

STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

By Lisa Branigan

According to the Australian Council of Trade Unions' (A.C.T.U.) 1997 survey, fifty per cent of workers had suffered some form of stress at work in a 12-month period. The statistics in care professions were even higher, with the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia reporting in its 2002 Attitudes To Teaching Survey that seventy per cent of teachers identified workplace stress as a cause for concern in their teaching positions.

Stress in the workplace is becoming a major concern for employers, managers and government agencies, owing to the Occupational Health and Safety legislations requiring employers to practice 'duty of care' by providing employees with safe working environments which also cover the psychological wellbeing of their staff.

One of the costs, for employers, of work place stress is absenteeism, with the A.C.T.U. reporting that owing to stress, nearly fifty per cent of employees surveyed had taken time off work. Other negative effects were reductions in productivity, reduced profits, accidents, high rates of sickness, increased workers' compensation claims and high staff turnover, requiring recruiting and training of replacement staff.

While a certain amount of stress is needed to motivate individuals into action, prolonged stress can have a huge impact on overall health. More than two-thirds of visits to doctors' surgeries are for stress-related illnesses. Stress has been linked to headaches, backaches, insomnia, anger, cramps, elevated blood pressure, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia and lowered resistance to infection. For women, stress is a key factor in hormonal imbalances resulting in menstrual irregularities, PMS, fibroids, endometriosis and fertility problems. Stress can also be a factor in the development of almost all disease states including cancer and heart disease.

Each profession has its own unique factors that may cause stress; below are some causes of stress that cross many professions:

- Increased workload
- Organizational changes
- Lack of recognition
- High demands
- Lack of support
- Personal and family issues
- Poor work organization
- Lack of training
- Long or difficult hours
- Inadequate staff numbers and resources
- Poor management communication
- Lack of control or input

So what can be done to effectively manage workplace stress?

Organizations can:

- Educate their employees to recognise the signs of stress.
- Where possible, give their employees the chance to be involved in decisions and actions that affect their jobs.
- Improve employer-employee communications.
- Provide employees with opportunities to socialise together.
- Be understanding of employees' personal and family responsibilities.
- Ensure employee workloads suit their capabilities and resources (provide more training and resources if not).
- Provide support (internally or externally) for employees who have complex stress issues.

Employees can reduce their overall stress by:

- Regularly exercising, as this releases ‘happy hormones’.
- Eating a healthy diet, as stress depletes vital nutrients.
- Getting adequate rest.
- Using tea and lunch breaks to read, listen to a relaxation CD or have a five-minute power-nap.
- If appropriate, playing relaxing music at work and burning aromatherapy oils.
- Being more organized. Get up earlier to have more time.
- Delegating responsibility where possible. Say no!
- Taking time out to laugh by telling someone a joke. Start a laughter group: by standing in a circle and all forcing a big laugh, it will soon become real!
- Avoiding caffeine and sugar. Although this may provide an instant lift it later depletes the body of energy and nutrients.
- Taking time to do things that bring enjoyment and pleasure.
- Making the work environment pleasurable. Have relaxing sounds in the form of music or a water fountain. Have enjoyable smells by burning candles or aromatherapy oils. Hang beautiful pictures or posters on the walls; have photos or flowers on the desk.
- Taking care of their overall health and wellbeing by practising good self-care.
- Keep a journal that monitors dates and times of stress to detect re-occurring patterns and to help you discover changes you may need to make.

Sometimes trying to implement change (even for the better) can itself cause stress and prevent a person remaining motivated. In this case it’s important to get support for your stress from a counsellor, doctor, naturopath, friend, peer or life coach who specializes in stress issues.

The benefits of a systematic and joint approach to reducing work stress are:

- Increased productivity
- Decrease in absenteeism
- Improved morale
- Decrease in workers’ compensation claims
- Reduction in workplace accidents

The most important benefit in reducing workplace stress is that it will promote a pleasant work environment for all.

Lisa Branigan is a Stress and Energy Life Coach working with busy professionals who are stressed, tired and overwhelmed. She runs regular self-care programs and retreats for stressed professionals. Lisa is the author of “Life Solutions” a free monthly e-zine providing tips, advice and information on self-care and wellbeing



Lisa Branigan

Personal & Professional Life Coach

Ph/Fax: 9757 3750

Email: lisa@quantumcoaching.com.au

Website: www.quantumcoaching.com.au

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