

Our Costly Tolerance of Stress

Whilst most people would say they understand stress is 'bad' for us, we still live in a society, and a business environment where it is tolerated to a high degree — to our impending detriment.

Finding any definitive research on the cost of workplace stress in New Zealand is nigh on impossible, and not surprising when — I contend — we continue to treat stress as a relatively 'normal' part of our daily life. 'Normalisation' of stress has meant that not only do we put up with large amounts of stress, we also push ourselves through it. "If I can just get through this next six weeks that I'll be ok" I've heard clients say, and my question is always, "And, can you?" The next question is "And do you want to keep doing so?" Because there will be another 'six weeks', another project, or a new manager that generates yet another source of stress. The danger is that we keep asking our body, brain and nervous system to tolerate these conditions, and the fact is that they can only go so far.

The health danger

I believe that that our over-tolerance to stress is flirting with danger. The World Health Organization (WHO) Global Burden of Disease Survey estimates that by the year 2020, depression and anxiety disorders, including stress-related mental health conditions, will be second only to ischemic heart disease in the scope of disabilities experienced by sufferers. Stress is making many people unwell and very unhappy. It is also diluting productivity in the workplace in spades.

Research for the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) covering 31 European countries shows

that constantly working under pressure can lead to five times more workplace incidents, and that reduced performance caused by 'psychosocial problems' can cost twice as much as workplace absences. In some of the prolific American research, fifty-one percent of US employees said they were less productive at work as a result of stress. In the CIPD's 2011 Absence Management Survey, stress was the most common cause of long-term sickness absence for both manual and non-manual employees.

The costs

While research on stress in New Zealand workplaces is relatively minimal, we probably all have anecdotal evidence of its impact. Numerous surveys and studies estimate work stress costs US industry more than \$300 billion a year in absenteeism, turnover, diminished productivity and medical, legal and insurance costs. That equates to \$947 per person annually — in New Zealand terms (per capita) this suggests it could be costing the country over \$4billion per year.

Perhaps the biggest challenge with stress is also the biggest opportunity. Stress is what I consider our politically correct term for the fight-flight survival response, and our body is not designed to be in constant survival mode; the effects of stress hormones, adrenalin and cortisol, take their toll. Where stress becomes particularly detrimental to our health is when it is frequent or ongoing.

Yale School of Medicine is a leader in the study of stress. Their most recent findings show that prolonged stress (that is, stress that lasts for longer than a few moments) "can reduce gray matter in critical regions of the brain that regulate emotion and important physiological functions — even in healthy individuals." Yale also reports that ongoing stress can make it more difficult to deal with future stress. "The accumulation of stressful life events may make it more challenging for [these individuals] to deal with future stress, particularly if the next demanding event requires effortful control, emotion regulation, or integrated social processing to overcome it."

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This explains why that while our nervous system and neurology can recover from chronic stress or burn-out, it often takes a long time. Herein lays the opportunity: where possible, avoid stress and minimise its affects. For an organisation, the productivity lost when someone is under-performing in the first place can be just as costly as their absence later if they take stress leave.



What is stress?

And why are they so stressed?

One of the perils around stress in the workplace lies in the assumptions about what it is, and what is 'normal'. The reality is that what is stressful for one person, may not be stressful for another. However, for the person who is stressed, their nervous system is still triggering stress chemicals and all the ensuing internal responses, whether we think it should be or not. This can result in certain individuals not receiving the help they need soon enough, if at all. In this case we need to distinguish between the stressor (situation/issue) and the stress response (the internal response occurring).

When someone isn't coping in the way we'd expect, there can be a plethora of possible causes, from low confidence, to difficulties with a colleague (more often than not, their boss), to relationship or health concerns. It's always solvable, and approaching the situation without any preconceived ideas about how they should or shouldn't be coping makes that much easier. Getting to the heart of the matter is the only way to create sustainable change.

How can we move from a stress culture to a high-performance culture?

I use the distinction of a stress - versus high-performance culture, because stress is not a peak performance state for the workplace.

So what can we do in-house to lower stress and support people to perform at their peak?

› Give up the idea that stress is just part of the world of work

While we continue to entertain this idea, we are filtering all of our decisions through this. It's the difference in our response when we see a flustered and fed up administrator come out of the office of a notoriously short-tempered manager (most offices have at least one). We can put it down to 'that's the way they are, they'll work it out' or we can help them both develop better self-leadership, resilience and communication skills to feel more flow, ease and enjoyment in their day-to-day interactions. It's not hard to imagine which approach is likely to produce more productivity. As a culture becomes more focused around wellness and performance, results naturally flow.

› Ask the leadership level to decide what's 'tolerable' and create a new set point

We know culture happens from the top down and I believe that while stress is still considered normal by the leaders of a business, change will be slow and the risk of resentment can run high when employees are given tools to deal with stress in a workshop and then asked to work late or speed up on a deadline by their boss that afternoon. We must walk the talk.

› Spot stress patterns early

This is especially helpful for new or more junior staff as they have often had little or no training around personal effectiveness, time management or resilience. Helping managers be aware of and notice an

individual's behaviour is an important part of this organisation-wide. Signs of stress might include: rushing/flustered, confusion or poor concentration, avoidance, indecision, lack of motivation or talking about feeling stressed. In most cases it's not hard to see they are not coping as well as they could be — especially if they are clearly not enjoying work. Changes in someone's behaviour such as lethargy, angry outbursts, impatience or frustration, looking close to tears, etc are also indicators of stress. Every additional day of these responses takes their toll. If your organisation is highly talent-focused this becomes increasingly important. Why hire great people and then burn them out?

› Make it easy for people to put their hand up

More and more often now I have individuals coming to coaching after putting their hand up for help. I also still hear many managers and HR teams talking about a particular individual who 'probably needs some help with coping in their new role' or similar, and don't seem to take the next step to make that happen. Weeks, months roll by and then they may end up coming to see me. Invariably they say, I wish I'd known this/sorted this out/changed this months ago!

Of course, putting their hand up relies on the fact that they are aware of the problem in the first place, and that is not always the case. However, if we know people feel encouraged and safe about asking for help, at least the ground has been laid.

› Help staff learn solid, practical strategies for managing their internal state

As well as how to shift their focus, ask resourceful questions, make resourceful decisions, etc that help them to fundamentally increase their resilience, confidence and performance.

At the heart of a high-performance culture is helping people develop resilience and self-mastery. As we develop more self-awareness and resilience, our stress levels come down. As our stress levels come down, it is easier to think straight and take a new approach to situations, and we become more resilient. It's easy to do a great job then.

Life is quite simple really. When people feel well and are doing a good job, they are happier. And having a resilient, healthy and happy workforce has got to be good for business **HR**

References available on request



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