

## **Stress: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly**

**By Ryan Coles**

Stress is something encountered by everyone. It is something we are all familiar with; however, very few of us understand it. We can experience stress due to a number of things, whether it be troubles at home, a fast-approaching deadline, or our current economic situation; the precipitators of stress are endless. With our lives becoming that much busier and the world placing that many more demands on our time, stress is becoming much more prevalent. But what does stress mean to an organization? Why do employers need to concern themselves with stress in the workplace? And is stress truly a bad thing?

### **The Reality**

Mental health claims now account for thirty to forty percent of disability costs in Canada according to the Canada Safety Council. This makes it the fastest growing category of disability in the country. Stress is a large component of these claims and is linked to conditions such as heart disease, decreased immune system, high blood pressure and addictions among other things. It can be a debilitating condition if left unchecked.

Stress has four phases, and recognition of these phases is important in dealing with stress in the workplace. The first phase is considered the warning phase where the signs include depression, boredom and emotional fatigue. This phase is much more emotional than physical and may take a year or more to develop. The second phase is when mild symptoms are being exhibited and the warning signs have progressed and intensified. This usually leads to physical conditions including sleep disturbances, muscle aches and headaches as well as withdrawal from contact with others, irritability and intensified depression. Once stress reaches this point, life changes must be made to counter it. Phase three, called Entrenched Cumulative Stress, occurs when the previous phases have been ignored for some time. This phase is also when we typically see stress having a deeper impact on career, family life and personal well-being. Signs of this phase include physical and emotional fatigue, ulcers, marital discord, crying spells, intense anxiety and restlessness. At this time, some degree of professional intervention is typically required to overcome its effects. Finally, phase four is Severe/Debilitating Cumulative Stress Reaction and typically occurs after years of continued stress. Signs exhibited during this stage include heart conditions, asthma, lowered self-esteem, inability to perform one's job, inability to manage personal life, suicidal or homicidal thinking and extreme chronic fatigue. At this point, stress may result in a permanent disability and significant professional intervention is required.

Stress can be a debilitating condition if left unchecked and with our lives, be it our personal or professional lives, placing greater demands on our time, the chances of encountering ongoing stress are much greater. Stress, if left unchecked after the first phase, requires significant interventions or changes to lifestyle, and if allowed to continue, it can place not only individual's mental and physical health at risk, but can lead to severe cost implications to an employer through their benefits.

### **Why Should I Be Concerned?**

Incidents of stress continue to rise in Canada and a greater number of people are taking time off due to mental health. Recognition of mental health issues will continue to increase awareness in this area and will lead to further increases in stress leave or other prolonged absences as such conditions are no longer ignored. Such absences will lead to higher costs for benefits and lost productivity, causing greater need for Attendance Management. Furthermore, stress can lead to

severe health implications and well as take a toll on an individual's personal life, and in some cases these things cannot be reversed.

### **What Can I Do?**

The key to addressing stress is to deal with it early. Being aware of the warning signs and allowing your employees to de-stress is important. However, there are many things an organization can do on a daily basis which can alleviate stress. This includes treating all employees in a fair and respectful manner, communicating regularly with staff and keeping them informed, taking stress seriously and being understanding to staff under too much pressure, being aware of the signs that a person may be having trouble coping with stress, making sure staff have the training and resources that they need, and keeping job demands reasonable. Providing individuals with the necessary support and maintain consistency goes a long way in helping individuals deal with stress. Keep in mind that the fear of the unknown and the feeling of being on your own can be two major sources of stress.

The use of wellness programs is another useful tool in combating stress. These programs not only provide employees with the tools and time to relax, but work towards making healthier lifestyle choices.

### **When Stress Is Good**

While excessive stress can be highly destructive and can negatively affect productivity, stress can also be a major motivator and can actually increase productivity if kept in check. It has been found that as low levels of stress increase, motivation and productivity increase until the stress becomes too great. Once that tipping point is reached, stress becomes destructive and has a severe negative effect. The goal for organizations is to find that optimal situation, where there is enough stress in place to maximize performance. However, to make this matter more complicated, that optimal level of stress changes with each individual and even for each person, the level can change day to day based on mood, health, fatigue and so on.

Communicating with staff and maintaining awareness of warning signs are key when attempting to achieve maximum performance through stress. While pushing individuals to perform, you must also be prepared to allow them to take a step back as to not become overwhelmed. This is certainly a delicate balancing act, however achieving that balance can be rewarding for both the organization and the individuals.

Stress is certainly not an issue organization should take lightly, nor should it be something that is feared. Stress in the right amounts can benefit organizations, however achieving that perfect balance requires work. Signs of excessive stress cannot be ignored. Dealing with excessive stress as soon as warning signs appear may take time and effort, however allowing stress to continue will not only be destructive to an organization, but more importantly, it can be destructive to the health of the individual.