

Accident risk up due to stress

<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/06/18/10323706.html>

06/18/2009 06:32 PM | By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News

I have often been involved in the aftermath of industrial accidents, and concluded that so-called 'human error' had less to do with personal failings, and more to do with stress.

Now there is confirmation from a recent report by one the UK's largest insurance groups, that the risk of accidents at work is increasing as stress-levels are driven up by the effects of the recession.

They blame it chiefly on fatigue caused by the extra work that this crisis demands, although I would place more significance on the psychological factors - disorientation and fear , which cannot accurately be measured.

I used to conduct regular training courses in a large chemical factory that produced methanol (a highly inflammable solvent), and had the grim experience of counselling many of the workers after a disastrous fire, the cause of which, it was argued, was stress.

One of the warehousemen had been dispensing the methanol into portable plastic drums, when the supply tank ran dry.

The standard drill then was that the tap must be turned off immediately. In error, this vital procedure was forgotten, apparently in haste.

He notified his colleagues that a new tankful was needed. As this was an automatic process of several hours, they all went home, ready to start again next morning.

During the next hours, and overnight, the open tap refilled the supply tank with the inflammable fluid which then flooded through a safety valve and caused an electrical short circuit, which then ignited the entire tank room.

Following the accident, an investigation team including one of our counsellors tried to ascertain the cause of what was an inexplicable and serious breach of the factory safety rules.

After debriefing the warehouseman to find out why he had acted as he did, it was discovered that he had had problems in paying his mortgage as a result of his wife losing her job, had not been sleeping well and had been suffering high levels of stress.

It was clear that the accident was a result of human error that could have been avoided had the man sought help from his employer and taken medical advice.

The counsellor, in his report, said that the man should not have been working in his present state and that the current high levels of stress were almost certainly recession-linked.

Another recent case was of an over-stressed accountant who when making a large electronic payment to a supplier, managed to duplicate the keying-in routine in error, so that the payment was made twice.

That error, as with that of the warehouseman, also had serious results, although in this case they were purely economic.

Unfortunately, high levels of stress can cause both serious errors and serious accidents, and management must be vigilant in recognising the telltale signs.

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.