

NEED TO KNOW

RELIEVING ANXIETY

Making sure your **workforce** is happy and content

In times of worry...

Recessions induce stress in employees, and this can have a negative effect on your bottom line. So what can be done to remedy this situation...

Words: Louise Cole

Stress is a primary cause of lost working days; they cost UK industry up to £530m a year and the tax payer £3.8bn, according to statistics from the Health and Safety Executive.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act, work-related stress is the responsibility of the employer, as well as detracting significantly from performance and staff morale.

The problem for employers is that stress of any kind can also affect productivity. Uncertainty about family security or personal money worries can have as strong an impact on workplace activity as job uncertainty. Although it is not an employer's legal responsibility to handle personal worries, it doesn't make sound business sense to ignore someone who is struggling with anxiety.

During a recession, stress can become even more of an issue. Recent research shows that UK adults spend more than two hours a day worrying. For many, this is likely to affect their concentration, their love life and may even make these individuals more likely to compromise an

CASE STUDY ICAS

One of the leading providers of EAP services is ICAS – originally the Independent Counselling and Advisory Service.

Eugene Farrell, business manager at UK-based AXA-ICAS, explains: "The cornerstone of these types of services is confidentiality and professional expertise.

"And the employer pays no more than they would for coffee over the year.

"In a larger company, it costs a few pounds per head; for a small firm possibly £30-40 a head. That's not much money for the return."

The management reports can also offer a form of 'social benchmarking' highlighting training or support needs for the workforce as a whole.

Farrell claims that an aggregation of studies into EAP, which was carried out at Aberdeen University, didn't show a negative return on investment in any study; some ROIs were as high as 14:1.

WHAT IS STRESS?

The UK HSE defines stress as a state of being arising from "the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand".

It is a state of being rather than an illness, but it can contribute to illness; it is also distinct from the buzz-inducing pressure which can make you perform better.

CASE STUDY WINCANTON

Wincanton has looked at EAP schemes but, says group health and safety manager Sean Cusack, they are expensive to run, and Wincanton's in-house systems seemed to work well enough.

Managers are trained to recognise early signs of stress, and will refer workers to

HR/occupational health who can arrange practical help with problems, counselling or arrange compassionate leave. "If someone has an acute emotional problem, then we offer six counselling sessions," says Cusack.

"Apparently, for most people, six is enough to take them

through the worst of it; if they need more than this then they require the kind of long-term care the medical profession can provide."

All support is confidential, although if someone faces divorce, or alcohol problems, they can be unofficially mentored. "We buddy

people up with someone who has been through the same thing," says Cusack. "We haven't seen stress get worse because of the recession, but I think that's because this is already such a high-pressure industry. But good firms need good processes. It's important to have a culture where people can admit to having problems."





otherwise healthy lifestyle and turn to alcohol or drugs.

Phillip Hodson, fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, says employers must use 'emotional intelligence' during the recession.

He adds: "This means being aware that everyone is asking: 'Is my job safe?' Panic is contagious. Worry freezes people and stops them resolving issues. Boards must offer leadership and that means saying where the company is going, within reason.

"If you fail to communicate your position, people will imagine it to be worse than it is."

He warns that firms must be particularly sensitive about handling lay-offs.

"If you treat those leaving with a lack of respect, it will be noticed by those who remain," he explains.

Hodson believes that as well as clear communication and calm leadership, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) can be useful. Brought to Europe by the US in the 1970s, these offer confidential phonelines for staff that can provide support with any kind of worry, professional or personal, 24/7, and they can also provide an overview of employee concerns in a management report.

It may seem that the smaller the firm, the closer the bonds between colleagues, so the easier it will be to see if someone needs help. But this depends on the culture of the firm. Some may feel more exposed in an intimate firm and more concerned that their troubles don't become office gossip; anonymity can be a blessing. Equally, managers may have more control over their jobs, but they may be more likely to feel isolated and unable to find a peer to discuss problems with.

Other ways to alleviate stress

Someone with serious anxiety issues needs to seek professional help to deal with them. But there are easy and cheap ways to help your team's emotional health overall.

- Team sports build support networks, produce endorphins and even help defeat clinical depression.
- Consider having a trusted counsellor's name and number to hand even if you don't want to finance it.
- Ask a practice nurse from your local GP surgery to come into the depot, particularly if she'll discuss any health issue. This gives anyone needing to talk the chance to without having to make it obvious to colleagues.

- Have an up-front attitude. Treat people with respect and honesty. Information is empowering, so share it.

- Ask a local massage therapist to come in to offer short relaxation sessions; many treatments can be done fully clothed and without a loss of privacy.

- Keep some relaxation CDs in the office – not to be used when driving or operating heavy machinery. Short neurolinguistic programming (NLP) or hypnotherapy recordings can relax, boost alertness and lift your mood – ideal for a 15-minute rest break. Useful for people who can't switch off.

Signs of stress

- Irritability or hyper-sensitivity to criticism
- Withdrawn behaviour
- Problems sleeping
- Poor concentration
- Missing deadlines, procrastination, making excuses
- Absenteeism
- Likely to drink, smoke or eat more junk food than before

With a combination of good communication and a willing attitude, stress can be beaten. ■