

WRITER

Carole
Spiers


STRESS

Myths & Misconceptions

Busy bosses equal busy PAs and stressed bosses invariably have stressed PAs. There is certainly no doubt that the Executive PA role is a stressful one and while many companies are willing to spend money tackling executive stress management, regrettably PA stress is often ignored.

You may be thinking that 'stress goes with the job' so PAs should keep it under wraps but is this realistic? Most job advertisements for Executive PA positions include the pre requisite 'must be able to keep calm under pressure' as a necessary attribute and so like the duck gliding across the surface of a pond, the PA appears to execute her tasks effortlessly, but like the duck, their feet are paddling furiously underneath!

So What Can You Do About It?

PAs frequently say they don't have time to manage their stress!. "Don't bother me now. I've got a job to do". "My boss takes priority over everything". Sound familiar?

You may be experiencing stress but you may 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, PAs should be able to cope with everything!

The fact is that it could your boss who is experiencing stress themselves and it they that is 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.

During the year, I will be writing a series of articles on managing stress and detailing some of the coping strategies to help manage it. So let us start off with some of the myths and misconceptions about stress.

"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.

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 skill 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 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 are under excessive pressure. If you are working in a large organisation, then you could turn to Human Resources, Occupational Health or an employee counsellor for support. However, if you are working in a smaller company, then you may need to seek guidance from a mentor, a coach or a colleague.

“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 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 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.

“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. Legally, because the source of any stress-related condition resulting from these is

not the employer's responsibility, an employee would not normally be able to bring a personal injury claim.

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.

This is the first article in the series, so do come back to me with any comments or experiences that you might like to share with other readers of *Executive Secretary*



about the author

Carole Spiers' credibility is rooted in twenty years' success as CEO of a leading UK Stress Management Consultancy. As a World Authority on Executive Stress, BBC Guest-Broadcaster and author, Carole's mission is to empower organisations to achieve sustainable success through a healthy workplace culture where her stress management expertise is in demand around the world. Carole is a high-energy motivational speaker able to combine inspiration with insight. Her charismatic style has made her a sought-after keynote speaker working with equal success in the contrasting cultures of the UK and the Gulf region with top corporations. Carole is VP of the International Stress Management Association UK. For more information on our Executive Coaching Programme and nationwide Counselling service, please contact us: info@carolespiersgroup.com or via www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk

Special offer for *Executive Secretary* readers: Need to manage stress? Contact us for our FREE Special Report, '45 Essential Strategies for Stress Relief for the busy PA. Email: sb@carolespiersgroup.com



Carole would also like you to know about this conference:

1st Global Woman Summit Conference, Washington DC, 8 – 11th October 2011

Michelle Obama will be opening this prestigious, 3-day educational programme that will unite and honour leading women in international fields. Meet and listen to world leaders, diplomats and experts plus your opportunity to network with eminent women from diverse occupations. Leave having gained greater insight and increased knowledge of women who regularly break the glass ceiling. Don't miss this unique event. Book your place in our audience now! www.globalwomansummit.org