Stress workshops and programmes (Shaun Tyson)

There is ample evidence that ‘stress’ has become a common feature of working life. Not only does the identification of the collection of symptoms which are clustered under the heading of ‘stress’ mean the problem will be more typically noticed and reported, but also the nature of working life itself has changed, which may account for increased levels of stress among employees. The epidemic of stress at work may also therefore be due to work intensification, a consequence of the 24/7 society and of the highly competitive environment for business pressures on the workers who now commute long distances to work. In addition, the anxiety and fear created by the recession meant there are macro-economic causes of this complaint becoming the reason for much sickness absence.

Stress has been defined by Roden and Williams (2002) as follows: ‘Stress occurs when the perceived demands placed on the individual exceed that individual’s ability to cope’ (p. 47).

Managers have long recognized the negative effects of stress on work performance, and occupational health specialists have equally long been aware that ‘stress’ exacerbates existing mental ill health of a lasting kind.

Among the various responses to prevalence of stress at work, good employers are keen to identify and to deal with those aspects of the causes of stress which they could avoid, and to ensure individuals are not suffering without help. There are also other good reasons for managerial attention to the problem.

In the USA, health care costs are the top concern of the Chief Financial Officer (HR Magazine, 2014: 17). This is associated with the reactions of companies to the Affordable Care Act, which introduces wider health care provisions to all members of the workforce in the USA, and which brings costs to employers.

In the UK, for three years in succession, stress among employees was the most common reason for sickness absence in 2013 (People Management, 2014: 23). The highest reported levels were in accountancy, property, medical, education, media, marketing and transport/distribution industries (p. 26). According to the CBI, in their 2011 survey, the direct costs of work absences in that year were in excess of £17 billion.

What are employers doing to reduce stress?

Preventive measures include wellness programmes, which bring the added benefit that they may reduce insurance costs, and form also part of the total reward approach as an attractive benefit. Reducing blood pressure, heart disease, and strokes is a long-term aim in many treatment programmes. These aims explicitly seek to reduce levels of stress (Wood 2013). These aims can only be met with general health improvements, for example to diet and habits such as smoking and alcohol consumption.

There are also policies such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) which provide a source of help to employees who are in any difficulty, through counselling services, as a way of avoiding major problems for the individual.

This is the context in which stress reduction workshops are located.

Stress workshops

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Delegates

There are two different types of programmes. There are those which seek to raise awareness among managers and to explain stress so that as managers of people they can identify and act appropriately when their staff are showing signs of stress, and can create working conditions which are not inherently stressful, or at least to mitigate the effects on the individual. The other type of programme is designed to help employees of all levels to cope with stress, and to become resilient. Because these programmes have different aims they are not mutually exclusive programmes, and may both be run for the same audience/delegates.

Generic workshop objectives which are suitable for both types of need, both or either programme, with appropriate modification

1. To define stress, to help managers to identify stress in themselves and others, and to understand how to mitigate stress through improvements in job design, and the work environment.
2. To understand what interventions are available and how to use them to reduce levels of stress.
3. To help those people who feel stressed, by giving them personal insights and techniques to reduce stress, and advice on how to avoid stress, and where to seek help if they experience signs of stress-related illnesses.

Content

The introduction should include: definitions of stress, and its relationship to other health disorders; the causes of stress for individuals, and individual differences; the financial costs of absences as well as the personal costs of stress, in relationships, loss of self-confidence blood pressure, mental ill health, anxiety and depression; organizational consequences, loss of trust, impact on employer brand, legal implications; the objectives and the structure of the programme.

Structure of the programme Programmes should be a mixture of information giving, discussion, exercises, cases, and self-completion questionnaires, with individual and some group working. Typically, these programmes could be run in, say, one to two days according the depth of the treatment of the material.

The ethics of the programme The main principle is that no one should be induced to reveal more about themselves than is safe; any possible danger to the delegates’ mental health must be avoided. No personal data should be revealed, and if personal questionnaires are used, the data must remain confidential to the person concerned. There should be counselling available, with qualified, experienced staff who are able to make appropriate reference to health professionals if necessary.

The topics to be covered The causes and consequences of stress, the health aspects, the impact of job design on stress (e.g. levels of autonomy, motivation built into the work, feedback and control, interest in the work, levels of support, etc.). Terms and conditions, e.g. working hours, benefits, flexibility. Personal issues and interpersonal relationships, combinations of personal and job-related stress.

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Ways to reduce stress: understanding the dynamics of how stress occurs, fight-or-flight reactions, building resilience methods to reduce stress, mindfulness techniques, counselling and treatments such as cognitive behaviour techniques.

‘Mindfulness’ is a technique which helps people to stay in the present in their thinking, as a form of meditation and relaxation, combined with mind–body awareness exercises, and gentle stretching, and there is mindful yoga. There can be group dialogue but these exercises can be done in groups and/or at home.

**Materials** There are health questionnaires/instruments such as the Occupational Stress Indicator (Williams and Cooper 1997). In addition, case studies, videos, and discussion exercises, as well as the slides used in the presentations.

**Follow-up** There is likely to be an assumption that there will be a follow-up, so that course tutors and the organization can ensure the programme is having a beneficial effect. However, it is better that any issues which are likely to lead to personal help with stress are referred to the EAP counsellor.

**References and further reading**


