Multi-level approaches to ‘managing’ work stress

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The scale and cost of work-related stress

- Eurofound (2012) high exposure to major psychosocial risk
- HSE (2017) 12.5 M days off for work stress, depression or anxiety
- EU-OSHA (2013) 40% indicated their workplace manages stress ‘poorly’
- EASHW (2014) Economic burden of up to $187 B

Managing work stress: A three-tier approach

Resilience in social work: An ecological model

Public Policy

- Gross national wellbeing?
- Monitor work-related stress to identify problems, target changes and evaluate impact (HSE)
- Fund (and disseminate) research on ‘what works’
- Highlight costs (direct and indirect) of psychologically unhealthy workplaces
- Be aware of powerful role models
- Challenge stigma

Organisational level

- Audit work stress and act on findings
- Improve job content, leadership and the working environment and enrich support networks
- Role models to reduce stigma and prioritise self-care
- Most stressors are organisational not occupational, BUT few intervention studies … ‘organisational interventions need to be better designed and focus on addressing the specific factors that cause stress’
Manager level

- Leadership style closely linked to staff wellbeing
- Line managers play a strong role in identifying and managing workplace stress
- Line managers’ competencies ‘the skills and behaviours line managers need to prevent and reduce stress at work’
- HSE/CIPD and job-specific competencies

Management competencies for preventing and reducing workplace stress (HSE/CIPD)

- Respectful and responsible: managing emotions and having integrity
- Managing and communicating existing and future work: proactive and problem solving
- Managing the individual within the team: personally accessible and sociable
- Reasoning/managing difficult situations: managing conflict and taking responsibility

Manager competencies for health and social care

Knowledge

- How the emotional demands of the job affect wellbeing (individual differences)
- Availability of training and support
- The need for recovery
- The importance of reflective supervision
- The key role of support from managers and colleagues

Skills

- Develop a culture that de-stigmatises stress
- Role model self care/compassion as well as resilience
- Identify signs of distress and deal as early as possible
- Effective communication skills
- Anticipate the impact of changes and change fatigue

Attributes

- Emotional literacy; self awareness
- Appropriate empathy
- Self efficacy to facilitate change
- Forward thinking and creative
- Integrity, authenticity and a sense of equity

Family supportive supervisory framework

Emotional support

- Instrumental support for scheduling conflicts

Role modelling effective WF behaviour

Creative work-family management

See Hammer et al. (2008); Kossek et al. (2011)

Team level

- The team provides reassurance, acceptance, cooperation and a sense of belonging
- Peers are a powerful source of support
- People more likely to disclose and discuss stress and mental health problems
- The use of care teams and peers e.g. Blue Light Peer Supporters; peer coaching

Individual level: health and social care

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See Gillard et al. (2014); Biggar et al. (2017)
Individual interventions: just a sticking plaster?

• Stress management skills and resilience are required, but risk of pathologising a ‘failure’ to cope?

• Concerns about shifting responsibility to the individual via professional standards (See HCPC)

• What should people be resilient to?

• Is burnout a ‘disease’ or a logical reaction?

• No work should be intrinsically hazardous to health

Beware of the downside of initiatives …

• Increasing resilience

• Reducing sickness absence

• E-working

• Continuous improvement

• Job enrichment

• ‘Family-friendly’ options

• The gig economy

• Enhancing compassionate care

• More support from managers/peers

Conclusions:

• Take an integrated, strategic approach

• Consult and work with all stakeholders

• Reduce demands, increase control, support and other resources

• Anticipate new hazards

• Wellbeing risk assessments for new initiatives

• Happy worker = productive worker; a business case for psychologically healthy workplaces

• Work at all levels to reduce stigma

See Nielsen et al. 2017

No quick fixes

• Beware of bad science

• Use evidence-based interventions

• Treat the underlying problem not the symptom

• No one-size-fits-all solutions

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