THE 2018 STRESS REPORT
A STRESSED NATION

- but is stigma changing?

In line with Mental Health Awareness Week 2018, Cascade HR conducted a survey of the UK workforce to assess the extent to which stress remains a prevalent employment issue.

540 participants across varying sectors, roles and demographics took part, and the findings were significant. Virtually no question reaped an ‘indifferent’ response, highlighting the emotive nature and widespread scale of this extremely topical subject.

4 in 5 people believe stress has now become a ‘way of life’ - a concerning statistic that needs to be addressed. But amongst the worrying findings of the research were very encouraging points. 61% of people feel they could speak up at work if they started to experience stress-related symptoms, for example, with 78% saying they have someone to talk to at home. But, as the study went on to reveal, there is a vast amount of work to be done to combat some of the causes of stress, and define more considered wellbeing strategies within the world of employment.

This report unveils the research findings – in full – with additional commentary from the Cascade HR team, regarding the key takeaway points.
STRESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

The mental health charity Mind cites a number of important statistics on its website, which help to paint the picture of psychological wellness in this country:

- Approximately 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year.
- In England, 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health problem (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week.
- The overall number of people with mental health problems has not changed significantly in recent years, but worries about things such as money, jobs and benefits can make it harder for people to cope.
- It appears that people are not coping as well with mental health problems, as those who self-harm or have suicidal thoughts is increasing.


The research participants would seemingly endorse this picture, with 75% of respondents believing that ‘Mental health is becoming one of the most significant risks to the nation’s wellbeing,’ with only 15% claiming it is a ‘buzz phrase.’

The very existence of Mental Health Awareness Week – and the 2018 theme of stress – evidences the importance of this subject, in the UK. But MentalHealth.org.uk importantly points out that stress in itself is not a mental health problem. In fact:

“The stress response is a survival strategy to keep us safe. It was a vital adaptation when looking to survive being eaten on the savannah.”

As the website goes on to explain, problems arise when stress becomes a way of life. It jeopardises the function of the prefrontal cortex of the brain, which controls blood pressure, heart rate, our ability to learn, concentrate and make judgments.

It is such chronic stress that requires the attention of employers and colleagues alike. The website elaborates that:

“Life will always have its challenges and no-one wants to go back to living in caves. But unless we step back and find alternative approaches to a life of repeated stressful events, we can’t expect the tide of poor mental health to turn.”

www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/stress-are-we-coping

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80% of research respondents believe that stress has, overall, become a ‘way of life’. Over the past 12 months, 62% of people have been stressed at work for a period of one week or more, and 20% have been absent as a result. For 65% of participants, this stress occasionally keeps them awake at night, with a further 12% frequently experiencing disturbed sleep. Only 14% said they are not stressed at all (page 4).

On the face of it these statistics make for difficult reading. But armed with the facts, it is possible to take action. The data therefore presents a number of key considerations for those involved:

• What can individuals do better to manage their stress symptoms?
• What role do managers play?
• Can and should employers be doing more?

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**THE UK PREVALENCE OF CHRONIC STRESS**

Do you think that stress has, overall, become a ‘way of life’?

- Yes: 433 (80%)
- No: 64 (12%)
- Not sure: 43 (8%)

Have you ever been off work due to stress?

- Yes: 106 (20%)
- No: 421 (79%)
- Don’t want to say: 6 (1%)

Have you been stressed at work, for a period of one week or more, in the past 12 months?

- Yes: 329 (62%)
- No: 198 (37%)
- Prefer not to say: 6 (1%)

Does the resulting stress keep you awake at night?

- Frequently: 66 (12%)
- Not Applicable: 17 (3%)
- Not at all: 104 (20%)
- Occasionally: 346 (65%)
UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF STRESS

During a typical working week, the part of life people find most stressful is:

- Home life 9%
- Work life 40%
- The overlap of the two 38%
- Neither (no stress) 14%

This helps to identify where attention needs to be focused, in order to manage stress symptoms and ensure they do not begin to cause health complications.

Digging a little deeper into the subject, the causes of work-based stress were ranked as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleague behaviour</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juggling work and family pressures</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management style</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadlines</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commuting</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pay</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inequality</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other: (1%) – bad communication, career direction, finances, inadequate training, inconsistent leadership, uncertainty in workplace, dealing with a disability at work.

Social scientist Michael Marmot describes stress as something that arises when people can’t control what is happening to them. Some of these stress drivers therefore require individuals to take additional steps to protect themselves, or at least develop mechanisms to alleviate stress when it begins to manifest. For example, customers are a key part of most business operations - without them organisations (and employees’ roles!) would not remain commercially viable. And if work-life balance is presenting a difficult act to juggle, workers should investigate the options for greater flexibility, where possible.

But many of the identified causes of stress require greater consideration by employers, line managers and HR teams too. For example:

- Would process analysis identify simple steps that could be taken to reduce the problems that these factors cause?
- Would stronger lines of communication help re-engage colleagues as to the purpose of their efforts, so that stressful situations can soon be overcome?
- And would training help to address any workplace disparity or ineffectiveness when it comes to management style?

Of course, the list goes on, but these are just some of the questions that merit some further thought. Stress may be inevitable in some form, but it can no longer be accepted as something that places a constant burden on peoples’ minds.
THE 2018 HR LANDSCAPE: WHAT'S IN STORE?

THE 2018 STRESS REPORT

It’s good to talk. The American Psychological Association emphasises the importance of seeking social support in a bid to combat stress:

“Get social support. Call a friend, send an email. When you share your concerns or feelings with another person, it does help relieve stress. But it’s important that the person whom you talk to is someone whom you trust and whom you feel can understand and validate you. If your family is a stressor, for example, it may not alleviate your stress if you share your works woes with one of them.”


It was therefore encouraging to see that 78% of people feel they can talk to friends and family if they start to feel stressed, and 61% would speak up at work. If communication channels are not clear within the workplace, this is something that needs addressing as soon as possible, either formally or informally, so that a confidante is available.

Do you feel you could talk to your friends and family if you started to feel stressed?

Yes: 420 (78%)

No: 58 (11%)

Not sure: 62 (11%)

Do you feel you could speak up at work if you started to feel the symptoms of stress?

Yes: 327 (61%)

No: 109 (20%)

Not sure: 97 (18%)

The research uncovered other activities and mechanisms that employees enjoy to relieve stress symptoms during the working day:

- Switching off from work when you leave: (27%)
- Colleague support: (26%)
- Listening to music: (13%)
- Regular breaks: (9%)
- Lunchtime: (7%)
- Other (5%) – work choir, lunchtime/after work exercise, an open & listening style of management
- Technology efficiencies: (3%)
- Healthy eating: (3%)
- Office pet: (1%)
- None of the above: (5%)

Once again, it could be considered an individual’s responsibility to participate in some of these activities to alleviate stress, but there are certainly mechanisms that managers and employers can support too, such as ensuring technology is fit for purpose and facilitating regular breaks. 17% of people admit that they rarely stop to have lunch (less than a third of the working month), with 5% saying they never have such a break.

This helps to explain why a recent CIPD and Simplyhealth report found that workplace presenteeism is at an all-time high. Organisations therefore have a duty of care to ensure this trend is challenged.

http://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/article-details/presenteeism-at-all-time-high-1
There can be no prescriptive recommendation as to the actions an organisation should take to safeguard employees’ stress levels. Much is dependent on the situation concerned and the prevalence of stress within a given workplace. However, some of the wider survey feedback may point to the areas in which progress is required.

Obviously, the ability to implement this solution is space permitting. However, if spare square footage does exist, this can be a simple step to providing employees with an area to physically and mentally take a break from the slog of the workload that they have identified as causing much of the issue (see page 4).

The perceived role of a manager in this scenario is unquestionable. This is therefore a crucial area of focus if an organisation’s management style and/or knowledge is deemed inadequate. Stigma needs to be challenged, understanding of the subject must be enhanced, and techniques should be taught so that managers can better support colleagues to cope with stress.

It is even important to talk about the topic – particularly, what levels of stress are to be expected, what is acceptable, and when stress risks causing a problem. Half of Cascade’s survey participants feel ‘stress’ has become an overused term, which can means some people may underplay the scenario when others in fact need help. This mutual understanding is therefore important.

The support of an effective manager plays a significant part in the management of stress levels and mental wellbeing: (77%)

A manager has some influence over stress levels and mental wellbeing: (22%)

Management style/support does not impact upon stress levels and mental wellbeing: (2%)

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Do you think ‘stress’ is an over-used term?

Yes: 268 (50%)

No: 211 (39%)

Not sure: 61 (11%)
Of the 540 people who participated in Cascade’s 2018 stress study, 277 stated some HR or management responsibility within their organisation. These participants were therefore questioned further, beyond the scope of their individual stress levels. The purpose of this additional investigation was to explore the extent to which stress is causing a problem for their wider business, and the efforts that are being exerted to protect wellbeing levels.

64% admitted that stress is a concern within their workplace, with 62% fearing it may have some impact on absences and 22% worried that the effect is significant. These statistics would appear to support recent findings from Group Risk Development (GRiD), which revealed that stress is the main reason for short-term absences within organisations.

Pleasingly, 57% measure the cost of this absence, which is something Cascade advocates via the clever use of HR technology. Not only does this quantified measure help to facilitate a more defined understanding of the situation – it can also spur action among business owners who seek a more commercial driver for change, beyond simply a duty of care.


**Do you think stress levels are a concern within your workplace?**

- Yes: 177 (64%)
- No: 72 (26%)
- Not sure: 28 (10%)

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**To what extent do you think stress affects absences within your workplace?**

- Significantly: 116 (22%)
- Somewhat: 166 (62%)
- Not at all: 41 (16%)

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**Do you measure the cost of absence within your organisation?**

- Yes: 313 (57%)
- No: 195 (36%)
- Not sure: 32 (7%)

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**IS WELLBEING A WORK IN PROGRESS?**
It must be acknowledged however, that defining and implementing a wholly effective wellbeing strategy is not something that can happen overnight – indeed, only 13% of HR and management respondents feel they already have a robust plan in place, whilst 64% believe they are heading in the right direction. The time to act on this is definitely now, but organisations perhaps also need to accept that – given the pace of change within the modern world of employment – it may always be a work in progress.

Reassuringly, 18% are confident that mental wellness is – and will continue to be – a top priority in their business, and 58% are going to ramp up their efforts because they know this facet of health is crucial. Worryingly, however, 19% fear they’re way behind the curve, and 4% state it is not even on the radar for their organisation. Hopefully some of the statistics published within this report will help to change this way of thinking.

Do you believe that you have an effective wellbeing strategy in place?

Yes, definitely: (13%)
It’s a work in progress but heading in the right direction: (64%)
No, not at all: (18%)
Not sure: (5%)

Which of the following statements do you most agree with?

Mental wellness in our workplace is (and will continue to be) a top priority: (18%)

We know mental wellness is crucial within the workplace, so we are going to ramp up our efforts: (58%)

We are way behind the curve when it comes to mental wellness and need to act fast: (19%)

Mental wellness is of no concern within our organisation and this is unlikely to change: (4%)
THE ROLE OF SOCIETY

An overwhelming 99% of respondents believe society has either some or a large impact, on stress levels. Many people may jump to conclusions and blame this on the ease of media consumption – especially via social channels – and the extent to which the lives and expectations of others then start to impact on an individual’s personal circumstances. But data appears inconclusive in this respect. A BBC article at the start of 2018, for example, referenced a 2015 study which found that Twitter was a ‘significant contributor’ to stress because it increased users’ awareness of other people’s anxieties and pressures. But for others it acted as a coping mechanism.


Mounting expectations may also have a role to play. Consumers appear to demand more, as do clients procuring products and services in the B2B space. Technology is expected to address a greater number of daily challenges, and the pace of life seems to be getting ever busier. Addressing these societal shifts could therefore feel almost impossible. That is why it is perhaps more important to focus on identifying ways to manage stress symptoms (see page 5), than trying to change a societal mindset.

To what extent do you think society has an impact on an individual’s stress levels?

A large impact: 330 (61%)
Some impact: 207 (38%)
No impact: 3 (0.5%)

THE 2018 STRESS REPORT
Developing a stress management plan.

This is unfortunately one of those employment scenarios where a ‘one size fits all’ approach to stress management will undoubtedly be ineffective. What one person deems a stressful situation, may be readily accepted and tolerated by a colleague, for example, and individuals’ abilities to cope with the symptoms of stress will differ greatly.

The challenge is to therefore identify what constitutes too much stress for the workforce. When this understanding is quantified – or the subject is at least explored further – steps can then be taken to protect employees so that their mental health does not become jeopardised.

It is important to stress however, that the onus should not just be on HR to take action, and neither are employers wholly responsible for the psychological wellness of their staff. Individuals each need to implement their own coping mechanisms when they encounter a situation beyond their control, which may induce stress-related symptoms.

But conversation surrounding stress and mental wellbeing certainly needs to continue. The more it is talked about, meaningfully, the easier it becomes to look past seemingly gloomy statistics and instigate change, regardless of who takes the baton.
For further information about this study, to discuss the contents of this report, or to speak to a member of the Cascade HR team about anything relating to your Human Resources and payroll requirements, please call 0113 230 8600, email marketingteam@cascadehr.co.uk or explore www.cascadehr.co.uk.