen Clements explains: 'We encourage staff to chat about their long-term vision for their life and we offer flexible working contracts that reflect the balance that people want to make between their career and personal responsibilities.'

That means staff with children can choose to do a nine-month contract over the year to free up enough time to cover school holidays. People who only want to work three days a week can do so too.

The company has found that stress for many people is generated by an outside source: money. To help staff deal with financial problems, it has set up a loan scheme – to help people cope with short term difficulties like maternity leave – and a crisis fund, which helps with emergencies and does not need paying back. The fund has so far helped one staff member jump on a plane to see a sick relative and another to buy essential furniture after a burglary.

The company also has a regular Friday afternoon, usually four times a year, when everyone downs tools to enjoy an alternative slice of life. Past events have included playing bingo, meditation sessions and belly-dancing lessons.

'These sessions are about having fun and seeing something, doing something that you might otherwise not experience. They are good for morale, they enhance creativity, induce loyalty and take the pressure off for a while,' says Helen Clements.

Other stress-relieving features at the company include a quiet room where staff can 'take five' on a futon, a massage chair in the lobby, and a 'well-being fund' which part-pays for groups of staff to undertake relaxation activities such as yoga, kung fu and pilates.

## **Stop go home**

At PricewaterhouseCoopers, the biggest provider of professional services in the UK, employees' timesheets are now examined to identify staff who spend too long at work.

Sarah Churchman, leader of diversity, explains: 'Some people enjoy working long hours and that's fine. But for others, long hours may be very stressful and we need to work with the individuals concerned to address this.'

The company also runs two-day survival clinics in which employees undergo health screening and are given practical tips to reduce stress.

Other sources of support include a confidential counselling telephone service run by an outside company, on-site massage, physiotherapy sessions, an outsourced concierge service and on-line support through PwC LifeStyle, an intranet-based supported self-help tool.

## **Stress management**

Building society Nationwide offers its employees a helpline to discuss work-related stress issues and other problems. The service is available to family members too. Face-to-face counselling is available for all staff across the UK if required.

Other companies are calling on outside help to combat stress. The Association of Stress Management (ASM) offers programmes to help companies where staff are having significant stress problems.

Organisations pay ASM's stressbusters to provide a series of sessions for any employee who wants them. The first eight are free. After that the individual pays.

## **De-stress for the price of a cuppa**

ASM chair Peter Goodwin explains the rationale. 'Once stress sets in in a major way a company starts to have serious problems with absenteeism, which costs the company. By offering these sessions, we've seen absenteeism fall by 50%, for the price of a cup of coffee per employee.'

One of the key features of the stress sessions is self-hypnosis. Individuals are taught how to calm themselves down when they start to feel stressed.

'It is usually another person that triggers the symptoms of stress in someone,' says Mr Goodwin. 'Stress symptoms are often a reaction to someone else's unreasonable behaviour. Self-hypnosis can teach you to detach yourself so that you don't react when, say, someone is shouting at you.'

So instead of feeling anxious, frustrated, getting a migraine, feeling your blood pressure rise or losing your confidence in the face of excessive demands and unreasonable behaviour, self-hypnosis induces a dream-like state in which such forces have zero effect.

It may all sound marvellous as an immediate escape route. But workplace stress experts warn that unless organisations tackle the root causes of high stress – whether it is excessive workload, staff shortages or other factors – stress will continue to be a problem.

## **Help yourself to a stress-free workplace**

Your own workplace may provide some kind of support aimed at preventing stress or to help staff manage their stress. You could check with your personnel department, occupational health department or trade union to find out.

Some companies run 'employee assistance programmes' which are designed to help staff who are already feeling stressed to cope better. The programmes may include face-to-face counselling, helplines and other initiatives.

Such services are not always well publicised so often staff in need of them don't know they exist. The best way to check whether your organisation offers such a programme is again to contact your personnel department, occupational health department or trade union.

If you work for a company or organisation which offers little to help employees cope with stress it is worth speaking to some of your colleagues to find out whether others are suffering similar symptoms. If so, you might jointly, or through your trade union, talk to your personnel department about tackling the causes of stress and introducing some initiatives to help staff cope.

In the meantime, there are some ideas to help you manage stress at work on our 'stressbusters' guide in the don't panic section and our beat your stress feature.

You may also find it helps if you can manage your time more effectively. Here are some useful time-management ideas:

### **Top 10 time management tips**

- say no to extra tasks
- allow 10% of your time for unforeseen tasks
- don't take responsibility for other people's workload
- start a job only when you have time to finish it
- delegate, delegate, delegate
- be brief on the phone
- don't waste time chatting in the corridor
- start meetings on time
- avoid time wasters
- prioritise, prioritise, prioritise.

Remember also to ask for support when you need it and aim to keep work in perspective. Nobody ever looks back on life and wishes they had spent more time in the office.

Finally, if none of this works, you may need to think about looking for a better employer.

## **Facts and figures**

- The average employee works seven hours a week for nothing.<sup>1</sup>
- Britons work the longest hours in Europe.<sup>1</sup>
- Only one in eight people who works long hours say they do so because they genuinely enjoy their jobs.<sup>2</sup>
- One-third of employees suffer sleepless nights due to stress.<sup>1</sup>
- 55% of full-time employees say that work-related stress makes them bad-tempered at home.<sup>1</sup>
- More than two million workers say their bosses are so overworked they don't really have time to manage their staff properly.<sup>1</sup>
- More than 50% of people say they find it hard to cope with the pressure of work.<sup>1</sup>
- Most managers think that working long hours is unacceptable but necessary for their career.<sup>3</sup>

Figures from

1. TUC
2. Chartered Institute of Personnel Development
3. The Quality of Working Life 1999 survey, the Institute of Management.

## **How stress can affect organisations**

- more mistakes
- increased customer complaints
- increased referring of problems onto others to sort out
- staff being less prepared to tolerate uncertainty
- staff less caring about customer complaints
- staff less inclined to listen and empathise
- chaotic systems
- high levels of staff burn-out.

## **What employers can do to reduce stress**

- investigate stress levels and 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.