



The HSE management standards on stress focus attention on what we need to be doing to tackle this complex workplace issue. But what's working and what isn't?

Train to take the strain

If you follow the HSE guidelines, the first thing you need to do to tackle work-related stress – assuming you have five or more employees – is carry out a risk assessment, the results of which should highlight problem areas you'll need to focus on in order to reduce (or ideally remove the causes of) stress in your organisation. In addition to these specific actions, there are a number of proactive measures you should also introduce.

1 Stress policy

This should be implemented in conjunction with staff liaison groups, and commitment should begin at the most senior level and be cascaded downwards. There's little point in introducing stress management training for line managers, for example, if senior managers have little or no commitment to minimising or eliminating excessive pressure within the organisation.

2 Communication

Effective communication is often neglected in management training, yet it's essential to good management – by reducing misunderstanding and the opportunity for discontent. Effective communication includes active listening skills – engaging with the person you're listening to and responding appropriately. Good communication at all levels will help to ensure that everyone in the organisation can work with confidence – reducing the opportunities for stress to develop.

3 Counselling

First contact counselling teams are made up of volunteers from the organisation who are trained in basic counselling skills, and receive ongoing training and supervision. They're often used as a 'first contact' for employees, for whom they can provide an active listening service and help to deal with work-related problems such as stress, bullying, change and mediation.

In mediation, the parties in a dispute express their views on a contentious matter, establish common ground, and move towards a solution that's acceptable to all. In negotiation, the aim

is to reach agreement on a course of action that satisfies at least some of the claims of both sides. It is vital that any disputes be resolved before it escalates into stress-inducing or bullying behaviours which can be much more difficult to resolve.

In February 2002, the Court of Appeal ruled that 'any employer who offered a confidential counselling service was unlikely to be found in breach of duty of care, by the courts'. Counselling should therefore be regarded as an intervention to be included alongside other supportive services available to employees.

4 Awareness

For stress management to become integral to corporate culture, initiatives must be introduced that will raise awareness of work-related stress. In particular, recognising the early warning signs and symptoms should become integral to management strategy. This can be achieved by monitoring sickness absence (especially short-term), carrying out confidential staff surveys, observing working

relationships (especially team dynamics), and questioning changes in attitude and behaviour.

Stress management training can then build on this by teaching employees about the nature and sources of stress, its effects on health, and the personal skills needed to reduce it. Training may also help to reduce stress symptoms such as anxiety and sleep disturbances, and has the advantage of being relatively inexpensive.

5 Recruitment

When recruiting it's important that both the organisation and applicant understand the requirements of the post and potential pressures involved. One conclusion of a landmark Court of Appeal case in February 2002 was that 'there are no occupations that should be regarded as intrinsically dangerous to mental health'. It's therefore essential to combine an appropriate selection policy with sufficient job-specific and practical training to enable individuals to carry out their jobs within their capabilities and with minimum stress.

6 Culture

Ultimately, reducing workplace stress is largely a matter of common sense and good management practice, and simply requires employers and employees to work together for the common good. Both share a joint responsibility for reducing stress – which, when this is successful, can help employees to enjoy their work more, and businesses to thrive as a result.

For this to become a reality, organisations need to work towards the creation of a 'healthy' work culture, one where there is an intelligent dialogue between managers and employees; concerns can be raised in the confidence that actions will be taken; and everyone in the organisation recognises stress as an unnecessary and unacceptable drain on creativity and resources. Or to put it another way, a culture where healthy ways of working have become so ingrained that the management standards espoused by the HSE will have become second nature. **FM**

Carole Spiers is an occupational stress management consultant

Rest and relaxation – what doesn't work?

Depending on the nature of your organisation, concierge services, or complementary therapies such as reflexology, yoga, massage etc, may also be of benefit. Typically, however, they should be incorporated within an holistic approach to work-related stress rather than being expected to resolve underlying problems on their own. If an organisation introduces this type of initiative without a foundation of stress management training and employee counselling support, they risk adding to problems of work-related stress through frustration, disillusionment. Employees might take the view that the true causes of stress aren't being taken seriously, and the organisation is simply paying lip service to the problem. Whereas, the key to successful stress management in the long term is to deal with the causes as well as the symptoms.