

# Why is there still so much stress in the workplace?

It has been a work week like any other; a week of coaching and training for individuals and groups across construction, manufacturing, legal and accounting firms. It has been an unexceptional week in that the challenges people are seeking help with remain the same; namely stress, feeling overwhelmed, fed up or angry, and in some instances impending burnout. The nuances vary between industries of course but there's a good chance both a lawyer or factory manager could be challenged by not mentally switching off after work, having too much to do or interpersonal issues with staff or clients – arguably universal challenges for working humans.

The most recent *Wellness in the Workplace Survey* from Business NZ and Southern Cross Healthcare shows stress levels have risen by 22.9 percent in the last two years (by 30.5 percent in organisations with 50+ staff) with the top two work-related causes of stress being work load and pressure to meet targets. People are often being asked to work unsustainably – ie. at a level that is not sustainable over time and eventually compromises health – often burning out the best people.

Cost of stress data in New Zealand is scant but we know from the wellness survey New Zealand lost 6.6 million working days in 2016 to absence – the equivalent of \$1.5billion. Still, it begs the question - why, despite all of the time-saving technology available and all that we now know about health and human performance, are we still facing rising stress levels and the ensuing cost? What keeps stress so prevalent and growing?

## Stress is 'normal'

Apart from tight deadlines, excessive workloads and typically distracting open-plan offices, there is a more pervasive and profoundly more subtle dynamic at play; that of our perceptions and societal norms. Norms that are right at home in our workplaces. Perhaps the most concerning of these is that we've normalised stress. In our busy consumer driven society where it is almost fashionable to be busy and stressed, for most people that's just the way it is. Watch a typical conversation between shoppers and your local checkout operator and you're sure to hear "Had a busy day?" We love to talk about being busy. Certainly

the idea that if you're not stressed you're probably not working hard enough still prevails in many workplaces.

## Just harden up

Closely related to this normalisation of stress is the idea one should 'harden up'. At least in New Zealand, the value placed on 'pulling yourself up from your bootstraps' is high indeed. The problem with 'harden up' is that it's saying, "Don't feel stressed, down, frustrated or angry, just get on with it. What you feel isn't important, and you shouldn't really be emotional anyway. Your emotion is making me feel uncomfortable, and I don't know how to deal with your emotions. Get it together and get back to work."

This almost complete disregard for emotions creates great dysfunction. It has us numbing ourselves to what's going on, pretending we're okay when we're not and stops us from getting our needs met. It can lead to chronic stress, burn out, anxiety, depression and other mental illness. At the very least it can lead to low confidence or fatigue. The *Wellness in the Workplace Survey* showed 46 percent of workers still show up to work when ill; potentially prolonging illness, spreading illness and lowering productivity. Even as children many of us were not taught self-care and good emotional hygiene.

This belief prevails in some succession processes. The partner of a firm might have experienced a tough road to partnership as a working parent and managing a large team. They then go on to let their upcoming senior associates go through the same hellish road – with the caveat of course that you just have to 'get on with it'. Why not pave the way smoothly and kindly and help people rise to the next level of their career with their health and families intact?

## (Mis)Understanding stress

Alongside these perceptions (and others beyond the scope of this article) are misunderstandings about stress itself. Different from the natural exertion of butterflies in the stomach before one gets up to speak or the heart rate rising as we climb stairs, I'm referring to stress as the fight-flight system activating. Blood and oxygen flow out of the head and heart and into the arms and legs for strength (to fight or fly). Adrenaline and cortisol are released, digestion and immune processes are

paused. The body is ready for action.

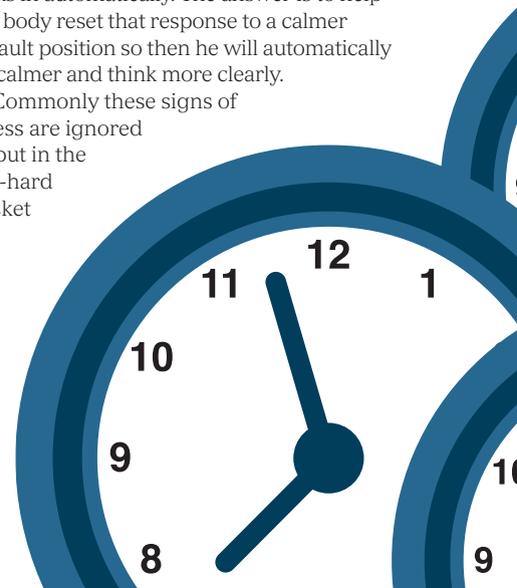
This response can be quite subtle such as tense shoulders and sweaty palms, all the way through to shortness of breath, a racing heart and totally blank mind. The subtly of some responses can make them less noticeable and over time can become a 'new normal' for the person. They may not notice how stressed they are until something significant happens such as a panic attack or forgetting to attend a meeting. Additionally, because we're so good at 'hardening up', stress responses are also often ignored or shrugged off. Consequently, people are often stressed for longer than necessary. Educating people about those more subtle signs of stress can mean they are more likely to catch them sooner - and tolerate them less.

## Stress creep

As a person experiences this recurrent stress their nervous system can develop the habit of triggering the stress response quite readily. Unfortunately, this slow creep will often result in cumulative stress. Yale University calls this 'stress sensitivity' meaning ongoing stress can make it more difficult to deal with future stress – leading to lower performance through mental fatigue, lack of clarity and lower energy levels.

These habitual patterns of chronic stress are often misunderstood – particularly by those who've not experienced it themselves. Someone's manager or spouse might say to me "I don't know why he keeps getting so stressed and sometimes he really loses his rag. He just needs to calm down and think more clearly." The reality is that he would if he could but because it has become an unconscious setting, the fight-flight response kicks in automatically. The answer is to help the body reset that response to a calmer default position so then he will automatically be calmer and think more clearly.

Commonly these signs of stress are ignored or put in the too-hard basket





by either the individual or their employer and can escalate to self-medicating with alcohol, panic attacks, bursts of anger, chest pain and so on. Chronic stress doesn't just go away on its own. If it does, it takes a long time and taxes the body in the meantime. By not seeing it for what it is and helping people access the right level of help, we maintain workplace stress.

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### Fostering genuine mental resilience

This need to 'reset' on the inside also points to the need to help people cultivate stronger mental strategies for dealing with typical stressors. Most wellness programmes include mental health, whilst traditionally putting more emphasis on solutions such as exercise and nutrition and in some cases referring to flexitime and leave provisions. Of course these are part of the picture, but this focus on the physical over psychological stress is missing the mark. People are at the mercy of their ingrained mental habits, and we're not helping them sufficiently to use

their brain on purpose.

A simple example is the approach to work-life balance. Often this will be practical things like working fewer hours or having more family time, but what really helps people transform their week is to learn how to mentally switch off, to feel satisfied with the day's work and to feel mentally calm about what's still left to do – helping their nervous system calm down too. This process helps the person to genuinely switch off, feel more present at home, sleep better, make better decisions about exercise and food and invariably be more productive at work the next day. By changing on the inside, they naturally take more helpful actions on the outside. This combo starts to genuinely lower stress.

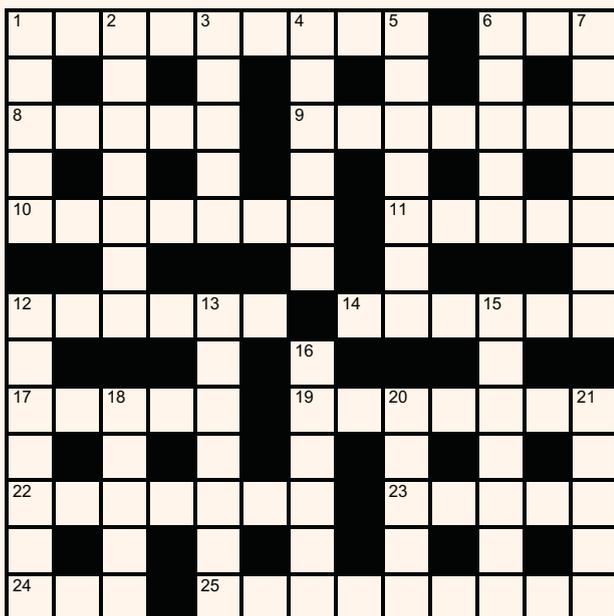
People want to do well and be well. Often they're just not sure how to get from here to there. When I graduated with a major in human resources almost 20 years ago someone said HR was a waning area in organisations. I didn't know what to make of that at the time, but the irony is that the need for nurturing our human resources is more vital than ever before. We've been through the industrial revolution and the information age, and we're now coming into a relational age; a time where technology is replacing many mundane activities and business is about connecting with and serving people. The differentiator in the market is becoming the quality of our people and their ability to

deliver at their best. Our job then must be to help them be at their best – physically, mentally and emotionally. For that to happen we've got to move out of a high-stress culture and into a high-performance culture. And that will take a different mindset altogether. **HR**



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## CROSSWORD



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### ACROSS

- \_\_\_\_\_ bargaining - duty to conduct negotiations honestly and with open mind (4,5)
- \_\_\_ data - information that has not yet been analysed (3)
- Practise good diet and exercise to avoid becoming \_\_\_\_\_ through desk-bound job (5)

- Staff information and training session (7)
- \_\_\_\_\_ out - checked others' opinions on issue (7)
- Scope or diversity of job skills, eg (5)
- Statistical tendencies in labour market (6)
- Communicates with colleagues or contacts (6)
- Knowledgeable nerds (5)
- Handy item in meeting (7)
- Trial policy or product before implementation or release (4,3)
- Learning \_\_\_\_\_ - rate at which new job skills are gained (5)
- In the \_\_\_ - when organisation is in debt (3)
- Fills in for colleague or boss (9)

### DOWN

- \_\_\_\_\_ misconduct - behaviour likely to lead to summary dismissal (5)
- Occupational \_\_\_\_\_ syndrome (OOS) - health issue linked to jobs involving repetitive movements (7)
- Area of expertise (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ information - details known only within organisation (6)
- Job involving monotonous routine can be this (7)
- Angry dispute in employment relationship, maybe (3-2)
- Staff members (7)
- More financially constrained (7)
- State of disagreement during wage bargaining, eg (7)
- Passes on knowledge or information (7)
- In agreement or on the same page (2,4)
- \_\_\_\_\_ into job - gradually became familiar with duties and requirements (5)
- Understood without being stated (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ code - rules around acceptable attire in workplace (5)