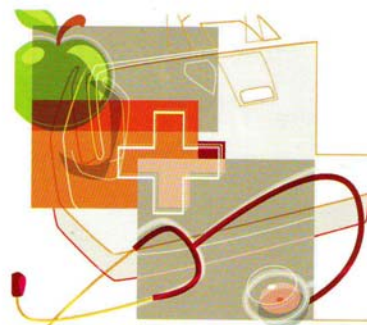


employee benefits

In a position to cope?

Stress-related issues can lead to huge costs for employers, but line managers are ideally placed to identify the problem early on and begin to tackle it before it can escalate, says **Sally Hamilton**



Allowing stress to take hold among a workforce can be costly in terms of the number of working days lost, reduced employee performance and, in the worst cases, legal action being brought against employers for breaching duty-of-care legislation. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's 2007 *Absence Management Survey*, published in July 2008, stress led to the loss of 13.8 million working days and was the biggest cause of long-term absence among non-manual workers last year.

But just 37% of employers have a strategy in place to deal with stress, according to *Employee Benefits/HSA Healthcare research 2008*. Arguably, line managers are best placed to identify and deal with the problem and 58% of those with a strategy in place focus on equipping them with the appropriate skills.

As line managers sit between the organisation and the workforce, they can help prevent normal work pressures escalating into something less bearable, as well as spot the warning signals of stress. They can also be instrumental in organising stress audits for their department, pinpointing problem areas.

However, line managers may need some guidance and even training in order to do so. John Dean, head of healthcare and risk benefits at Punter Southall, says: "They will need to identify typical signs of stress as well as where to find support, ranging from the human resources and occupational health departments to using employee assistance programmes (EAPs) and seeking help from the providers of the employer's private medical and group income protection insurance. Letting a stressed employee work shorter hours for a time to help sort out personal problems is cheaper and better for the organisation than employees being off on long-term sick [leave]."

Insurers of perks such as group income protection are often as keen as employers to sort out a stress case before it becomes an expensive medical or income replacement claim.

Line management training should start with an explanation of what stress actually is. The Health and Safety Executive defines this as "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed upon them".

Line managers should then be shown how to understand the difference between pressure, which is motivating, and stress, which arises when pressure becomes excessive. It is vital they are alert to warning signals because sufferers might be reluctant to seek help. Geoff Taylor, senior consultant for Axa Icas, says: "Many see it as a sign of weakness to admit to stress and worry it could mark their card, sidelining them for promotion or putting them first in line for redundancy. Typical signs can be

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Geoff Taylor,
Axa Icas

when an easygoing employee starts being argumentative or someone who is normally detailed in their work begins to make elementary mistakes."

When dealing with stress cases, a line manager has a number of steps they can take to help the employee. These range from a simple one-to-one chat to referring the employee to a counselling service or the occupational health department, or even reorganising their working role. Staff may also benefit from cognitive behavioural therapy. Wolfgang Seidl, director of EAP provider The Validium Group, says: "We try to explain how to recognise the boundary between knowing when lending a listening ear is enough and when professional help needs to be brought in. If they are unsure, line managers can use an EAP, if there is one, to ask in confidence what they should do."

Nationwide Building Society, for example, held workshops for 80 managers and HR personnel to outline the support available during a period of change at the organisation. Harvie Hughes, occupational health and safety consultant at Nationwide, says: "The workshops taught managers how to recognise the early signs of stress, including irritability, reduced eye contact and inconsistent work outputs."

As well as being the watchdog of stress, a line manager's own management style can sometimes in itself be a cause of stress. "Sometimes all the action required of a manager is to provide a little tender loving care. However, if it is an issue of too high a workload, the manager might have to help put together a recovery plan with the employee. HR may need to be involved," says Dean **EB**

If you read nothing else read this...

- **Some 13.8 million working days were lost last year due to stress, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.**
- **Line managers are in pole position for spotting symptoms of stress and acting on them.**
- **Line managers need guidance and possibly training on what to look out for and where to turn in terms of support, including perks such as employee assistance programmes and group income protection.**
- **The Health and Safety Executive has devised tips for managers at <http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards>**