

Healthy Heads

Helping identify stress, anxiety and depression at work.

Recent changes in workplace culture and more flexible workforces has transformed the Australian economy, yet had a major impact on employees. This is captured by a single word – “stress” – a word that has found a place in our modern language - the same as “texting” and “BlackBerrys”.

The cost of stress, anxiety and depression for business and families

Too much workplace pressure is very costly for business and in the US costs about \$150 billion a year and in the UK, between five and 10 per cent of GNP a year (Cooper 2006). Stress, anxiety and depression are often linked and employees coming to work, but not functioning due to illness or injury, costs our economy \$25.7 billion a year. Depression is the highest contributor to presenteeism (Medibank Private 2007). In a New Zealand study, one in seven women and one in 10 men out of nearly 900 people with no previous mental health difficulties reported being stressed at work and suffering clinical depression or anxiety by the age of 32 (Henzell 2007).

The trend towards a long hours culture has seen managers perceiving a negative influence on both themselves and their families. They report that long hours seriously damage their health, affect family relationships and greatly undermine productivity. According to Coopers (2006), those managers who reported feeling 'less productive' averaged nearly 10 days sick leave a year, in contrast to 2.5 days a year for those who worked fewer hours and felt more productive.

Managing stress in a changing workforce

Before you start any interventions, find out the causes by doing a **stress audit or risk assessment**. You can reduce, manage or prevent stress, do all three.

To **reduce stress**, look at ways to reduce harmful impacts on staff from the environment. Why not look at:

- redesigning tasks
- making work schedules more flexible
- encouraging stronger decision-making roles
- including employees in career development, analysing work roles and establishing goals
- providing social support , and building unified teams
- sharing rewards.

You can **manage stress** by helping the employee recover from any physical or emotional ill effects. Counseling services, either in-house or with external agencies are beneficial. This assists people deal with workplace stresses that can't be changed, as well as non work-related pressures like relationship issues that spill over into working life.

You can **prevent** stress by increasing staff stress management skills with training and education. To build resilience, include training in human relations, mental coping skills, and work/lifestyle balance skills, such as time management or assertiveness training.

Improving quality of life

The reality is that stress is here to stay, and our challenge is to focus on quality of life as well as increased productivity. This means how many hours we work, family time, manageable workloads, control over our career and having a sense of job security.

Ford Health, a national corporate health provider, has recently introduced a “**Healthy Head**” Assessment. This 30 minute on site check uses the **Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS)**, a 21-item self-report instrument that measures the three related negative emotional states of depression, anxiety and tension/stress. Each person also has a full lifestyle profile check that looks at diet, activity levels, smoking, alcohol intake and sleep patterns. There is also a work profile that reviews work practices, leave-taking behaviour, fatigue and burnout. All these factors can impact on our ability to cope and keep positive and realistic when dealing with change and challenges.

In conclusion, the Ford Health “Healthy Head” assessment ensures that employees will be assisted to identify their own health risks and they can decide to take action and use existing workplace EAPs, thus increasing uptake of these beneficial programs.

To find out more, please contact Scott Gaffney at Ford Health
Ph: (07) 3839 0992
Email: scott.gaffney@fordhealth.com.au

References

Cary L Cooper (2006) The challenges of managing the changing nature of workplace stress, **Journal of Public Mental Health**. Brighton: Dec. Vol. 5, Iss. 4; pg. 6, 4 pgs

Henzell, John (2007) Workplace Stress, **The Press**. Christchurch, New Zealand: Aug 6, pg. A.5

Medibank Private, Tuesday 29 May 2007 (<http://www.qbr.com.au/index.cfm?storyid=31463&cp=displaystory&type=s>)

Priest, Marcur (2007) Pressure-cooker lives push lawyers into depression, **AFR**, 23 April.