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White Paper:

# Stressed Out

By Jessica Andrews

A look at how stress in the workplace leads to physical illness and how it be managed.



An unemployed graduate is plagued by eczema. A bereaved woman suffers a heart attack. A divorced man develops high blood pressure. Are these circumstances linked... or mere coincidences? Stress is an ever-present influence on our health and well-being, therefore awareness of its impact is critical. The UK Chief Medical Officer raised concerns in a report in 2014 stating that the 70 million working days that are lost each year in the UK due to mental illness - of which stress, was a significant portion. This came at a £70 to £100 billion cost to the economy.<sup>i</sup>

Although not all stress is directly linked to workplace factors, given the amount of our working lives we spend in the workplace it is a major contributory factor to the level of stress. The mental effects of stress have been extensively researched and analysed, but the physical impacts of stress are often ignored. Since the misery of stress is often felt as much in the body as in the mind, it seems evident that psychological stress leaves us prone to physical illness and that this is something employers should be aware of.<sup>ii</sup>

## The Impacts of Stress

We're probably all aware of the common physical symptoms we suffer from during times of stress such as tiredness, headaches and tense muscles - but stress is also a contributing factor in the development of much more severe ailments. Physical problems related to stress include the lowering of the immune response, chronic muscle tension and increased blood pressure. These problems can eventually lead to life-threatening illnesses such as heart attacks, kidney disease and cancer. Studies have found that individuals who have undergone several stressful life events over the course of a year have a much higher probability of developing these types of serious illnesses, than non-stressed individuals.<sup>iii</sup> This information is reinforced by studies which have found that the majority of the body's systems suffer significant disruption due to stress. Systems affected by stress include the gastrointestinal, reproductive and cardiovascular systems but, perhaps even more worryingly, stress can also alter brain structure and functioning.<sup>iv</sup> Newer information also supports the idea that stress induces or worsens certain symptoms or diseases; diabetes, cardiac disease and rheumatoid arthritis can all worsen with mental stress.

Perhaps more worryingly still, periods of prolonged or extreme stress can actually alter the structure of our brains. Indeed, neuroscientists at the University of California have

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uncovered that chronic stress is a trigger for long-term changes in brain structure and function. These findings are supported by evidence that young people who are exposed to chronic stress in early life are prone to mental illness, such as anxiety and mood disorders, in later life. In a series of revolutionary experiments at the University, it was discovered that chronic stress and elevated levels of cortisol in the brain can lead to fewer neurons being developed than usual. Cortisol, otherwise known as 'the stress hormone', is believed to create a domino effect in the brain whereby pathways become hard-wired in the brain making it more predisposed to stress, essentially locking the brain in a constant state of fight or flight.<sup>v</sup> Luckily for us, there are many ways to reverse the effect of cortisol on the brain. This can be as simple as exercising or meditating, as both of these methods help a person to become aware of and focus on their surroundings.<sup>vi</sup>

Not only is stress damaging to our health, but it also interferes with our effectiveness on a day to day basis. Stress negatively affects individuals in the workplace, leading to a variety of undesirable consequences. It's estimated that as much as 75% of today's illnesses are related to stress. Indeed, the European Agency for Health and Safety at Work states that stress within an organisation affects as many as 22% of employees. Common implications of stress include insomnia and fatigue, inability to concentrate or make decisions, poor memory, decreased confidence, decreased productivity, problems communicating with others and an increase in conflict, all of which can have serious adverse effects on a person when applied to their working lives.

Indeed, mistakes made by employees made under the effect of stress can have serious costs and implications for organisations. At the organisational level, losses occur in the form of absenteeism costs, early retirement, attrition and recruitment, damaged equipment and reduced productivity to name a few. The British Health and Safety Executive estimated that the costs due to diseases and accidents caused by stress amount to between £1.1 and £2.2 billion per year. However, these estimates have most probably been estimated too low as they do not account for overtime, loss of customers, individual problems or decrease of work moral and other indirect consequences.<sup>vii</sup>

The average worker has between thirty and one hundred projects on their plate at any given time, modern workers face interruptions up to seven times an hour and four out of ten people working for large organisations are undergoing a major corporate restructuring and facing uncertainty about their futures. Is it any wonder we face severe stress at work? Reports by the Health and Safety Executive in 2012<sup>viii</sup> found that over 400,000 people in the UK reported work-related stress at a level they believed was making them ill.<sup>ix</sup> The real level might significantly higher as workplace stress often goes unrecognised and unreported. Due to this it seems to be of paramount importance that both employees and managers look to identify and reduce stress in the workplace, not only to improve productivity but also to increase the length and quality of life of workers.

## Employees can Combat Stress

There are several techniques that workers can employ to reduce their stress in the workplace.

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1. A large amount of stress comes from feeling overwhelmed, like everything is spiralling out of your control. It is important to realise what you can and can't control; typically, you're in control of your actions but not in control of macro forces. Make sure you are fully in control of what you can have an impact on and try not to worry about the rest.
  2. Interruptions to our days, such as a bout of emails or an unscheduled meeting can throw you off your game and cause stress. While you may not have control of the interruptions, you can control your response. Helpful ways of handling interruptions come in three forms: accept the interruption, cut it off to diagnose its importance and then slot it into your schedule or ignore it until a pre-planned time. This will allow you to gain control of the situation and handle it in your own way and time.
  3. If you start to feel overwhelmed, perhaps after a particularly tense meeting, and need to clear your head a few minutes of deep breathing will restore balance. This technique is generally underused and underrated, yet it is one of the most commonly prescribed methods to reduce stress by psychologists.
  4. Scheduling breaks throughout your day to walk, stretch your legs or do a breathing exercise can help immeasurably to reduce stress. Taking a short break from a task allows you to clear your head and come back to it with a fresh perspective, increasing productivity in the long run whilst allowing you some important stress reducing time.<sup>x</sup>

## Management can Combat Stress

The responsibility of reducing stress does not just solely lie with workers; employers should also have methods in place to make the workplace a more stress free environment for employees. Rather than throwing up their hands and becoming frustrated with a stressed out employee, there are some things that a creative manager can try.

1. Learn to recognise the signs of stress in your employees. Symptoms can be emotional - such as increased emotional reaction, withdrawal and mood swings, or mental - such as confusion, indecision and a poor memory. Other common symptoms of stress are deviations from normal behaviour, such as changes in eating habits, changes in attendance or increased smoking/drinking.
2. The first thing to do is to listen. Simple enough, but not as easy as it sounds. Often the manager is tempted to do all the talking; if you want your employees to be open about their problems, meet them in private with 'two big ears and one small mouth'. Listening to employees allows them to air their frustrations and reduce stress, whilst also showing that management cares about individual employees and their well-being.
3. Don't neglect the resources within your own company; the personnel and medical departments can prove helpful in dealing with interpersonal problems.<sup>xi</sup>
4. Management also needs to be willing to combat cultural issues in the workplace that can lead to stressed employees. Many organisations today face a 'long hours' culture, where many employees work more than their contracted hours, often without being paid overtime. An office culture of 'presenteeism' can play a large role in generating stress for employees and is certainly an issue that management needs

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to address. Presenteeism is the practice of being present at one's place of work for more hours than is required, especially as a manifestation of insecurity about one's job. The impact of presenteeism and how to address it is an interesting avenue of thought and certainly one that needs more consideration (watch this space for future Baker Stuart White Papers).

## Organisations can Combat Stress

Organisations as a whole can also take initiative in an attempt to combat stress for employees. If an organisation can breed a culture which is non-conductive of stress with management who are trained in recognising the signs of stress in employment, then this should trickle down through the ranks and result in a workforce relatively free from stress. Some aspects that an organisation should consider are as follows:

1. Employers need to recognise that individuals have different needs in terms of creature comforts and social requirements. A modicum of privacy is also required, but individuals vary in their need for such privacy. One person's productive environment is another's prison and management needs to be aware of this and cater for all personality types.
2. Employee wellness programmes can also have huge benefits, by increasing health, happiness and morale for employees, and in turn making them more productive. Larger organisations can offer a wide array of wellness programmes including gym memberships, meditation classes and providing healthy, low cost lunches. For smaller companies that don't have the cash to spend on lavish wellness schemes, there are cost-efficient wellness schemes available too. At Baker Stuart we have found schemes as simple as banning eating at desks to be an effective wellness measure; this encourages staff to take a break, move around and socialise - which are all good news for wellness. Other effective measures for smaller companies can be providing staff with low-cost pedometers to help them be more aware of how much they're moving or removing unhealthy snacks from vending machines.
3. Other methods that have been found to reduce workplace stress include flexible hours, working from home, employee counselling, training in time management techniques and stress management and improved physical workspaces.<sup>xii</sup>

## Final Thoughts

Perhaps the simplest way for managers to reduce stress is to create a more comfortable working environment for employees, and these changes don't have to be large to have a positive effect. For example, something as simple as introducing a new, high end coffee machine can go a long way towards improving worker morale. Indeed, in a recent survey, thirty-eight percent of workers think they couldn't live without coffee and perks such providing free, good quality coffee improve office morale and makes employees feel valued and appreciated. Thirty-seven percent of people would prefer having free coffee every day to the company Christmas party, says a recent survey.<sup>xiii</sup> In tough economic times, when other perks are cut, keeping a decent pot of coffee in the break

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room is a way of telling your employees that things aren't hopeless, and neither are they. Thanks to Taylor and his factory based research, we've known for over a hundred years that employees become more productive just from feeling like management is taking an interest in them.<sup>xiv</sup>

Being aware of stressors in the workplace and employing the correct techniques to reduce stress is of paramount importance in promoting a healthy and productive workforce. At Baker Stuart we specialise in helping our clients to make the most of their workforce and it is clear that a workforce which is subjected to high levels of stress is not going to maximise performance. Good office design can be an excellent medium for achieving a more relaxed workplace; providing a multi-layered office space which is designed with employee wellbeing in mind can have a huge magnitude of positive effects. Taking the simple step of creating inviting breakout spaces will improve interaction, encourage staff to take breaks and get them moving more. All of this will have positive knock on effects on morale, stress levels and productivity. Taking steps such as this should result in a happier, healthier workforce, and the benefits of this should more than pay for themselves (and all of the free coffee).

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We provide a range of consultancy services including workplace analysis, workplace consultancy, real estate strategies, project & programme management, project procurement, furniture consultancy, contract administration, design management, change management, facilities management, CAD/CFM and relocation consultancy.

We have an award winning track record and have helped businesses both public and private sector, from SMEs to multinationals to use the working environment as a catalyst to drive positive behavioural change.

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<sup>x</sup> Goudreau, J. 2013. As above.

<sup>xi</sup> Grimaldi, J. and Schnapper, B P. 1981. Managing employee stress: Reducing the costs, increasing the benefits. *Management Review*. 70(8), pp. 23-30

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<sup>xiii</sup> Horowitz, A. 2011. The One Office Perk You MUST Splurge On. [Accessed 8 October, 2015]. Available from: <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-one-office-perk-you-must-splurge-on-2011-3?IR=T>

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