

Stress – Myths and Misconceptions

By Carole Spiers

In my previous article in December I looked at festive stress and how to prevent it. The article produced a great response, with many of you asking for more information on this highly topical subject, so here I aim to dispel some popular myths and misconceptions about stress.

‘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 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. A feeling of nervousness before giving a presentation, for example, will often result in increased mental acuity and responsiveness, which will stimulate the 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 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. 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 which one person perceives as merely pressure, another may perceive as stress.

Managers and supervisors need to be aware of 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 talk over 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; or to an external counselling service, e.g. an employee assistance programme or other outside agency.

‘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. An individual 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.

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 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 therefore be raised in a way that makes it easy 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 legal duty of care does not extend to preventing ill health caused by problems in the employees' personal lives, such as divorce, bereavement or money worries because the source of any stress-related condition resulting from these is not the employer's responsibility.

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 must also 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 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.

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