

# STRESS

## myths and misconceptions

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### About the Author

Carole's credibility is rooted in 20 years success as CEO of a leading UK stress management consultancy, working with equal success both in the UK and the Gulf. She is a world authority on corporate stress and BBC Guest Broadcaster.

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People frequently say they don't have time to manage their stress!. "Don't bother me now. I've got a job to do". Sound familiar?

You may be experiencing stress but judge it unnecessary to tell your boss as it could be seen as a black mark against you and you could be seen as not coping. And as we know, we should be able to cope with everything!

The fact is that it could be your boss who is experiencing stress themselves and it is they that are causing your stress. Some people are known as 'stress carriers' and they often leave anger and frustration with those whom they come in contact. They don't necessarily see this for themselves and are sometimes quite surprised when it is brought to their attention. So let us start off with some of the myths and misconceptions about stress.

### MYTH 1: 'THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS STRESS'

Wrong. I can't tell you how many times this is said to me. Companies say 'we don't do stress!' It is almost as if they can't bear to even bring the word into their vocabulary because if they do, they may catch something!

Of course stress exists, and 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.

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

### 'STRESS IS GOOD FOR YOU'

Wrong. It's 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 types of work-related ill-health.

While a certain amount of pressure can motivate individuals and therefore be useful, 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.

### 'STRESS IS A MENTAL ILLNESS'

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

### 'STRESSORS AFFECT EVERYBODY EQUALLY'

Wrong. We need to appreciate that not everyone will react in the same way to any given problem, and that which one person perceives as merely pressure, another may perceive as stress.

It is important to be aware of the symptoms of stress and have the skills to defuse or mitigate any issues before they become potentially serious or disruptive. Being able to talk over difficult situations can often help when under excessive pressure.

### 'SUFFERING FROM STRESS IS A SIGN OF WEAKNESS'

Wrong. Anyone can suffer from stress. 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, weakness or ineptitude. Someone working in an organisation where there are 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.

Individuals are often wary of any mention of stress being noted on their work record in case it might prejudice their chances of promotion, and so avoid discussing the problem with colleagues. This is why it's so important that the workplace culture embraces the notion that to be stressed occasionally 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.

### 'THERE'S NOTHING AN EMPLOYER CAN DO IF AN EMPLOYEE DENIES SUFFERING FROM WORK-RELATED STRESS'

Wrong. Employers in the UK are under a duty to protect their employees' health and safety, regardless of whether an employee is willing to run the risk of harm. If an employer



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believes that an employee is at risk of stress, concerns should be voiced in a way that makes it easier for the employee to be honest - for example through an informal discussion with an independent third party, or away from a particularly tough manager. If the employee continues to deny that they are stressed, the employer should make a note of all conversations on the subject (including dates) and ensure the situation is monitored.

### 'EMPLOYERS AREN'T RESPONSIBLE IF AN EMPLOYEE'S STRESS IS CAUSED BY PROBLEMS THAT AREN'T RELATED TO THEIR WORK'

Not necessarily. An employer's duty of care does not extend to preventing ill-health caused by problems in employees' personal lives, such as divorce, bereavement or money worries. However, it is possible that a failure by the employer to take such matters into account in dealing with poor performance and/or increased absence might render any subsequent dismissal (resulting from the employee's stress) 'unfair'. If an employee is known to be having problems outside work, this should be taken into account when carrying out any stress-related risk assessments, as this could make them more vulnerable to potential stressors inside work.

### 'ALL YOU NEED TO DO TO STOP WORK-RELATED STRESS IS GO FOR COUNSELLING'

Wrong. Counselling may help you if you 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.