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Work stress and UAE dimension

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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The very conditions that have enabled Dubai's explosive commercial success have also been shown to represent a dangerous downside in terms of workplace health - a startling reminder that you don't get something for nothing in this world.

To outsiders, including many Europeans thinking of moving to Dubai, the prospects of a healthy life here seem outwardly favourable. We have sun, sea and cleansing winds across the desert. We have this wonderfully new capital city, where everything is efficient and hygienic.

And in the big corporate offices in their state-of-the-art tower blocks, you can find all the best-equipped executive gyms to encourage year-round fitness of body and mind. From a distance, it can certainly look as though we have simply taken everything that threatens employee health, and designed it out of the system.

But the medical statistics tell a different story. For the UAE is afflicted with the second biggest incidence of heart disease and diabetes per capita on earth. And against a world average age of 65 for heart-attacks, the UAE figure is just 50. Inevitably, this means that many people are suffering their first heart-attack at 30 or younger. What lies behind these truly terrible findings?

One factor is genetic bad luck. The local population happens to be pre-disposed to heart disease, and the many expats from India and Pakistan even more so. But that is a secondary issue, compared to the huge impact of workplace stress, equally affecting the European community, who are not normally prone to this kind of disease on genetic grounds.

From the fitness angle, working conditions in Dubai run counter to any of the normal rules of health, and are sure to frustrate any attempt at a sensible daily regime.

That perfect climate, for example. Unless you're swimming or sailing, the heat can actually be quite oppressive, placing strain on the heart, while also virtually forcing you to stay indoors for long hours in sedentary mode.

Your only excursion will probably be out to lunch (by taxi, of course, to save valuable time.) And in a city geared to top-level business, all the emphasis will be on lavish entertainment, either to impress important visitors or just to

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advertise your status around the corporate village. Any idea of a sensible, moderate diet goes right out of that 30th-storey window.

Then there is the sheer atmospheric pressure of working right up here at the summit of global commerce. A terrible logic starts to take hold: if you don't work that extra hour, your competitors will, and they'll snatch the business from you.

It is this universal imperative, even more than the accelerating pace of the e-mail and mobile-phone way of life, that proves so fatally hypnotic to corporate executives. Did someone mention the gym? Not now. Not now. Some other time...

Like the monkey with its hand in the long-necked jar, you must force yourself to let go at some point, or you're just going to be one super-rich corpse. Stress management, (which includes the increasingly important time management) should start to bulk-up bigger as a central part of executive training and practice. Soon.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

Key points: Workplace health

- The UAE has the world's second biggest prevalence of heart disease.
- Workplace stress is by far the main cause of this serious condition.
- Stress management should be an official part of executive routine.

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