

Survey: Anne Henderson

Stress assessed

With unemployment at its highest in decades, stress in the workplace is having an impact on efficiency, morale and - increasingly - employees' health. But what can those suffering from stress do - and is this something employers should be helping with? Hannah Ewan considers the impact of mental health charity MIND's new findings.

The survey, carried out by mental-health charity, Mind, has lent support to the increasing awareness of the toll the recession is taking on the UK's workforce. Five percent of the working population had begun to see a counsellor, and seven percent take antidepressants, in an attempt to combat the stress and mental health problems directly caused by the effect of the recession on their working lives.

Government statistics show that unemployment is at its highest since September 1996: the unemployment rate for the three months to April 2010 was 7.9 percent. With figures as serious as these, it is understandable that less attention has been paid to those who have kept their jobs. However, it is in both employers' and employees' interests to place greater emphasis on mental health - if only for the sake of profitability.



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Stress is one of the greatest causes of lost work-hours: as well as anxiety and depression, it is widely considered a major factor in digestive ailments, as well as back pain and heart disease. Research from Warwickshire University, recently published jointly by the CIPD and the HSE (Health & Safety Executive), shows that work-related stress accounts for over 30 percent of all new incidents of ill health. When you consider that 13.5 million absence days were blamed on stress during 2009 - more than were lost to the strikes in the 1970s - the £5 billion a year that the Confederation of British Industry estimates is lost to the condition doesn't seem so unbelievable.

Carol Wilson, Head of Accreditation for the Association of Coaching, has seen first-hand the affects of stress on her clients: "Most of my clients come because of stress in one area or another, and this has all been intensified by the recession. A typical example is that a higher level of performance is being demanded from managers, yet they have less resources and budget to achieve it, and the morale-lowering fear of jobs being lost all around them. There is often a sense of 'will I be next?'"

However, exacerbating this problem is the shrinking of services available to employees suffering increased stress-levels. When business budgets are cut, training and support are often the first to go. Speaking from her coaching perspective, Wilson warns that this may be counter-productive. "The extra workload

experienced by many managers due to reductions in staff levels tends to result in a reluctance to spend time with a coach - managers feel that they simply cannot take on any more.

"However, I have noticed that managers are surprised to find that the practice of coaching actually saves them time, whether because of the clarity of perspective they obtain, or an increased ability to delegate successfully through using coaching skills with their own staff." Yet the impact on businesses doesn't start when the sick-note is handed in. Stress, most of us will be able to attest, affects energy levels, motivation,

personal confidence and efficiency - qualities an employer will be keen to encourage as far as possible in their workforce. Yet departments in both the private and public sectors are relying on a skeleton workforce to complete the work of many. Redundancies, competition between employees and sick-leave have seen 28 percent working longer hours.

Anne Henderson, a trainer with Catalyst-Coach, has this advice for those suffering from stress in the workplace: "Work smarter, not harder. Put an effective time management system in place. Prioritise, delegate and recognise what value each action brings to you and your organisation. If an action doesn't add value, bin it."

Forget multi-tasking. If you want to do a task to the best of your ability you need to focus on it. You can only effectively focus on one task at a time so forget juggling emails, calls and queries from colleagues whilst you are trying to complete that report. Your performance will suffer. If you have an important piece of work to get done, shut down your email, hide your BlackBerry and focus, focus, focus. Even if you only focus on the task for 30 minutes, you will be amazed at how much more you get done when you are not fighting off endless distractions.

Phone a friend. Talking over a work situation with a friend can provide fresh insights and perspectives which can often help to alleviate stress. Get fresh. Make sure that you take breaks from work and get outside into the fresh air. Even a 15 minutes walk can help to clear your mind and increase your focus when you return to your desk.

For further information:

www.catalyst-coaching.org