

Taking the stress out of Mental Health

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Stress is part of life – work and home life.

Performance at work is profoundly affected by other aspects of our life and also our general health. Problems do not go away simply because we have arrived at work!

Lee introduced the concept of a 'stress bucket'. Stressors can occur before the workday begins and the 'stress bucket' may be full or nearly full before an employee arrives at work. Consequently, it may take very little to tip a person over the edge.

There are many aspects of working life that can aggravate or alleviate stress

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- is the environment suitable and comfortable, with adequate lighting, heating and ventilation?
- is the task and work station designed so as to minimise health risks?
- is the employee – maybe you - taking enough breaks, at regular intervals? – with lunch away from desk?
- is there access to support and information for instance through HR or line manager?
- is the work/life balance skewed towards work?
- are there enough resources? - Lack of adequate staffing is a business's problem and not an employees'.

Anyone who has responsibility for other workers – whether or not they have 'manager' as part of their title – has a legal duty of care towards them. An employee should feel able to ask for their manager's help.

Changing Attitudes

Mental health is now being given greater priority and celebrities are being more open about their own battles with mental health issues, bringing the topic into the public arena and making it more acceptable for ordinary people to share their mental health

concerns. Reducing stigma will mean more people ask for help sooner.

Currently, the biggest killer of men under the age of 45 is suicide. Clearly, knowing that help is available and accessible will be of benefit to those who feel there is no way out of their problems.

Stress is not a medical condition and there is no drug that will fix it. Consulting your GP may allow you to have time off work but simply having time off will not resolve the problem and if there is no change the problem is likely to recur upon returning to work. During an employee's absence, employers need to address the problems which led to the ill-health. Sometimes, a phased return and making colleagues aware of the issues can be helpful. The New Economics Foundation/Mind, suggest

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- Connecting with people – via more face to face contact, rather than texts and e-mails
- Becoming more active – e.g. taking the stairs, getting off the bus a stop early
- Taking notice of your surroundings – reducing clutter, taking an interest in colleagues
- Continuing to learn – reading more, learning a language
- Giving to charity, volunteer work

What Management can do:

- Investigate sickness absences – conduct thorough return to work interviews to find out underlying causes
- Interview employees who have resigned to establish whether there are any workplace issues
- Train and monitor staff to prevent issues from occurring

Some Resources

- Offering staff access to a combination of occupational health, physio and counselling services.
- NHS/IAPT – for talking therapies
- ACAS – workplace advice
- MIND
- Mental health first aid (MHFA).