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Clearing away the stress myths!

By Carole Spiers (Pressure Gauge)

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A COUPLE OF WEEKS ago I wrote on the subject of stress as a barrier to sustainable success, and how its effects can be countered.

 The responses prompted by the article highlighted the continuing confusion about stress - and in particular the difference between stress and pressure - so these are the facts about some of the greatest of those misconceptions.

'There's no such thing as stress'

There is, but the word 'stress' itself is often applied incorrectly. Many people will use it when they have a temporary work overload, whereas in fact stress only occurs when a person perceives (over a prolonged period) that they have insufficient personal resources to cope with a given situation.

We can think of stress as a light switch that our body turns on automatically under specific circumstances. What we need to do is learn how to turn the switch off. This is an ability that needs to be taught - as only through teaching can we learn how to manage our body's natural response to perceived danger.

'Stress is good for you'

Wrong! It's bad for you. It is often mistakenly thought that stress is good for people, when long-term stress is invariably harmful. Ill-health due to work-related stress, or conditions ascribed to it, is also one of the most common factors in absenteeism.

While a certain amount of pressure can motivate individuals and therefore be useful, excessive and prolonged pressure, that invariably turns into stress, is never so. A probable explanation for the myth that people perform well under stress is that in fact they perform well under pressure that is 'controlled' (i.e. effectively managed).

Controlled pressure is useful when our body and mind are finely tuned in a way that enables them to achieve optimum results and performance. A feeling of nervousness before giving a presentation, for example, will often result in increased mental acuity and responsiveness, which will stimulate both speaker and audience.

By comparison, arriving late, inadequately prepared or with a laptop or projector that fails to operate properly, would inevitably be stressful.

'Stress is a mental illness'

Wrong! Stress is the natural reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them. Stress itself is not an illness, but it can lead to serious mental and physical ill-health such as depression, back pain, heart disease and 'burnout'.

'Stress affects everybody equally'

Wrong! An employer or manager should appreciate that not all members of their team will react in the same way to any given problem, and that an environment which one person perceives as merely pressurised, another may perceive as stressful.

Managers and supervisors need to be able to recognise and identify the symptoms of stress and have the skills and expertise to defuse or mitigate any issues before they become potentially serious or disruptive.

Being able to discuss difficult situations can often help those employees who are under excessive pressure, and managers should ideally provide the first line of support in encouraging staff to take steps to combat the problem.

This could be through in-house referral, e.g. to Human Resources or Occupational Health departments, if existing, or to an external counselling service such as an employee assistance programme or other outside agency.

'Suffering from stress is a sign of weakness'

Wrong! Anyone can suffer from stress: director, shop assistant, manager, technician, teacher even a doctor - can all suffer from excessive pressure, if it is prolonged and outside their capacity to manage. It all depends on the circumstances we are in at the time.

Many people think that if they admit to experiencing stress, it's a sign of failure or weakness. An individual working in an organisation where there are likely to be imminent redundancies, for example, may well seek to cover up any sign of stress in the belief that they may be viewed as unable to cope with their job and might therefore be regarded as expendable.

Many employees are also wary of any mention of stress being noted on their work record in case it might prejudice their chances of promotion, and so they avoid discussing the problem with colleagues. This is why it's so important that the workplace culture embraces the notion that to be stressed sometimes is a normal human condition, and that to admit to it - initially to yourself - is the first step in modifying the situation or meeting the challenge.

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'All you need to do to manage work-related stress, is go for counselling'

Wrong! Counselling may help individuals who are suffering from work-related stress, but is unlikely to tackle the source of the problem. Research has found that support at work, particularly from managers for their staff, has a protective effect - frontline prevention by the organisation is far better than third party cure.

Key learning points

- Stress is usually harmful - sometimes seriously so

- While some pressure can motivate, excessive pressure can be damaging
- Stress is not a mental illness. It is the natural reaction to prolonged overload
- Stress affects each person differently
- Suffering from stress is not a sign of weakness

Carole Spiers, the UK's leading Guru on corporate stress-management and organisational change, is also a regular BBC broadcaster and international author on these major, business issues. She is also a regular motivational speaker at UAE conferences. Your questions and input on this article or any related topic, is welcomed. Each Friday, we will discuss a selection of your letters or case studies. Please write to Carole Spiers at: ktwkd@emirates.net.ae. Website: www.carolespiersgroup.com



