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Health and work stress: The link

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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In the wake of last week's biggest-ever health conference in the Gulf, I notice a new report from the UK confirming what many stress consultants have suspected for years, but never been able to prove - that stress is a factor in coronary heart disease (CHD).

As this, in turn, follows last month's statement by UAE health official Dr. Ali Ahmad Bin Shakar, that 41 per cent of the country's deaths are caused by heart disease, with a tripling of the problem expected over the next 20 years, the new findings should be essential reading by corporate managements.

Based on a 12-year study of more than 10,000 civil servants, this major research project demonstrates the strongest link yet between work stress and the biological mechanisms underlying CHD.

The most significant finding was that stress directly activates the pathways controlled by the nervous system, the endocrine glands and their hormones. Workers who suffered greater stress at work were liable to have lowered heart-rate variability, poor vagal tone and abnormally high morning levels of the stress-hormone, cortisol.

Significantly, these effects were independent of stress-linked behaviours - unhealthy lifestyles of little or no exercise and poor diet, with their effects on the metabolic system - which accounted for only 32 per cent of the syndrome.

As a professional stress consultant, I would naturally remind corporate businesses that they have plenty of opportunity to train their HR departments in the many specialist areas of stress management (organisational change, time-management, diversity, bullying behaviour etc.), as well as providing their other employees with seminars and presentations that generate a culture of stress awareness.

For those who are not ready to make the necessary investment, however, let me suggest how you may be able to relieve employee stress through a few everyday interventions that cost nothing.

These are the little acts of good manners, appreciation, common decency and consideration that can lubricate workplace life out of all proportion to the effort involved. This is how to generate a spirit of 'give', not just 'get'. It's done by encouraging people to love their work - or indeed to work with love, as in the words of Khalil Gibran, 'Work is love

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made visible'.

The chairman or MD in particular firm should take a little time to 'walk the talk', showing an interest in people's jobs, always remembering names correctly (which carries far more impact than you may think), and generally making every person feel valued.




Certainly, employee health in the UAE faces many side-effects arising out of its breakneck commercial growth. That's a constructive thought to leave you with, as stress management moves firmly one step higher up the national agenda.

- 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: Impact

- Stress has been shown to impact on heart disease.
- Stress management is vital in countries like UAE where heart disease is rising.
- Invest in specialist help or reduce stress through your own interventions.

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