

Accepting the depressing reality

<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/04/28/10308199.html>

04/28/2009 07:47 PM | By Carol Spiers, Special to Gulf News

Perhaps you celebrated Depression Awareness Week by taking advantage of the free Depression Tests at the German Centre for Neurology and Psychiatry.

As a newly-arrived team, these specialists were able to take a sharply focused view of the Dubai factor in work-related depression. Resident senior neurological consultant, Dr Michael Grundmann, explained that the large expatriate community suffered from being a long way from their family and friends, and lacked the social support network that is necessary for reducing stress levels and warding-off the onset of chronic depression.

He says the condition is most common between 20 and 35 years of age, during the prime earning years, as people tend to heap the most pressure upon themselves to make money and achieve success, often not realising the stresses this brings.

This tallies with other findings over the years that people in their early thirties in high-stress jobs run twice the risk of suffering serious depression or anxiety as those in lower-stress occupations.

Top of the league are head chefs in top restaurants and construction workers under pressure to complete a building on time. They are found to be six times more likely to buckle under stress, because they are working to deadlines in an environment where failure is publicly visible, while facing hard physical labour in extremes of heat or cold, frequently without encouragement or support.

As an established local stress consultant, I can certainly confirm all of that. In Dubai, the stress levels have outstripped anything I've seen in other great capitals. The sheer pace of business in the Emirates, the acutely competitive nature of the work, the exhausting heat, and now the credit crunch, applying huge extra pressures of uncertainty, financial disruption and the daunting prospect of idleness. A Depression Awareness Week for Dubai seemed timely indeed.

But depression does not just come from overwork. I am always strongly aware of that other less-obvious stressor, idleness. The most memorable case of this in my experience was in Switzerland, where I once had to counsel an engineer installing a new ski-lift in one of the top resorts.

His contract included a lucrative bonus for punctual completion, but heavy penalties in the event of lateness. Then at a crucial moment, they found that the biggest component of all, the huge wheel that controlled the lift, was faulty; an ultrasonic test showed that it had developed a structural fault and, until a replacement arrived, the team could do nothing but wait on the spot, poised for action.

He said it was the longest three days of his life - simply forced to do nothing. Some people might have envied him, free to laze about on scenic slopes. But it is actually very hard to do nothing. And I hope that this does not become Dubai's next challenge, as we confront the global downturn.

- 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.

Depression: Trigger factors

- Prolonged pressure turns to stress and then depression.
- Big bonuses and penalties raise the stakes - and the stress.
- Redundancy and idleness cause as much depression as overwork.