



# WORKPLACE STRESS

## Moving beyond being a victim

GERRY TALBOT AND ZENA KNIGHT

The statistics on health impacts of workplace stress can be enough to induce stress in themselves: **13 million working days** lost to stress-related absence in a year; the average case of stress related ill health gives rise to 31 days absence; one third of all new incidences of ill health are caused by workplace stress. Employers know their responsibilities in managing stress in the workplace, yet the situation gets worse and worse. **Are we tackling the issue in the right way?**

The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as “The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them.” This highlights that the pressure in the workplace is not necessarily a bad thing. Many people react well to pressure and find it motivating – increasing productivity. Stress results when the pressure exceeds the individual’s capacity to deal with it.

Many solutions to workplace stress – awareness campaigns, focus groups and training events have focussed on how individuals can cope with these pressures, or make representations to reduce them.

Yet so often the effects are short term and before long the pressure and the stress reaction returns. In fact, many stress management programmes can be about how to work better with the pressure – increasing the risk rather than diminishing it.

Studies show that the most stressful form of pressure is that imposed upon us from other people – levels of workload, deadlines, lack of control of our working day etc. As a result, stress management techniques can focus on how to react better to such impositions. An alternative is to empower the individual to **deal with stress more proactively**.

Once we move beyond being a victim of stress, and understand more closely our own role in managing it, the solutions can be closer to hand. This does not mean stress is the employee's fault – more that how we choose to react to the pressure at work is our choice – and once we start to choose proactively, **we can manage the stress more successfully.**

“The most stressful form of pressure is that imposed upon us from other people...”

Successful stress management training is therefore firstly about **ACCEPTANCE** that stress affects us all. We can learn to **BLOCK** stress by understanding the causes and symptoms of stress and we can increase our awareness of when we step over the line from motivational pressure to excessive demands and stress. With that in place, we need to understand our own physiological and psychological reactions to that pressure, because we all react individually.

To change our behaviours when under stress, we can work on our own beliefs and sub-conscious thought patterns – giving us a whole range of tools and techniques which will find us in a better position to **CONTROL** and reduce stress. This deeper level of training creates a whole new perspective on the issue. Rather than mending a pothole, to allow smooth passage of the pressure and increase our ability to cope, we are creating a new road on a different route, to change the nature of the issue.

In particular, this development of our inner stress management techniques shifts us from being reactive to the pressure of work to being proactive – taking

more control of our workload, deadlines and our working day and so on. From being a victim, at the mercy of external forces creating pressure in our work, we become a player in the game, directing at least some elements of what affects us.

The benefit of this different approach is that the impact is longer lasting – the empowered employee can carry these techniques into a wider range of situations within the workplace over a greater period of time. In addition, the organisation automatically reacts to the proactive nature of the employee, with the possibility that structural and organisational causes of stress, which may be wider than just one individual, can be identified and managed out.

Keeping the pressure employees feel on the 'motivated' side of the line, and away from the 'stressed' side has obvious impacts on productivity, absenteeism, retention and innovation. Empowering employees to **move from being a victim of stress**, into taking a proactive approach to managing the sources of stress and their reactions to them is the first building block in that process.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Gerry Talbot and Zena Knight are Directors of the leading behavioural change training company, Advanced Behavioural Capabilities Ltd.

Their ABC of Stress Management course empowers employees to more effectively deal with challenge and stress in the workplace.

To learn more, visit [www.abc-training.com](http://www.abc-training.com) or call **01638 664345**.

