Psychological distress at work – Taking the Prevention Approach

Psychological distress at work is expensive.

The expense comes in two forms:

- the loss of performance of people attending work but unable to concentrate effectively due to established stress triggers, and
- the costs associated with sickness absence and staff turnover.

The more significant cost is the former, known as psychological presenteeism, which is estimated to be 1.5 times the combined cost of sickness absence and staff turnover.

Stress is largely preventable. Most stress is caused by managers and their actions. There are several reasons for this, including:

- Most managers do not receive training in managing people.
- Most managers do not understand that their own behaviour is a prime cause of stress.

Individuals vary enormously in their predisposition to suffering stress. Much depends on the strength of personal resilience. Resilience is the ability to mobilise personal characteristics that provide an attitude towards adverse events resulting in the ability to cope, tolerate and overcome events without experiencing stress symptoms. Resilience is, also, the ability to grow and develop as a result of adverse events.

Whilst it is a personal responsibility to be as resilient as possible, it is, also, a manager's responsibility to ensure that staff are sufficiently resilient to perform consistently well.

In the UK stress management has been dominated by a therapeutic model. This means that individuals have to manifest stress before they are provided with any support or help to overcome it. A slight shift towards secondary prevention has taken place with the HSE Management Standards which requires all organisations employing 5 or more people to undertake an annual stress risk analysis and survey of staff.

Although the HSE had identified culture as a significant influence on stress, it decided to omit culture from the standards. This is probably a significant mistake, although the standards as they are have helped raise the awareness of stress amongst employers, Trade Unions, Professional Organisations and employees.

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The judicial process has, also, helped to shift attention towards prevention. It used to be the case that the Courts would accept the provision of support services as an indication of employer concern for employee welfare. This is no longer the situation. Today, the Courts expect employers to be active in the prevention of stress at work.

The Government has, in the recent past, become concerned about health and wellbeing at work. This has largely been sparked by concerns over the costs of benefits paid to those off work, and a desire to see more people return to work. Since 2008 there have been a plethora of studies, reports and recommendations on the health and wellbeing of people at work including research sponsored by the HSE and CIPD into the behaviours of managers. In 2006 the Government appointed Professor Dame Carol Black to spearhead initiatives to improve health and wellbeing at work, and recent reforms of the public sector services have introduced health and wellbeing boards as partners between local organisations focusing on health and wellbeing issues in communities.

My work however has taken a different approach to the prevention of stress.

I recognise that we all behave according to the context we are in, and the expectation we think others have about our behaviour and actions in that context. Therefore, if we can nudge organisations and workplaces towards creating a context where the behaviours are expected to be open, problem solving focused, encouraging, supportive, discretionary, engaging, trusting and other positive elements, then we would expect employers and employees not to be diverted by the causes of stress, as the causes of stress would not arise.

If the causes of stress did arise, it would be for exceptional reasons, and the responses would be swift, encouraging, and those affected wouldn’t be isolated and left to suffer for any longer than absolutely necessary, as this would be seen by everyone else as unacceptable in that culture. This description is of a healthy organisation, one that is flexible and adaptable, uses adaptive principles of joint corporate responsibility, and one that has the workforce at its core, recognising that without a high performing workforce there would be no organisation of any value. I link a healthy organisation, or organisation health, AND performance.

With regard to the workforce itself, I make the direct link between wellbeing AND performance. Individuals who make up the workforce think, feel, form an attitude and behave. If a person feels unwell (suffering a sense of anxiety) he or she will under perform, regardless of their general level of health. This is because the concentration of the person concerned is diverted by the cause of their anxiety. As soon as that happens, under performance follows.

To prevent this situation I suggest that managers have to know how to persuade their staff to do things without causing any form of distress, and still further, to encourage their staff in such ways as to inspire them to perform at their best. There are specific behaviours that achieve this result.
However, managers behave within a context, so it is just as important for the cultural context to encourage managers to behave appropriately as for the managers to demonstrate these behaviours. There are specific actions and ‘rules’ that provide the appropriate context for managers to perform effectively.

The services that I offer emphasise the link between organisation health and performance, and psychological wellbeing and performance, elevating the interest in psychological wellbeing in individuals as being independent of health, although linked. I focus on the causes of stress at work and have identified the impact of leaders and managers on the performance of employees.

My work and services are all about:

- **changing cultures** to a positive working environment
- **improving manager behaviour** to produce commitment, trust and engagement and
- **strengthening personal resilience** against stress

Why not come to a MAS workshop to learn more about taking a preventative approach to stress and presenteeism in your organisation.

Our public workshops for autumn 2011 will include:

- Creating a Stress Prevention Culture
- Employee Engagement – the route to high performance
- Managing People Effectively – the behaviours that promote commitment, trust and engagement
- A Resilient Workforce – strengthening the resilience of people at work.

For dates and locations, please visit our website at [http://www.mas.org.uk/events-and-seminars.html](http://www.mas.org.uk/events-and-seminars.html) or contact barbara.leigh@mas.org.uk or call 01242 241882.

Our in house development programmes will provide in depth insight into these topics that will cover awareness/implementation/embedding together with a train the trainer package which will include licensed material enabling large organisations with their own teams of trainers to roll out a preventative approach to stress and presenteeism within their organisation.

To find out more, both about our public workshops (the dates and locations) and our in house programmes, which have different delivery formats to suit all requirements and budgets, email Barbara.leigh@mas.org.uk.

Derek Mowbray
July 2011
Derek Mowbray is a Chartered Psychologist and Chartered Scientist with a doctorate in leadership. Dr Mowbray focuses on the behaviour of leaders and managers in relation to their employees, and helps them to develop the behaviours that encourage commitment, trust and staff engagement.

Derek’s techniques include problem focused coaching, cognitive coaching, group work and consultancy. Professor Mowbray combines the unique features of working on the big picture as a strategist as well as facilitating effective leader and manager performance. He combines applied academic research with a career as a leader in ground breaking organisations, including MAS and OrganisationHealth.

He is a visiting Professor of Psychology at Northumbria University, and works for the European Commission as an Independent Technical Expert.

In 2008, Professor Mowbray was sponsored by the Institute of Healthcare Management to develop a 'Manager's Code of Conduct', which has the aim, once implemented, of improving manager behaviours to enable wellbeing and performance in the organisation. This is linked to further Codes including a Code for Ethical Leadership and a Code for Engagement.

Derek is a regular contributor to HSJ, HSE, CIPD and LinkedIn communities, and has made national presentations at the International Stress Management Association, NHS Employers Conference, HSJ's World Class Workforce Conference and HSJ's Tackling Staff Sickness and Absenteeism Conference. In 2011, he has spoken at Health and Wellbeing @ Work at the NEC; SOLACE South East Conference; HPMA Wales Conference; Public Service Management Wales Summer School 2011; and is talking at the RCGP Primary Care Conference and the CIPD Conference later in the year.