The prevention of stress at work – a big problem in search of a big solution

Professor Derek Mowbray
Director, OrganisationHealth
Director, Management Advisory Service
Director, Wellbeing and Performance Group

What is stress?

Stress is at the wrong end of a continuum that includes pressure-strain- stress. It is an idiosyncratic idea, clearly affecting different people in different ways. To some, pressure is a stimulant, and only becomes a problem when the pressure is unrelenting, turning itself into strain, and then if nothing is done to reduce the strain, it turns to stress. Untreated stress can become really serious, turning into some of the nastiest physical and mental illnesses known to man.

> *Defining stress is a tedious exercise that enables the sceptical to have a field day, voicing their superiority in being macho, decisive, thrusting, and proving themselves to others as being hopelessly misguided.*

The good news is that stress is preventable. The bad news is that very few people want to know. In the UK there is a clear difference of approach by individuals to stress depending on whether they are employed or self-employed. Those employed with benefits when sick appear to have a lower threshold to adverse events at work, compared to those who work on their own account, where being sick means losing an income. There may, also, be differences in personality, and differences in levels of resilience. Therefore, the threshold of stress is dragged lower and lower in a working culture that supports, financially, those who can go off sick for reasons relating to stress. Currently, this atmosphere is different. There is a fear of losing income altogether because of losing jobs. Engagement and retention levels are currently up because of this; people are coping with their heightened levels of pressure-strain-stress. This plays straight into the hands of macho man, who has never believed that stress is anything other than an excuse to squander the company's money or rip off the taxman. Macho man, however, misses a key point – people like to work. They tend to go off sick, either because they are ill, or because of macho man.

There is no doubt that there is massive ambiguity surrounding stress at work. Where there is ambiguity there is good reason to do nothing. Stress is often too complicated a topic to discuss, and many people are reduced to generalities that cut no ice with the decisive, hard pressed, threatened businessman or politician, often under pressure herself, or the nicely financially cushioned public servant who simply hasn't the time for such wishy washy ideas. 'Give me answers' is the universal cry, 'Don't give me all this soft crap. Give me a dose of Sugar anytime'.

The fact is that the UK loses money big time due to people going off sick, claiming benefits, or changing jobs because of the stress they experience. The web site blogs are full of people in distressing situations pleading for help, and full of others offering help that won't make any difference, except at the margins. The reality is that there are not enough people dying from stress related

> *Most countries suffer from massive groupthink situations, where it is obvious that to do X will result in positive lives for Y.*

illnesses for a real concerted effort to be made to address its prevention.

Most countries become trapped into massive groupthink situations, where nothing seems to be done to change the lives of citizens even when the evidence is unambiguous that to do X will result in improved lives of Y. This is the stuff for psychologists; to penetrate the groupthink mentality and bring happiness and prosperity to people's lives. On a smaller, but no less dramatic, scale, the groupthink mentality of macho man prevents her from achieving even greater success because she is both blind and deaf to the prospects of eliminating stress from the workplace.

The impact of stress – not a pretty picture

The picture includes the misery of individuals. People, who lose concentration, lose confidence, are sometimes dizzy, and become anxious about minor matters, do not work well, are under-productive and can be counter-productive. They can cause accidents, commit errors of judgment, and physical errors. If the stress is left untreated, people become dis-engaged from their work and make little contribution; they go off sick, change their jobs. If they are off sick for more than six weeks it becomes more difficult for them to return to work. The cost to the employer is potentially enormous. The cost to the taxpayer is recognised as being unacceptable, leading to various Government initiatives to help people back to work.

The impact of stress at work

The picture also captures the regulations relating to stress, in particular those that are enforced by the Health and Safety Executive. The management standards have achieved much in a relatively short time, especially the raising of awareness of stress at work. The standards are enforceable.

Legislation relating to matters that provoke stress – bullying, harassment, equality, discrimination - are examples of descriptive events that can lead to legal action. The financial and personal costs incurred by this are potentially very heavy, although compensation results are normally modest.

Insurance payments and premiums – situations where people make claims that have little justification are now placing pressure on premiums for everyone else. The insurance companies are becoming more concerned about the reasons why stress is not addressed at work, and becoming more critical in their approach to medium to long term support, with increasing premiums reflecting the overall situation.

The costs to business and services can be mouth wateringly awful. With pension black holes to fill and lower tax revenues to help the banks, the lost income and deferred higher profits due to the costs of stress have to be a focus for serious businessmen, particularly those who recognise that macho man doesn't provide the solutions.

Prevention – the Holy Grail

Is it possible to prevent something that cannot be defined? Herein lies the complexity, ambiguity and reasons for little or no progress in reducing or eliminating stress from the workplace in the

face of compelling economic and social arguments for action. If stress cannot be defined, what is to be prevented? The adverse events that are proxies for stress become the focus for current attempts at prevention. They have limited effect because they do not address the primary or secondary causes of stress.
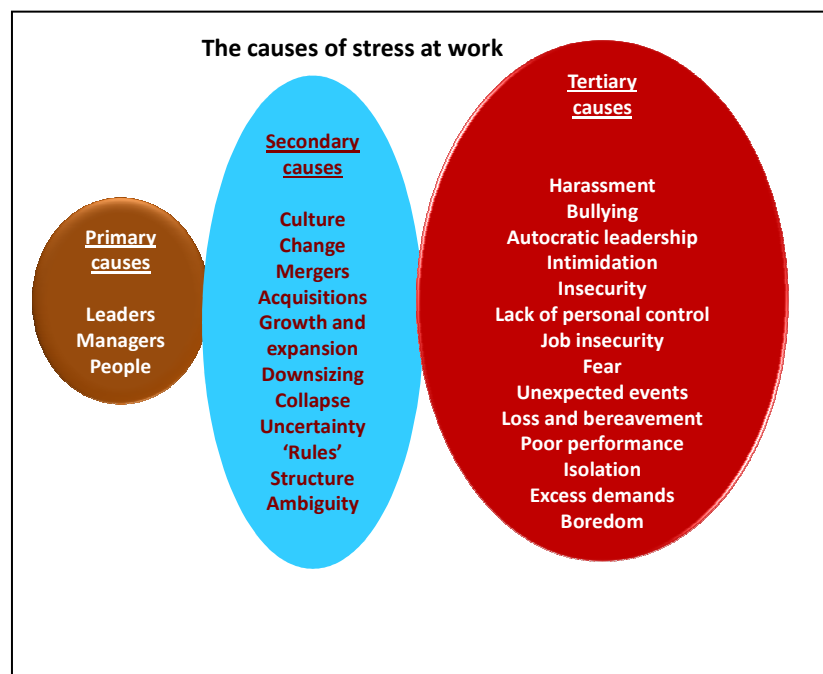
There are primary, secondary and tertiary causes of stress at work. The primary cause is

> *The primary cause of stress is ourselves. We have no one else to blame but ourselves, and, of course, our managers, who should know this already!*

ourselves. We have the ability to cause and eradicate stress by adopting behaviours that either alienate or engage people. Most do a little of both, because our interaction between people is governed by the context in which we behave at any moment in time. Macho man opening a car door for a lady who, once inside the building, is shouted at to get the coffee, is an example of changing interactions as the context changes. The opening of the car door may be unnecessary, but is often viewed as courteous and polite, placing macho man in a favourable light that is switched off as soon as he is inside his own territory and starts shouting for coffee, changing the interaction to a form of master and slave with no courteous language or pleasant behaviour. The lady might have stood her ground and told macho man to get the coffee himself, but the damage had been done already and the interaction is evidence of dis-engagement between the two. Even if the lady liked to be shouted at, (because of psychosexual desire related to domination) and liked to get the coffee the ripple effect amongst witnesses to the scene would foster dis-engagement between the staff and macho man, as no one likes to be shouted at.

The secondary causes of stress focus on the cultural context within which people at work are expected to behave. Culture is a secondary cause because it's people who create and sustain culture, and, therefore, positive and negative cultures are the instrument of people. In addition, there are significant events at work that cannot easily be avoided, and which is to be expected, such as mergers, acquisitions and change. Other events might be more challenging, such as downsizing. People (who are the primary cause of stress at work) are expected to plan and manage the secondary causes in ways that don't provoke stress. It is when these expected events are not managed effectively that stress is caused.

The causes of stress at work

Primary causes

Leaders
Managers
People

Secondary causes

Culture
Change
Mergers
Acquisitions
Growth and expansion
Downsizing
Collapse
Uncertainty
'Rules'
Structure
Ambiguity

Tertiary causes

Harassment
Bullying
Autocratic leadership
Intimidation
Insecurity
Lack of personal control
Job insecurity
Fear
Unexpected events
Loss and bereavement
Poor performance
Isolation
Excess demands
Boredom

The tertiary causes may be more familiar as they are the events at work that are categorised in ways that enable policies, procedures and processes to be used to resolve the problems. The

ways in which these events are managed is determined by the culture of the organisation, which, in turn, is determined by the people who create and sustain the culture. For example, an unexpected event for an employee will be handled positively, and with considerable personal support, in a culture that values the contribution and engagement of employees, compared to a culture that has little interest in the engagement of staff in the organisation where an unexpected event might provoke no support for the employee, and, in some cases, may lead to their dismissal. Most people caught up in these events will not understand the influence of

> **Managers are often part of the problem as well as part of the solution to stress at work**

culture and management on the way the event arose, and how it is handled. They will simply be suffering the consequences of stress and losing focus, concentration, and be thinking of ways of escape. Managers may not understand their influence in these situations and only see the employee(s) becoming more and more chaotic and causing more management time to be devoted to sorting out the problems, which will often not include the managers as part of the problem.
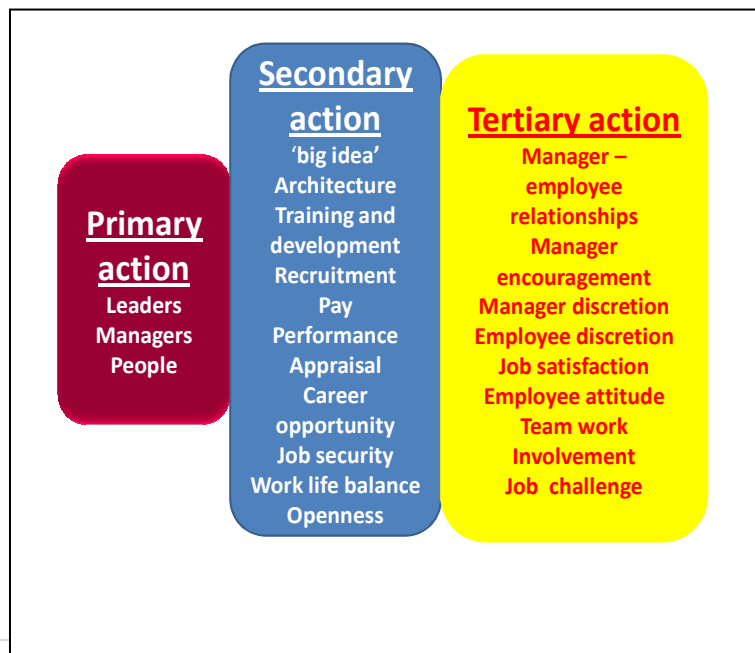
Primary and secondary prevention

Most managers and Board level directors are quick fix merchants, working under considerable pressure to deliver performance targets. They have less interest in the costs incurred in achieving the performance targets, and until such time as input costs include the costs of sickness, absence, staff turnover, lost profit due to sickness, and the cost of using HR staff to sort out management problems, the quick fix merchants will, for ever, under perform.

The problems associated with quick fix merchants are compounded by the slow fix nature of fixing stress. Improving the interaction between people seems to take time. In reality, taking the time to forge good interactions saves time. Macho man and the lady in the car provide an illustration. If they had forged a good interaction, the lady might well have said in the car 'I'll bring you some coffee as soon as we get into the office', to which macho man would reply 'that would be most welcome, thank you'. She might well have continued 'and once you have settled, we can continue our routine appraisal of your continuing professional development needs to see what other activities the company can help you with'.

A prevention approach to organisation and management development is a large solution to a complex challenge. There are no short cuts.

The aim is to create and sustain an organisation and personal set of values based on commitment, trust, engagement and resilience. These values need to be embedded into the psychology of

Primary action
Leaders
Managers
People

Secondary action
'big idea'
Architecture
Training and development
Recruitment
Pay
Performance
Appraisal
Career opportunity
Job security
Work life balance
Openness

Tertiary action
Manager – employee relationships
Manager encouragement
Manager discretion
Employee discretion
Job satisfaction
Employee attitude
Team work
Involvement
Job challenge

every employee from the Chairman to the latest part-time agency recruit.

Commitment, trust, engagement and resilience are all attributes that facilitate people to look beyond self interest, towards the interests of the business or service they are employed by. The creation of a culture of engagement produces about 20% increased productivity, and untold amounts of innovation and development, such as ideas for penetrating markets, new products, ways of reducing input costs. Input costs are dramatically cut by adopting a culture of engagement as sickness absence and staff turnover rates plummet, and there is no longer lost profit due to levels of stress. Signs of stress are quickly identified and exposed, and dealt with in a supportive, constructive manner. Going off sick due to stress is a major management failure.

Implementation

Implementation requires three major actions – the engagement of top management in the processes required to bring about change (primary action); the definition and implementation of a renewed culture that prevents stress (secondary action), and the training of everyone in the behaviours required to promote and sustain positive relationships at work (tertiary action)

The secondary and tertiary actions include four different but related processes to address:

Culture

Step 1: clarification of purpose (the 'big idea')

This step is essential in establishing the basis for everything else. If the purpose of the organisation can be clarified in a manner that enables the consumer to quickly understand what the organisation is about, staff will become committed to the purpose and to the organisation, just as much as the consumer.

Step 2: designing a structure that promotes engagement

Organisation structures are needed to map out the relationships between different aspects of a business or service. The best approach to structural design is to work out a structure that promotes the involvement, and therefore, engagement of all employees in decisions that affect themselves. A structure, should, therefore, ease the flow of information between parts, and facilitate the involvement of people in the business of the organisation. The flatter the structure the better is the rule of thumb.

Step 3: constructing 'rules' that promote engagement

Rules are normally policies, procedures and standing orders that determine how the organisation is meant to work in practice. There are some rules that promote engagement. They are:

Rules about:

Training and development – everyone wants to acquire additional skills, knowledge and experience, and providing opportunities to achieve this cements the commitment staff have for their organisation.

Pay – everyone has a sense of fairness when it comes to levels of pay. Those who negotiate pay should demonstrate trust in the fairness of all staff and listen to their observations about levels of pay. Providing a reasoned explanation for decisions about pay also helps cement commitment.

Challenging jobs – people like to respond to challenges in their work; by providing challenges that stretch individuals, the organisation demonstrates its appreciation for the skills of its staff, and trusts them to rise to the challenges. This, in turn, provokes commitment in the organisation.

Team working – teams provide social as well as professional support; they are 'places' where people should be able to discuss any aspect of their work without fear of humiliation. The effectiveness of team working can be found in the reduced levels of stress, as teams provide an invaluable safety valve for staff under pressure.

Communication – the process of communication is the opposite of broadcasting; it is about seeking a response, listening and responding to the response.

Involvement – all staff need encouragement to become involved in the wider elements of their work, for example, how their own work dovetails with others. Providing opportunities for staff to rotate around different working experiences enhances the level of commitment to the organisation.

Performance appraisal – staff seek opinion about their work, and regular comments about performance is part of the process of gaining commitment and trust.

Career opportunity – if the organisation can offer opportunities for acquiring new experiences, as well as skills and knowledge, by offering career development opportunities (preferably in the same organisation or on secondment elsewhere) this cements the commitment to the organisation.

Job security – everyone likes to complete the work that has been asked of them. Job security is about the completion of tasks, not the seeking of lifetime security. These days a portfolio career is the expectation, and coupled with this is the hope to be able to complete tasks.

Management encouragement – commitment and engagement is increased if managers are genuinely interested in the work of their staff. This can be demonstrated by offering encouragement and support on a regular basis. Critical appraisal is also welcomed, and a balance may need to be struck between encouragement and critical appraisal. Both help to cement commitment.

Worklife balance – this is about how the organisation responds to domestic crisis. A crisis can be serious or seemingly trivial, but the impact on the employee is similar in all situations, and by responding positively, the employee strengthens commitment to the organisation.

Openness – the encouragement of openness, frankness and honesty strengthens the relationship that people have with each other. If this is encouraged actively within organisations then greater commitment is the result.

Step 4: training everyone in the behaviours needed to implement the rules and in promoting trust and commitment.

The behaviours that promote trust and commitment are:

Attentiveness
The ability to demonstrate genuine attentiveness to the contents of an interaction by demonstrating listening, responsiveness and reaction.

Politeness
The ability to be polite in any interaction

Courtesy
The ability to place the other person (people) at the forefront of an interaction

Personal communication
The ability to communicate personally wherever possible; understanding the limitations of electronic communication.

Body language
The ability to use body movements and expressions to show attentiveness.

Addressing needs
The ability to respond positively to individual needs, even in circumstances when the needs cannot be met, given all the circumstances.

Empathetic
The ability to demonstrate an understanding of the other person's issues, ideas, thoughts and experiences

Intellectual flexibility
The ability to think on ones feet and respond with credible choices, alternatives and ideas

Emotional intelligence
The ability to be self aware, self regulate, motivate, show empathy and be socially adept

Negotiation
The ability to negotiate a successful outcome in an interaction.

Sharing
The ability to share with others one's own thoughts and ideas

Reliability
The ability to do what one says

Honesty
The ability to be open in an interaction

Clarity

The ability to be clearly understood in an interaction

Fairness
The ability to be fair to anyone in an interaction, taking account of all the circumstances, and to explain clearly the position that is taken and the reasons

Humility
The ability to acknowledge mistakes, misunderstandings, errors and faults, and to apologise where necessary.

Conflict resolution
The ability to confront a conflict at the time of conflict and to try and resolve any dispute at the time of the dispute.

Encourage contribution
The ability to motivate and encourage others to make a contribution in interactions.

Implementing a programme to prevent stress at work
The steps above will lead to the prevention of stress at work, by adopting a culture and behaviours that promote commitment, trust and staff engagement – the major antidotes to stress. If pressure at work builds up it can be diffused through the processes of openness and mutual support from management and staff.

The implementation process for a large change programme will depend on strong project management skills, and a clear target to aim for. Below is a description of an organisation that has implemented all the steps and is a successful and flourishing organisation, and provides the target.

Psychologically healthy organisations have:

• a clear, unambiguous purpose, expressed as a simple 'big idea', an idea which all the staff relate to closely, and are proud to discuss with friends and colleagues.

• an atmosphere of confidence, where all the staff are interested in each other, support each other, and project this confidence towards clients and customers.

• staff who behave respectfully towards each other, value each other's views and opinions, work in teams which are places of mutual support, where anything is debated without a hint of humiliation, where the critique of individual and team work is welcomed, discussed and where lessons are learnt and implemented.

• staff who 'go the extra mile' by providing unsolicited ideas, thoughts, stimulus to each other, and where their interest in their customers offers something more than is expected, beyond courtesy, and beyond service, offering attentiveness and personal interest.

• challenges for their staff, that provide opportunities for personal development through new experiences, and which treat everyone with fairness and understanding.

• staff who are personally driven towards organisation and personal success - intellectually, financially, socially and emotionally.

A general framework for implementation

The establishment of a Steering Group of top managers.

The agenda for the Steering Group is:
a) Establish a policy and strategy for the prevention and management of stress at work
b) To acquire the required resources to implement an operational programme that addresses the policy and strategy
c) To monitor the progress and impact of the policy and strategy on the productivity and costs of the organisation
d) To implement an appropriate survey of all staff to establish their current levels of commitment, trust, engagement and resilience. To introduce a prospective survey that staff contribute to on a quarterly basis, that shows what their expectation of changes might be, and how these are matched by events.
e) To implement appropriate actions that review the purpose of the organisation and re-draws the purpose in terms that promote commitment.
f) To review the organisation structure in terms that promote the engagement of staff in decisions that affect themselves.
g) To review and recast the 'rules' by which the organisation is meant to work.

h) To implement training, development and coaching programmes that lead to a change in the culture of the organisation and the ways in which the organisation does business and treats its staff.

Conclusion

Preventing stress at work is a complicated business. With an epidemic of stress cases being reported in the UK, some might believe it appropriate to tackle the root causes of stress and reduce the misery to individuals as well as the huge costs to business and the taxpayer. This article sets out how to tackle stress. There is no quick and easy solution as the solution lies in our own behaviour towards each other, and very few people willingly listen to someone telling her that her behaviour is inappropriate for managing a multi-national conglomerate with 25,0000 employees that props up the UK economy. On the other hand, there are a number of people who see that reducing stress at work is the route towards high performance and great success in business and in the delivery of services. It is to them that this article is initially directed.

DM
2.8.09
Word count 3530

www.orghealth.co.uk

www.derekmowbray.org.uk

www.mas.org.uk

www.wellbeing-and-performance-group.org.uk