

Mental health service users' experiences of stress in the workplace

All names have been changed to ensure anonymity in four examples, two in the private sector and two in the public sector, of situations where organisational and individual stress prevention, management and interventions differ dramatically.

- Emma was completing a Master's degree and working at a restaurant where she was under a great deal of stress. The conditions exacerbated her depression and affected her ability to perform her job and study effectively. Now in a new job, the support and flexibility offered to her by the organisation and the personal techniques she uses enable her to reach her potential and stay healthy.
- Hannah was working for a pensions consultancy when she experienced stress burnout. She has been deeply affected by the experience and believes the organisation expected too much from employees while failing them in a number of ways. A number of organisational and individual circumstances lead to her reaching 'breaking point'.
- Kelly had a very positive experience in the voluntary sector. The organisation had a comprehensive mental health policy and offered flexible working hours. Equally important was the support she received from colleagues. She believes the red tape in the public sector often prevents employers from being supportive to employees with mental health problems.

- Joanne worked in a public relations role where she was expected to complete important tasks, in public, without any training or adequate support, even though she had declared her diagnosis of manic depression. The stress triggered her condition and eventually led to her forced resignation. The inhumane treatment she received from the organisation, before and after her employment was terminated, has affected her working life ever since.

The full report provides more detail about these service users' experiences. It also presents case studies of public and private sector organisations making effective interventions to prevent and manage stress.

Conclusion

On basis of this research, Mind concludes that while workplace stress is a huge occupational health problem, it is manageable. Moreover, it is clear that employers cannot afford to ignore it any longer.

We urge understanding and openness to issues of mental health in the workplace. Equally important, we show that it makes better economic sense for organisations to support current employees than to have to recruit and train new ones, who, if the proper systems are not in place, will become stressed themselves.

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Summary of key messages

For employers

There are a number of key actions that employers can take in order to encourage a mentally healthy workplace:

- Demonstrate and encourage awareness, understanding and openness in relation to the issues of stress and mental health in the workplace.
- Adopt and adhere to formal policies on stress and mental health in the workplace and commit to addressing both issues.
- Allow employees to make reasonable adjustments, for example, flexi-time, working from home or quiet rooms to help them to manage mental health problems and work related stress issues.
- Offer resources or procedures to help manage stress at work and generally improve mental wellbeing, for example, stress awareness training, access to counselling or stress busting initiatives.

For employees with mental health problems

- Searching for and applying for jobs can be stressful experiences in themselves, so it is important to recognise and prepare for this.
- Relationships with colleagues are a crucial factor in the experience of stress at work for employees with mental health problems. Therefore, it is important to develop supportive relationships and friendships at work.
- Workplace stress can create mental health problems, or act as a trigger for existing mental health problems which may otherwise have been successfully managed. This highlights the importance of recognising and guarding against factors in the workplace that may cause stress, or of negotiating adjustments to your working practices, in reference to the DDA if necessary.
- You can play a key role in preventing personal stress by developing awareness of the causes and symptoms of your stress and developing personal coping skills.

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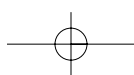
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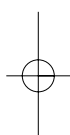


For better
mental health

Stress and mental health in the workplace

Executive summary

Mind week report, May 2005



Executive summary

Background

In January 2005, Mind commissioned Robertson Cooper, leading consultants specialising in occupational stress, to produce research on the extent of the problem of stress in the workplace in England and Wales and what can and should be done about it.

The report looks at the issue from a generic public interest perspective (employers and employees, in particular), as well as from the perspective of mental health service users. It looks at workplace stress as a trigger for mental ill health and covers issues of concern to service users such as Disability Discrimination.

Mind's key recommendations

- Employees should be provided with genuine control over their work and an appropriate degree of self-management of workload.
- Roles should be clearly demarcated with defined responsibilities and expectations.
- Employees should have a say in planning and decision making.
- The physical workplace environment should be of a high standard, including natural light where possible, good ventilation, good health and safety practices.
- Employees should be actively discouraged from working excessively long hours.
- A supportive working environment should be provided for people with mental health problems.
- Flexible hours schemes should be introduced to take account of regular hospital check-ups.

- There should be a gradual return to work for those who have had to take time out after illness.
- Positions should be kept open during sickness absence.
- There should be on-the-job support and mentoring schemes.
- There should be ways of tackling employment discrimination and providing support during periods of ill health.
- There should be government support for proactive recruitment of people with mental health problems.
- There should be better legislation to protect people with mental health problems from discrimination, including provision for those who experience episodes of depression of less than 12 months.
- There should be improved mental health assessment for people applying for the two new benefits to replace Incapacity Benefit.

Stress in the workplace: some facts

- In a Health and Safety Executive (HSE) report on work related stress, 20 per cent of respondents suffered from stress at levels described as "very" or "extremely stressful".¹
- Workplace stress is estimated to be the biggest occupational health problem in the UK after musculoskeletal disorders.
- The most common stress related complaints presented to GPs are depression and anxiety and are reported to affect 20 per cent of the UK working population.

¹ "The Scale of Occupational Stress: The Bristol Stress and Health at Work Study", *HSE Contract Research Report 265*, HSE Books (2000).

² "Long term sickness absence", *British Medical Journal*, 330, pp 802-3.

³ Health and Safety Executive (2004) *Health and Safety Statistics Highlights 2003/04*. Available at www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/overpic.htm

- Mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, now account for more Incapacity Benefit (IB) claims than back pain.²
- It has been estimated that nearly 10 per cent of the UK's gross national product (GNP) is lost each year due to job generated stress.
- Stress is the highest cause of absence among non-manual employees, with an estimated 12.8 million working days lost in Britain in 2003/04 due to stress, and depression or anxiety ascribed to work related stress.³
- Nearly three in every ten employees will have a mental health problem in any one year, the great majority of which will be anxiety and depressive disorders.
- The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) estimates that 30 times as many working days are lost due to mental ill health as from industrial disputes.
- Mental health problems account for the loss of over 91 million working days each year.
- Half of all days lost through mental ill health are due to anxiety and stress conditions.⁴
- In a CBI survey of over 800 companies, 98 per cent of respondents said mental health should be a company concern, with 81 per cent of those saying that the mental health of employees should be a company priority.⁵
- But fewer than one in ten of the companies surveyed had an official policy on mental health.

Workplace stress in the public and private sectors

Despite the common perception that public sector employees enjoy shorter hours and a less ruthless culture than their private sector colleagues, a survey of TUC Safety representatives revealed:

- In the public sector, 64 per cent of public sector employers were concerned about overwork or stress at work, compared to 48 per cent of private sector employers.
- Stress was the top ranked concern in both sectors.⁶

However, the difference in sickness absence rates between the two sectors is marked. The 2004 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development employee absence survey revealed:

- Highest levels of sickness absence in public services, with 4.7 per cent of working days lost per year on average or 10.7 days lost per employee per year overall.
- Lowest rates were found in the private sector, 3.4 per cent of working days lost per year on average or 7.8 days lost per employee per year, and equate to a cost of £588 per year per employee.⁷

This imbalance could be due in some measure to the fact that the culture within the public sector is more accepting of higher sickness absence rates relative to the private sector. Tesco, for example, made headlines with an initiative to cut short term sickness absence by withholding sickness pay for the first three days of absence. Such schemes are unlikely to be adopted by heavily unionised public sector organisations.

⁴ Gray, P. (2000) *Mental Health in the Workplace: Tackling the Effects of Stress*, London, Mental Health Foundation.

⁵ CBI, cited by Gray, P., in *Mental Health in the Workplace: Tackling the effects of stress*, The Mental Health Foundation (2000).

Stress and mental health in the workplace

Mental health in the workplace: the law

Disability is defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) as a “physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day to day activities”. Employers have a duty not to discriminate directly against disabled applicants and staff, or treat them less favourably, because of their disability, and also have a duty to make reasonable adjustments.

- Fewer than four in ten employers say that they would consider hiring someone with a history of mental health problems, compared to more than six in ten for someone with a physical disability.⁸

Stress prevention and management

All organisations should have a stress prevention policy which lays down the way the organisation deals with stress issues. All policies should include:

1. Why the policy is important and why the business needs the policy.
2. Who is responsible for what.
3. A definition of stress.
4. An indicator of what the business strategy is for dealing with stress, in particular, the general activities the business will be undertaking as a matter of course.

Stress intervention

There are three levels of intervention when it comes to dealing with workplace stress:

- **Primary interventions** aimed at eliminating or modifying environmental stressors to reduce their negative impact on individuals, for example, job redesign, culture change, flexible working or work life balance policies.
- **Secondary interventions** focus on increasing the awareness, resilience and coping skills of the individual, for example, stress management training, health promotion activities and skills training more generally (without trying to eliminate or modify the stressors).
- **Tertiary interventions** concerned with the treatment and rehabilitation of distressed individuals, for example, counselling or return to work policies.

Managing for mental health: the Mind employers' resource pack

This fully revised edition is a must for all employers who want to ensure best practice in mental health promotion at work. It includes a complete guide to good practice and policies on employment and mental health, as well as essential background information on mental illness. Order the pack from Mind publications at £14.99, contact details overleaf.

⁶ TUC (2004) *Biennial Survey of Safety Reps*. Available at www.tuc.org.uk/h_and_s/tuc-9056-f0.pdf

⁷ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2004) *Employee absence 2004: a survey of management policy and practice*, London, CIPD. Available at www.cipd.co.uk/surveys

⁸ Social Exclusion Unit (2004) *Action on Mental Health - A Guide to Promoting Social Inclusion*. Available at www.socialexclusion.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=300