

TROUBLESOME TIMES

Kate Nowlan asks if stress at work is the spice of life or the kiss of death.

At a conference in Perugia next April hosted by the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion entitled *Healthy Work – Healthy Lifestyle – Healthy Business*, one of the more intriguing keynote speeches includes the words stress, spice, life, kiss and death. We are so used to the appalling statistics on stress-related absence and the effect on organisations that it is shocking to think that stress might also be the spice of life.

The effect of stress

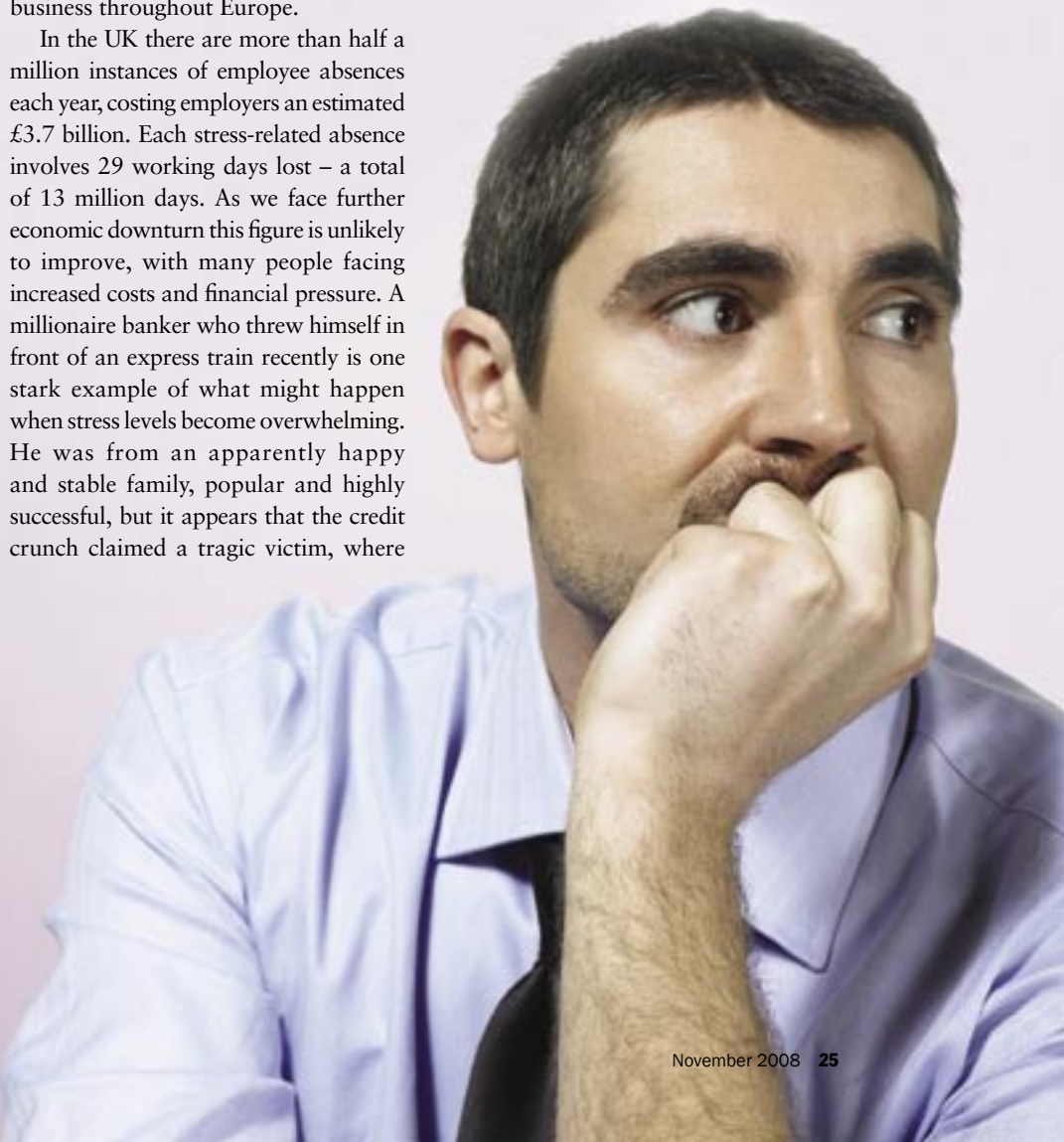
The trouble with stress at work is that our perceptions can differ so markedly from each other that we are often at a complete loss in knowing how to engage with the symptoms effectively. Dealing with stress in the workplace is not an exact science and managers frequently struggle with their own ambivalence when presented with a “diagnosis” of stress from an employee. Pressure and stress, for example, are not the same thing. We all know colleagues who thrive on intense pressure and for whom stress will surface when pressure lifts and they are faced with mundane office tasks. We also know colleagues who are filled with crippling anxiety when faced with deadlines and long working hours. Think of those for whom travel is an integral part of their working life – either through the daily commute or through frequent air trips or long motorway drives. Some will enjoy the challenge, the break from routine and flourish as they revel in new experiences that enhance their productivity – even creativity. Others will suffer crippling anxiety as they grapple with traffic jams, train

strikes, or passport control and airport delays. Those exposed to cumulative stress in their work will probably be more vulnerable to stress-related illness, but every employer knows that there are different levels of resilience within their workforce and there is no one-size-fits-all remedy. There are endless subtle variations of workplace stress, but it has now become a tidal wave overwhelming business throughout Europe.

In the UK there are more than half a million instances of employee absences each year, costing employers an estimated £3.7 billion. Each stress-related absence involves 29 working days lost – a total of 13 million days. As we face further economic downturn this figure is unlikely to improve, with many people facing increased costs and financial pressure. A millionaire banker who threw himself in front of an express train recently is one stark example of what might happen when stress levels become overwhelming. He was from an apparently happy and stable family, popular and highly successful, but it appears that the credit crunch claimed a tragic victim, where

serious signs of stress had been hidden or possibly mistaken for exhaustion.

Stress can have a debilitating effect on work performance, morale and physical wellbeing – and managers in HR, occupational health and related departments need all the support they can get in both preventing the onset of serious symptoms and alleviating them when they are more obvious. The Health



and Safety Executive (HSE) provides helpful advice on its website, www.hse.gov.uk/stress, where there is much emphasis on the preventative approach. A workforce that is happy, healthy and supportive will clearly suffer less stress than one that is fearful, anxious and continually under severe pressure. In an ideal world line managers, team leaders and HR professionals will be skilled in identifying the first signs of stress, in addition to promoting positive wellbeing initiatives for their staff.

Spotting the signs

Early warning signs of stress are sometimes easy to spot – although it can be difficult to separate work and/or home issues. Some common symptoms are:

- emotional – irritability, depression, mood swings, apathy, increased sensitivity to criticism, anger, manic behaviour, nervousness, feeling on edge, uptight
- mental – forgetfulness, poor concentration, boredom, paranoia, perfectionism, lack of motivation, poor work performance
- relational – loneliness, withdrawal from colleagues, intolerance, relationship problems

- behavioural – substance abuse, eating problems, overwork, procrastination, consistent absence, increased sick leave
- physical – fatigue, headaches, back pain, insomnia, indigestion, cramps, constipation, diarrhoea, sweatiness, sleeping too much, dizziness, sexual problems
- spiritual – sense of emptiness, loss of beliefs and sense of meaning, cynicism.

The challenge for managers is in the assessment of such symptoms. For example, might there be a normal reaction to a bereavement or a relationship break-up? Will the symptoms pass in the fullness of time? Maybe it feels easier to keep a watchful eye from a distance than to talk directly to an employee who might resist what they feel is an intrusion into areas which are not work-related. The top stressful life events are defined as:

- death of a partner
- divorce
- marital separation/break-up of long-term relationship
- imprisonment
- death of a close family member
- personal injury or serious illness

- marriage
- dismissal from work
- change of job
- pregnancy
- change in financial state
- retirement.

However, in the workplace there are numerous factors that can lead to illness, especially if any of the above are combined with exposure to traumatic incidents at work, cumulative pressure of workload, bullying and harassment, poor or overbearing management, lack of leadership, lack of control and autonomy or team conflict.

The role of employers

There have been several notable cases where employers have been taken to court for not paying due attention to an employee's stress levels and the HSE has joined a European Social Dialogue to help clarify companies' duties towards their staff. In the UK the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 requires employers to secure the health (including mental health), safety and welfare of employees while at work and, among other things, provide a safe place of work. Employers are also required under the Management of Health & Safety at Work Regulations 1999 to carry out a suitable and sufficient assessment of the health and safety risks to which their employees are exposed while at work. This includes the requirement to assess the risk of stress-related ill-health arising from work activities and to take measures to control the identified risk.

This all feels more like the kiss of death than the spice of life, so what can employers do to encourage a healthy workplace, where stress may be part of office culture but also a positive and spicy aspect of it? There are many proactive stress audit tools on the market that companies can introduce, either online or as part of a more personal, face-to-face appraisal to help managers effectively and easily diagnose stress at an early stage. There are stress management programmes which staff can be encouraged to use – giving them tools to look after their own mental health and recognise their stress levels, help them with time

management and encourage them to take proper breaks. Wellbeing days that offer “feel good” products – a head massage, salsa dancing, exhibitions, theatre vouchers, gym membership, etc can help transform a demotivated team into a workforce that knows employers care for them and therefore has a pride in the company. Shared ownership, bonus schemes, profit share, generous benefits also help bolster morale – but more important may be the feeling of involvement that people have in the organisation as a whole. In the UK we may have much to learn from Scandinavian business where office design is of the utmost importance – light and airy work stations, onsite clinics, where staff can have physiotherapy or reflexology during working hours and where flexible working and shorter working hours are the norm.

Employee Assistance Programmes

The increasing popularity of Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) which deliver 24/7 support to companies in all sectors are essential ingredients of proactive support for employees across the board. EAPs deliver counselling for those who need it and will also provide a raft of wellbeing initiatives and information services. Successful EAPs are those which work closely with HR and occupational health to ensure that the particular culture of their organisation is understood. A strong relationship between the EAP provider and HR can be of immense value to a company, offering not only help to individuals suffering from stress but support to managers through their consultancy services. Skilled assessment on the phone will ensure referral to the most appropriate support for employees and early interventions will play an essential part in preventing the onset of serious stress-related illness. EAPs can play a significant part in promoting a healthy and happy lifestyle for people at work and therefore contribute in no small way to a healthy business that might experience stress as the spice of life.

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Case study: GSK

Research-based healthcare company GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) has put employee wellbeing high on its agenda.

Its energy and resilience portfolio provides a strategy and tools for managers and employees to enhance performance, resilience and energy, to sustain work effectiveness and employee satisfaction. All GSK teams complete an internal audit and if the results reveal that employees find demands to be unsatisfactory, specific goals are set which must be met in a shortened timeframe to ensure that high standards of wellbeing and engagement are maintained.

Overseen by an Employee Health & Performance (EH&P) department, GSK delivers a resilience programme which focuses on the team and individual. Personal resilience training courses are available and employees have access to EH&P clinics with fully qualified occupational health advisers and in-house physicians. This is supported by a full EAP – LifeWorks – delivered by Ceridian.

Through team assessments key areas such as behaviour, relationships, communication and work demands can be reviewed and members are empowered to take ownership and propose ways to alleviate any issues that are identified.

GSK's energy for performance programme looks at how individuals can be fulfilled by their working life and how this supports a wider personal mission.

Nicola Riley, Health Planning Manager for GSK, says: “We are concerned with an individual having a clearly defined personal sense of purpose, a personal mission if you like, and how they can utilise and build on specific aspects of their working life to help fulfil that purpose. By having this alignment, individuals can access the power of their very best energy, commitment and passion.”

LifeWorks offers guidance and practical resources, supports the energy and resilience portfolio and is promoted through internal communications mechanisms and team assessments. The effectiveness of the service was measured through an engagement survey, which identified where employees are on the pressure/performance curve before and after contacting LifeWorks. The pressure/performance curve charts five key stages – boredom, comfort, stretch, strain and overwhelmed. While it is normal for employees to move between these stages, for optimal performance they should be operating predominantly within stretch, while taking respite in comfort.

The GSK resilience programme has been well received by employees and, combined with other health initiatives, its impact on the business has been tremendous.

Between 2001 and 2005, GSK reported a 60 per cent global reduction in work-related mental ill-health, the number of days lost due to sickness absence also fell by 29 per cent and there was a 66 per cent decrease in new cases reported.

The results for 2006–2007 show feelings of “enhanced inclusivity and collaboration” among the workforce. Analysis of pre- and post-personal resilience evaluations also showed a 10 per cent drop in fatigue, a 16 per cent reduction in frustration, a seven per cent increase in mental clarity and a 14 per cent rise in self-esteem. Furthermore, results show a 21 per cent increase in satisfaction with the company and a 14 per cent increase in willingness to experiment with new work practices.

Not only did the initiatives have a positive impact on work-related mental ill-health, but 72 per cent of employees reported that they could manage their work–life balance more effectively.

The resilience programme has also been recognised as a Beacon of Excellence by the HSE.