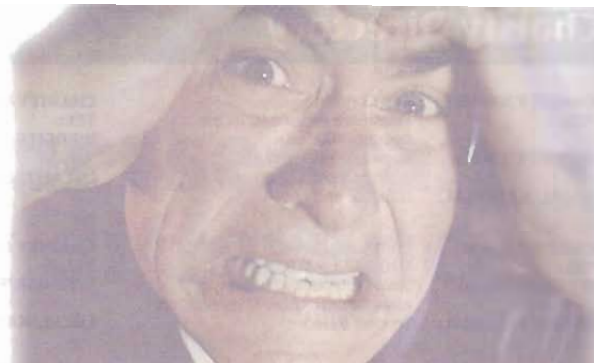


# Stress

## in the workplace



**We can all recall the last time we heard someone in the office complaining that they feel stressed. You've probably said it, and most certainly thought it at some point recently yourself. Scientists and academics argue over whether stress exists or not but if you're feeling it, and suffering from it, it certainly exists.**

According to the Health and Safety Executive, about half a million people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill; up to 5 million people in the UK feel 'very' or 'extremely' stressed by their work; and work-related stress costs society about £3.7 billion every year. Estimates indicate that self-reported work-related stress, depression or anxiety account for an estimated thirteen and a half million reported lost working days per year in Britain.

We're all susceptible to feeling stressed and although we may complain, we usually keep our behaviour within the realms of what's socially acceptable. But what if we can't? What if a situation becomes so intolerable that we reach breaking point? Reactions to stress in the workplace can vary from depression and an inability to do anything, to extreme explosions of anger and aggression, often directed at office machinery or, at it's worst, office colleagues.

We are all susceptible to stress and we all have different ways of coping with it. We also all have different points at which we snap. Stress isn't confined to the workplace but there are often issues that arise at work that can tip people over the edge. In our offices we have to do things that we may not agree with or work with people that we may not particularly like. Often these factors lead us to behave in ways that can be shocking.

Stress arises when we don't get what we want. We're all control freaks to a certain extent and we

don't like it if something or someone gets in our way. We can take so much pushing and then we have to push back. Or do we? Why is it that some people can handle stress better than others can?

The answer lies in two key areas; having a strategy for coping with stress, and developing the courage to accept responsibility for one's own situation.

Strategies for coping with stress in the workplace can vary widely. Some people cope by making themselves as busy as possible to distract themselves from stressful events. Others choose to take time out from work and go for a walk or get some fresh air. Some practice breathing techniques, some have stress toys and others use physical activity – running, cycling, swimming or boxing – to work through their frustrations. Some like to talk through issues while others seek silence and time to recover themselves.

There may not be one single strategy that works for everyone but there is a successful strategy out there for all of us if we take the time to discover what it is. Trial and error is the best way to discover what works and it's advisable to discover your strategy sooner rather than later. If you become too stressed then searching for a coping strategy will only serve as something else on your list that's causing more anxiety.

Accepting responsibility for our own situations can be as difficult as finding a successful strategy for stress management, but embracing this challenge and overcoming it can be

immensely rewarding.

All too often when people are suffering from stress, you'll hear them say that their situation is the fault of someone else. If it weren't for so and so, everything would be fine. Or a sequence of events has taken place that has conspired against them and, had this not happened, they would've been fine. This kind of argument is helpful if the aim is to apportion blame to a situation, but if we want to move forward and improve what's going on, we have to take responsibility for where we are right now.

Whatever the situation, we are there due to decisions that we have taken, things that we've said and events that we've put into motion. The results may not have been exactly what we intended, but they are the results nevertheless. If the results cause us stress we can either complain about them or we can accept what has happened and plan how best to use the current situation to benefit us in the future.

Complaining can make us feel better because we then don't have to admit either that we made some poor decisions, or that we now have to work out how to fix things. This denial of responsibility can be reassuring in the short term as it convinces us that we're right and everything else is wrong. The cost of this however, is that if we remove our responsibility for any given situation, we also remove our ability to take action and make things better which will only lead us to further stress in the long term.

By accepting full responsibility we arm ourselves with the desire and motivation to put things right. It is empowering and liberating and will instantly reduce feelings of stress.

As we've stated, stress isn't confined to the workplace, but some solutions can certainly be found there. These days many employers are thinking more creatively about how they can help alleviate stress among their staff, and schemes can vary from company memberships to gyms, health clubs and sporting organisations; to personal development programmes, adventure weekends, flexible working hours and family fun days. Corporate coaching and company wellness programmes have proved invaluable to many organisations in the quest to help employees understand their industry and the role they play within it.

Whatever steps businesses can take to enable their staff to regain control, explore individual coping strategies, and take responsibility for themselves, the closer we can get to removing stress from the workplace and creating a calmer, happier and more effective working environment that we will all benefit from.

**Written by Jeff Archer, Director of The Tonic Lifestyle Consultancy. The Tonic specialises in health and well being programmes for organisations and individuals. For further information please visit [www.the-tonic.com](http://www.the-tonic.com) or telephone 020 8405 1727.**

### LAW UPDATE!

Humphrey Klinkenberg of The Corbiere Stress Company advises: "The Law Lord's landmark decision earlier this year ruled that employers must take the initiative to protect vulnerable employees. All employers need to ensure that they are aware of the HSE's Stress Management Standards that are due to be enforced later this year."

The effect of stress in the workplace and the source of its accountability is nothing new. Over the last 10 years we have seen two very dramatic cases resulting in significant awards on the basis of stress, both groundbreaking in their legal precedent. John Walker Vs Northumberland County Council was a stunning and well-documented case, resulting in a 6-figure settlement for stress-induced illness. We again saw a similar outcome with Atkinson & Anor vs. Seghal with significant undisclosed damages awarded for stress. In the absence of guidelines on how to address this new form of discrimination to the Industrial Tribunals, industry at large is simply unable to take a backseat with regard to stress, if for no other reason than it can't make a big enough financial provision for an unknown quantity. This means that the mental and physical well-being of employees is, quite rightly, now centre stage - Helen Brickett - Into The Pink Ltd