Mindful Work

The worrying facts about workplace stress

Work-related stress is a growing epidemic.

A survey by the Centre for Mental Health shows that 55% of employees feel that working has an adverse effect on their mental well-being, and a third of us feel unable to cope with stress caused by work. The Office of National Statistics[i] indicates that more than one third of us live with high levels of anxiety.

The Health and Safety Executive in 2018 found that in the workplace, stress accounted for 47% of all work-related ill health cases and 45% of all working days lost due to ill health. Typically, an employee who is off sick for stress will be away for 24 days, and on average 27 days are lost each year per employee, due to stress, anxiety or depression.

Research by The Priory[ii] shows a 58% increase in stress in the last 10 years, and there is a 17% increase in the last 3 years in people being referred for stress-related illness. The Mental Health Foundation[iii] suggests that 3 in every 10 employees will have a mental health problem in any year.

The Farmer Stevenson report[iv] in 2017 defined the costs of presenteeism, absenteeism and staff turnover per employee in different sectors:

	Low estimate	High estimate	Avg
Finance, insurance, real estate	£ 2017	£ 2564	£ 2290
Health	£ 2029	£ 2174	£ 2101
Professional services	£ 1473	£ 1998	£ 1735
Education	£ 1617	£ 1817	£ 1717
Public sector	£ 1551	£ 1878	£ 1714
Avg. these 5 sectors			**£ 1911**

A multiplier effect

Stress is a killer factor in establishing effective organisations and viable businesses. Stressed staff display a lack of focus, creativity, and good decision-making.

Stressed individuals tend to communicate unskilfully, blame others, and behave without empathy, creating dysfunctional teams and conflict, and undermining external relationships with partners and clients.

Additionally, and on a more personal level, it leads to physical and mental health problems.

Taken together, these effects are likely to lead to:

- Poor work quality
- Poor communication with colleagues and clients
- Reduced productivity
- Absenteeism - or presenteeism (being there but doing very little)
- Losing staff all together

Secondary impacts of stress for staff include limiting social contacts with family and friends; not exercising; or eating unhealthily to soothe difficult feelings.

The most common causes of workplace stress

The two top causes of stress, that we hear again and again, are:

1. Work overload and unreasonable deadlines (which become more pronounced with cuts in service provision and tighter fiscal budgets)
2. Difficulties with other people especially line managers, colleagues, and clients

Closely followed by:

3. Not being in control of one's work environment
4. Feeling under-valued or misunderstood
5. Poor pay, conditions and physical environment

Work overload is a particular issue in the UK and USA, where working hours are increasing; in some workplaces working very long hours seems to be expected.

However, working more than 50 hours a week is both *counter-productive* (research by Stanford University) and can lead to health problems such as stroke (according to a 2015 NHS study of half a million people).

5 key actions

1 – Know the signs of workplace stress

The first step is to know what's going on, both in yourself, and in your staff. Do you recognise the signs of stress?

To help with this, we have developed a Stress Check - a free online tool which you can fill in and save as a pdf file. Do it yourself and encourage colleagues and staff to do it too.

- What is it telling you?
- Who do you need to discuss it with?
- What's stopping you taking action about it – and how can you get past that?

Our Stress Check Tool is available on the members' pages or here:
https://mindfulwork.co.uk/stress-test-2019/

2 – Face up to work overload and unreasonable deadlines

There are many time management guides available online, but just getting organised may not be all that's needed. Somehow we need to approach the working day in an altogether more purposeful, creative and energetic way. This means clearing the obstacles first, that you may have identified in Stage 1.

That said, here's our top action list:

- Be clear what needs doing - avoid surprises or burying your head in the sand
- Make a table of tasks, time required, what you need to do it (eg from others), deadline, & importance
- Figure out what's realistic and achievable

- Share this between staff and managers, agree a do-able list, and a strategy for addressing the tasks which can't be done (eg inform those who need to know)
- Stick to the plan
- Update every week and if necessary go through this process again
- Make sure the plan is reasonable and SMART

3 – Improve working relationships

When we ask people what they struggle with at work, 'other people' comes up in many forms. We're social animals, and we can't avoid playing out social games, fears and habits in the workplace, where we're surrounded by people we may not have chosen to be close to.

There are of course many approaches to improving team management. But from a mindfulness perspective, the following steps can be transformative:

- Articulate the problems on paper – who do you have a problem with, what are the triggers, how does that make you feel, what is your response?
- Step back and breathe – take time out to de-stress and learn to pause between action and response
- Be clear what we really know to be true - most of what we experience is in our own minds, and is our own story, yet may be inaccurate, and we can easily mis-read others or just have a difference in style
- Recognise that we all have problems – before reacting to what someone says or does, take a moment to step into their shoes and recognise the stress or difficulties they may be experiencing
- Take appropriate action – meet with the people concerned in an informal way, to explain on how their actions affect you – and be friendly!
- Set an intention at the start of each day to be friendly and compassionate, and smile more!

4 – Take care of yourself

The only person who can make things better is you – we all need to take responsibility for our own wellbeing (and encourage our staff and colleagues to do this too). So here are a few easy wins:

- Create gaps to pause, breathe and get perspective
- Create a nurturing workspace – tidy up and treat yourself eg flowers
- Eat proper meals, away from the desk, and drink more water
- Get some exercise or do yoga every day
- Be kind to others – it makes us happier
- Develop a personal well-being plan, and find a buddy to work with so you make a commitment with each other

5 – Develop a workplace strategy

At an organisational level it's clearly important to address stress, yet despite the evidence of its impact on wellbeing and productivity, ACAS[v] say that more than a quarter of HR managers have no strategy in place to deal with stress or anxiety, despite the evidence of benefits of doing so[vi].

We have a strategy to address stress at an organisational level (*feel free to share this but please credit Mindful Work).* This includes:

- Inviting a range of stakeholders to be involved in a creating a strategy
- Identifying the indicators of stress, gather data, and survey staff
- Identifying the causes of stress – non judgementally
- Taking action for individuals at risk
- Developing new team management protocols
- Planning group training or individual coaching

Action plan stage	Key tasks and *contribution of mindfulness training*
Developing a **stress action plan** and protocols	• A clear plan and protocols should be developed, included in induction activities, and regularly revisited and updated • Participation by stakeholders at all levels is recommended in action plan development
Recognising stress-related outcomes	• Define indicators and signs of stress in individuals and teams • Brief all managers to identify and act when signs are evident *(mindfulness helps build emotional intelligence)* • Gather data, for example on: level and reasons for absenteeism, employee wellbeing, productivity outputs etc. & be alert to negative trends
Identifying the **causes** of stress and **risk factors**	• Ask individuals and team representatives, or hold group action-planning events, to identify causes and risks specific to your organisation/business *(hold conversations and run events with mindful listening skills)* • Note the most common risk factors are: work overload, control, management environment, clarity of role/responsibility, team relationships, and change/restructuring
Taking action for **individual** cases	• Intervene early with employee reviews, return to work interviews etc *(employ mindful coaching approaches)* • Jointly agree an individual action plan • *Offer or recommend mindfulness training (workshops or online course)* • Maintain communication & review progress
Taking action at team and **organisational** levels	• Hold team interaction events *(employ mindful meeting skills)* • *Offer group mindfulness training workshops* • Encourage informal coaching between team members *(using mindful conversation principles)*
Monitoring and review of progress	• Hold regular reviews through repeated surveys and from other data, to inform progress in addressing stress • Reflect and suggest updates to action plan

Finally, consider a taking a mindfulness course, or provide one for your employees

Mindfulness programmes have a proven effectiveness record in addressing stress - for example, programmes have been found to:

- Improve **wellbeing** resulting in **less time taken off work** – from research in 2014 at the Psychology and Neuroscience faculty at the University of Colorado - and at Transport for London this led to a 70% drop in time off work for anxiety or stress
- Our own 8 week team-based training returns an average of over 70% improvement in the capacity to manage stress, with a resulting 65%+ improvement in productivity
- Improve **productivity** and saves money – a study in 2014 at Dow Chemical Company indicated savings of $22,580 per year per employee
- Help with **work focus** – as identified by 88% of participants in a programme at IF Insurance
- Improve **capacity for multi-tasking** – from a study by University of Washington Seattle*, 2012*
- Help **people get along better** – eg a study on empathetic concern after brief mindfulness exercises researched by the University of Queensland, Australia, 2014
- The Stevenson Farmer Deloitte review in 2017 found that wellbeing interventions on average return over 4x the cost of investment.

References and other evidence

[i] ONS Annual Population Survey, 2012/13

[ii] November 2012, Priory Group

[iii] http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk

[iv] Thriving at Work: Stevenson, Farmer 2017
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thriving-at-work-a-review-of-mental-health-and-employers

[v] http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1993

[vi] BT's mental well-being strategy resulted in a 21.5% reduction in annual mental health related sickness absence between June 2010 and June 2012.

McCubbin et al Nov 2014
Research shows **positive impact on physical and mental health**, **work productivity, and reduction in healthcare utilization** [and hence less time off work], of employees in mindfulness programme, up to one year afterwards.

Aikens, K. A.et al 2014
Web-based Mindfulness-based interventions found to **combat work stress and burnout**. 66 employees in Dow Chemical Company significantly improved their 'resilience, and physical, emotional, and cognitive vigor, and decreased their perceived stress'. A cost-benefit analysis projected possible **cost savings of up to $22,580 per year per employee** due to decreased employee burnout.

Fortney, L et al 2013
A program with 30 clinicians offered 14 hours of mindfulness instruction over a three-day weekend,

followed by two 2-hour post-training sessions; this led to '**significant decreases in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, anxiety, and stress, and significant increases in a sense of personal accomplishment**. All of these differences were **significant at nine-month follow-up**.'

Sharma and Rush, 2014
In a review of 17 research studies of 8 week mindfulness programmes, 16 demonstrated **positive changes .. related to anxiety and/or stress**… mindfulness-based stress reduction appears to be a promising modality for stress management.

Chiesa A, Calati R, Serretti A, 2011
Findings … provided preliminary evidence suggesting that MMPs could **enhance cognitive functions**… early phases of mindfulness training could be associated with significant improvements in **selective and executive attention**, whereas the following phases could be mainly associated with **improved unfocused sustained attention** abilities.

The Ashridge Journal, 2011
Preliminary findings suggest a significantly upwards shift in general levels of satisfaction
for individuals who commit to a period of mindfulness…. 61% noted 'feeling of **calm'**, 30% listed '**having time to themselves'**, 22% of the items listed related to **improved sleep**, and 22% also cited 'having a **different perspective'**.

IF Insurance, 2010
An independent evaluation of a mindfulness programme found, based on participant's self-assessment, that:
88% of participants reporting "a highly **increased ability to stay focused**"
76% of participants reporting "highly **increased positive relationships within their teams**".
68% of participants reporting "highly **increased personal efficiency and productivity**"
60% of participants reporting "highly increased **ability to counteract stress**"

Transport for London, 2010
After a mindfulness programme with 600 staff, there was a **70% drop in time off work** for anxiety or stress, and a 50% drop in absenteeism for any other reason.

Department of Economics University of Warwick, 2011
Happier workers, research found, were 12 percent more productive. Unhappier workers were 10 percent less productive.
http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/research/centres/eri/bulletin/2009-10-3/ops/

Levy et al, University of Washington Seattle, 2012
Mindfulness and meditation training in a high-stress information environment indicated **improved capacity for multitasking, staying on tasks longer, less negative emotion after task performance, and improved memory** for the tasks they performed.
https://faculty.washington.edu/wobbrock/pubs/gi-12.02.pdf

Erik Dane and Bradley J Brummel 2014
In examining workplace mindfulness and its relations to job performance and turnover intention, the study found that there was **a positive relationship between workplace mindfulness and job performance, and less tendency to leave the job.**
http://hum.sagepub.com/content/67/1/105.abstract

Shauna Shapiro, Greater Good talk 2014
When we are happy, there is a greater proportion of activity in the left pre frontal cortex. Experienced meditators have higher left ratio. With a randomized control group and mindfulness trainees, after 4 months, the left side was more active. **Changing external circumstances, negative or positive – job, relationships, health etc – do not change your level of happiness long term. Mindfulness can, because the very structure of our brain can be changed through training. What we practice, becomes stronger.**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5AqgMo1P05E&list=UUPfDETmabmiBHjNrPPHlF5A&index=39