

Stress pressure work



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Every one of us experiences stress, however, each one of us responds to stress differently, whether that be emotionally, mentally and physically. There are, however, common effects of stress for most people. In this essay I will be exploring the research on work related stress, the sources of work related stress, the effects and three specific ways of managing and reducing stress. As many factors, alongside individual, public and sometimes departmental expectations can lead to Social Workers falling victim to high levels of work related stress, I will be specifically relating some aspects of this essay to Social Services which is where I am completing my field practice.

Many people have studied the subject of stress with the expectation that it will give a better understanding of, and in order to devise strategies for managing it. The relationship between stressful events or situations, coping resources and the stress response is a complex one, certainly in that not all people will respond to life's events in the same way. Whilst there are many definitions for the word 'stress', for the purpose of this essay I feel that Dailey and Fogel (1998: 226) defines it most appropriately, 'any demand made on the body that requires psychological or physical adjustment'.

According to Hans Selve (1956, Foot and Hook 2005: 340) there are two types of stress 'eustress' and 'distress'. 'Eustress' is known to have a positive effect, 'sometimes people are stimulated by having to deal with a number of issues; this can be exciting and motivating'. Graham (1998: 129) also suggests that stress has both negative and positive aspects as some employees 'thrive on pressure'. Studies however would suggest that the majority of those that suffer with stress experience the negative stress.

Studies conducted by the CBI (1998) show the seriousness of the impact of work related stress. The research estimated that approximately 270, 000 people in Britain each year take time off from work due to stress. They conclude that over £10 billion is lost every year to British industry as a result. More alarmingly perhaps, is the findings by the ISMA (2000), that show that 70% of UK adults have experienced stress at work, as compared to 60% in 1999. Furthermore a report was published by GEE publishing (1999) states that ' Stress has overtaken the common cold as the biggest cause of sickness from work'. Social Workers, according to the HSE (2001), fall into number five on the most stressful professional table.

Malim and Birch (1998: 145) identified the entirety of ' stress' as being made up of two components, ' stressors' and ' stress responses', the former being the stimuli that causes the stress, and the later being the biological and physiological responses to the situation. Banyard (1999: 48) added a dimension to this theory by emphasizing the ' uniqueness' of the individual, taking physical and psychological components into account, thereby highlighting the complexities of defining and measuring ' stressors' and the ' stress responses'. Newton (1995) challenged the assumption that responsibility for managing stress rested on the individual and argued that this theory did not appear to account for things ' outside' of an individual's control. This would appear to tie in with the theory of ' external and internal stressors', this is an example of the external, where the stimulus for stress is conveyed from things ' beyond' the control of the individual.

By pinpointing the key components relating to social Work, we could consider the profession over-wrought with ' stressors'. The institution itself is

'dynamic' in the fact that it is constantly changing. New legislation is introduced, which at times, appears to create conflicts in social work practices, for instance, between needs and rights of the service user. The introduction of the Human Rights Acts created 'uncertainties' for Social Workers and the service users.

'The pressure to accommodate to legislative changes and government philosophy can easily lead to neglect of purposes inspired by the professional value base and to unquestioning practice, unless space for debate is created'

Braye and Preston Shoot (1999: 156)

It would not be right however to suggest that the number of reforms, aimed at establishing equality of opportunities and rights between different 'groups' of people did not help to break down 'stereotypical roles'. Phillipson (1992, in Braye & Preston Shoot 1999) suggests that social welfare organisations 'maintain the gendering of society', and Dutt (1990, in Braye & Preston Shoot 1999) emphasises that 'White power and privilege in relationships with black people.... still underpin law and practices'.

Concerning disabled people Dalrymple and Burke (2000) suggest that 'even enlightened local authorities with clear equal opportunity statements often have municipal buildings which are inaccessible and support inadequate public transport systems'. Redress for discrimination on grounds of race, gender or disability is still dependant upon an individual being prepared to pursue a case if a challenge is forthcoming. The categorising of individuals based on physical characteristics applies extra pressure on Social Workers

and can have traumatic repercussions. These various challenges, however, that Social Work offers is often the main reason for drawing people into the profession.

The way that an organisation is structured and its climate can have a profound effect on an employees stress levels. An individual who as an unclear job description can lead to ambiguity on ' who should do what' (Graham & Bennett 1998: 129).

Graham and Bennett (1998: 130) also refer to what most people see as the major cause of stress as overwork, ' which can be quantitative (having too much work to do) or qualitative ' finding work too difficult.' An employee who experiences stress due to quantitative work is directly affected by poor management style and structure, as it's the management that oversees the employee's workload. Overwork can result in an employee working longer hours and will be ' frequently connected with poor diet, lack of exercise and inadequate relaxation' Graham and Bennett (1998: 130). Whilst it appears to be the case that the hours social workers at work are within the accepted range, their line manger ensuring that this is the case by checking calendars regularly to ensure that no one is working longer hours than directed, there is a common theme amongst the team of eating their lunch whilst working at their computers typing up the reports. As Social Work is a decision making occupation the problems associated with this, perhaps feelings of guilt and blame for the decision that they have been involved in can also lead to stress and strain.

The effects of people experiencing stress will ultimately affect the performance of the organisation. Maund (2001: 299) states that ' individuals exhibiting high stress within the workplace will effect the organisation and the achievement of Organisational goals'.

Within the workplace stress may occur due to many reasons, high demands, competition, and organizational change to name only three. Too much pressure at work can create prolonged stress, and also chronic stress, which in turn can lead to a destructive cycle of poor performance, a decline in confidence, inefficiency and decreasing productivity. Stress can damage physical health, social relations and can have a detrimental effect on the way that we function both at work and at home.

So what exactly can be done about stress. Organisations have been challenged to address the problems of work related stress, primarily by creating a more supportive working environment. This has given rise to the growth of stress management programmes. The role of stress management training and Organisational orientated interventions has become crucial within the workplace. Primary interventions are typically developed following assessments of specific work based stress inducing factors, for example reducing individual workloads or redesigning jobs. One important way, suggested by a report conducted by the HSE (2001), of reducing employee stress is to redesign the way that jobs are structured, such as increasing the employees discretion to make their own decisions. Key elements that emerge from the research done in the report are:

- Work design can reduce stress and promote healthy, effective workforce, particularly by increasing employees' control over their tasks and ensuring clearly defined work roles.
- Work designs should be suitable for the situation, introducing team working where there is little need for employees to co-operate together can be worse than no change at all.
- A participative approach to managing change is likely to make it more acceptable to employees and ultimately more successful for the organisation

Thus it can be seen that employers can help to change, or certainly reduce stressors, by adopting the above suggestions. As a result, it is important that managers are trained in the recognition of stress and in stress management techniques and interventions.

Secondary interventions focus on training individuals to develop more effective coping mechanisms and strategies. SMT (Stress Management Training) is a mechanism aimed at providing employees with the skills to deal with possible harmful working conditions. In effect therefore, it helps the employee to be aware of the symptoms and response to stress thereby curbing any detrimental effect of stress on both themselves and the organisation. It involves the introduction of stress management courses, normally in the form of information, training and advice. SMT's are normally conducted by external providers, and in contrast to Counselling delivered to a group of employees as opposed to a one - to one session.

SMT's normally include a variety of skills including, time management, relaxation techniques, coping and assertiveness (Briner, R). Research conducted in 1998 by Social Services sought to assess the impact of SMT's in the work place. The findings were quite impressive. Of the 87% of staff who suffered from job stress, an amazing 62% of them felt they were more productive at work after undergoing a series of the training sessions. However, despite what would appear to be encouraging statistics, SMT's have attracted negative comments from some critics. They argue that such programs because they are voluntary are not actually attended by those who are prone to stress, suggesting that those that are actually prone to stress are not attending the sessions due to a fear that the results of their ' stress profile' may perhaps hinder their chances of progression within the organisation.

Tertiary interventions provide support and counseling. Counselling is becoming more widely available to employees within many organisations. This form of intervention aims to help individuals develop an insight into their problems by assisting with their symptoms of stress. The basis of this method is talking privately, to this effect confidentiality as an issue becomes imperative. Normally, although supportive, the counsellor does not give advice, but rather encourages the ' client' to draw on his or her own resources. Thereby placing the employee in a better position to deal more effectively with his or her own life in future.

Counselling exists in two diverse forms. The first approach is to use employees of the company as counselors. This scheme in addition to being cost effective is also advantageous as those Counsellors have background

knowledge of the internal culture of the organisation, perhaps suggesting that they are in a better position to help the 'client'. The alternative approach is to use the services of a professional outside counsellor. This scheme may seem unpopular with employers due to cost, however, with absenteeism curtailed and productivity increased as a result of engaging with qualified counsellors, costs may be recovered.

Doubts have been raised by several schools of thought concerning the notion of using counselling as a means of curbing stress. Critics propose that employees should motivate themselves in to addressing their issues as opposed to being offered counselling. They suggest that this form of therapy discourages self-reliance. This argument however, is ill founded, as the basis of counselling is to equip the employee with the tools enabling them to develop their own potential.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there appears to be no single recipe or point of intervention to be recommended for the management of stress in all individuals, in all organisations and in all circumstances (Newman & Beehr, 1979). Therefore, it seems that neither organizational nor individual action alone will yield optimum stress management in an organization. Rather a carefully integrated approach that moves away from the view that stress is an individual problem is needed to bring about psychological stability and well being to all employees. It involves the introduction of stress management courses, normally in the form of information, training and advice.

Actions to reduce stress should be given top priority to organisational change to improve working conditions, but even the most conscientious efforts to improve working conditions are unlikely to eliminate stress completely for all workers. For this reason, a combination of organisational change and stress management is often the most useful approach for preventing stress at work.

In respect of my time spent with Social Services it has become apparent that Social Work is a challenging subject and one that will actively push the boundaries of all social workers on a personal and professional level. With this in mind, would we consider it is actually possible to incorporate a 'global' strategy for managing stress in Social Workers, should strategies for dealing with stress be tailored to different 'populations' within the organisations and what training and other prevention strategies are most effective for Social Workers for whom English is not a native language or who have limited physical abilities, or for Social Workers of different races, ages, cultures and socio-economic circumstances.

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