Recognize the Signs of Employee Stress

By
James C. Petersen, Ph.D.
Stressmaster International

Oct 12, 2015

Oct 10th was World Mental Health Day, many people missed it but there is still time to do something to reduce workplace stress. In Europe, Oct 19 to 23rd has been set aside called: European Week for Safety and Health at Work. The focus of this initiative is called “Manage Stress!” This is a great time to help reduce workplace stress and build stress resiliency. Let’s do something meaningful!

It is interesting to note that while we have more technology, better systems, more resources, instant communication…the problem of stress in the workplace remains a record highs…worldwide. According to Patricia Murray, a psychologist with the European Health and Safety Authority,

"When…pressure develops into a persistently stressful working environment, with little or no supports in place, people can find it difficult to cope and some may develop a range of health issues as a result. And, as with most potential health issues, it is much better to take a preventative approach."
In a recent study by the European Agency for Safety and Health, Stress is the 2nd most frequently reported workplace related problem. The #1 was muscle related problems which, for some issues, are stress related such as tension headaches. The Agency also reported that 60% or more of lost workdays is due to STRESS!

In the US, the highest claim for disability is from mental health and stress related problems at 24% of all claims. According to a recent Harvard and Stanford University report, over 120,000 deaths each year are related workplace stress at a staggering $190bn in health care costs. According to the report by Drs. Jeffery Pfeffer and Joel Goh,

"… high job demands increased the odds of having a medically diagnosed illness by 35%. Long work hours increased the chances of early death by almost 20%.”

In Ireland, while most businesses recognize the importance of dealing with psychosocial problems, 84% of all businesses in Ireland still do not have a wellness program in place.

According to Mental Health in Australia,

“One in five (20%) Australians will experience mental illness in the next 12 months, almost 50% of …in our lifetimes.”

The Early Identification of Stress Warning Signs Is Key!

The importance of early identification and recognition of the signs of stress cannot be overstated! According to CEO of Mental Health Australia, Frank Quinlan, he states that...

“Mental illness impacts so many in our community. But if we can recognize the signs and do something about it early, we can significantly reduce the impact it can have on our lives.”
In Wales, Capita Employee Benefits reported that “77 per cent of Welsh employees who were questioned said they'd felt stressed at work over the last 12 months.” But, very few companies offering any type of assistance. In addition, 53% of employees felt that they were under pressure to come to work when they were sick, and 37% of employees bring their work home and can’t switch off from the demands of work.

In Scotland, Capita also reported serious workplace issues in that 4 out of 10 employees quit jobs because of stress and 29% of Scottish employees are working longer hours. According to Alistair Dornan, Head of Health Management at Capita Employee Benefits, said:

“Stress can take a toll on people at work, affecting their emotional and physical health as well as productivity. If employees do not feel they can talk comfortably to their employer then they may look to hide the issue. This makes it harder for employers to tackle stress and could lead to absence or performance issues.

Capita, along with hundreds of other agencies and organizations, encourages employers to take a 'pro-active approach' to reducing work stress and provide more support to help senior staff spot any early signs of stress of depression.

Solving workplace stress requires many approaches and a concerted effort by employers to recognize that a) stress is real, b) stress warning signs can be identified and c) employees can be helped to master their stress... if there are proper interventions available.

Stressmaster International focuses on helping employees to master stress, but also encourages a change in the work environment and corporate culture. When 25% of all managers surveyed said that they felt Anger was an appropriate form of management...something really needs to change. But to make an impact, both the company and individual must change in order to reduce workplace stress.

The key is to create a workplace culture as humane and stress free as possible. In other words, "Treat the employee like you would like to be treated." The goal is not to eliminate stress, but to make stress optimal for best performance, creativity and job satisfaction. C-level staff and managers should find better ways to interact with their employees, communicate more effectively, create work demands that are reasonable and achievable, reduce overtime and workload, and create a workplace where stress issues can be talked about and solved.
Managers, HR directors and executives should be trained to recognize the signs of employee stress and, when recognized, provide programs to reduce stress before it becomes dis-stress and destructive.

It is important for management to continually help employees to become more effective at reducing their stress at work and at home, building a more balanced life where work is not the only thing, and having free access to help when work or personal stress becomes too great. This is accomplished by providing better stress risk screening as part of HRAs, access to stress mastery and stress resilience programs, classes and workshops, the adoption of a comprehensive wellbeing/wellness program and being able to access stress mastery coaches to provide on-going support.

The tools, inclination and people are available to help improve the world of work; let’s put them to use and help reduce job related stress.

ABOUT STRESSMASTER - Stressmaster International provides stress risk assessments, stress mastery training, organizational stress assessments and organizational development. Stressmaster has Associates in 15 countries.

Click here to learn more - About Stressmaster

ABOUT THE SMQ - Help employees and employers learn to recognize the signs of stress. The SMQ is a proven effective and valid (NIOSH, 1982) stress “risk” assessment tool that provides a view of how stress reveals itself in one’s life. There are 11 standardized stress “risk” scales measured by the SMQ.

Click here to learn more about the ABOUT THE SMQ