



**Carolyn Yeoman**

## **Occupational Stress**

BEHAVIOURAL SAFETY USER CONFERENCE 2006

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Lovely to see so many of you here, good morning, yeah, I'm going to talk to you today and its going to be a really quick run through, occupation stress, what you need to do, what you need to be looking, maybe what you should be thinking about from a legal perspective.

You will see there are a lot of slides in your pack so as I say it's going to be quite quick run through but obviously if you need more information that's no problem.

So, I thought what it's do to begin is just walk through what some of the issues may be around stress coz quite often organisation don't look at stress and there's a number of reasons why they don't do that and these are some of them so there's still a general perception out there that its not really a serious problems, stress, its one of those sort airy fairy things so we'll, we'll ignore it.

There's another perception that stress is actually a mental illness so if we start to talk about stress then we're getting into the realms of sort of psychiatry which I'm going to talk about later and a little stress is good for you, hear it a lot, little stress is good for you, its not; stress is always negative. Some pressure is good, we all need a bit of pressure, some people need more than others; when that pressure's too much, stress, so we shouldn't be saying a little bit of stress is good for you, we try not to now, I know in the past it was used in sort of 2 ways which was very confusing.

People think well if you've got stress go off and get some help, you know, its your problem, go off get some counselling, come back when you're all right and there's a lot of positives around counselling and I'm going to talk about that towards the end of this session about when we might want to use counselling but we shouldn't really be just blaming individuals and sending them off for counselling.

There's nothing employers can do, we cant do anything as employers, its individual, send them off and we don't need to think about it as an organisation and then the bottom is really the one that you see all the time, stress is for wimps, only happens to wimps, you hear it all the time, particularly in male dominated industries, people don't like to say I'm suffering from stress, well you know, is he all right, bit of a problem, we wouldn't expect that from a man, all this sort of thing so we need to try and get over those because there's some really hard hitting bottom line effects associated with stress of work; we get reduced performance, reduced productivity, bullying quite often is associated with stress, we all know work place bullying is on the increase and stress is an obvious result of that; you get massively reduced loyalty and commitment from your staff if they're suffering from stress and if the organisation doesn't do anything about it coz they start to think well they don't really care about me so why should I care about them so we do need to think about it. Absenteeism obviously, people who are suffering from stress will be off work, it may not be with stress, it might be an odd Monday here, an odd Friday there, it might be an odd week off with gastric flu or migraine whatever but people are off work for a lot of time a year with stress and I think the one that we probably need to be concerned about most is the last one which is presenteeism so people who are in work in body but not in mind so they're psychically there, they're physically sat at the table or their desk or wandering round looking like they're functioning but underneath it all they're not functioning adequately, the brains aren't functioning properly and therefore they're not doing a good job so as employers we should be on one level getting stressed about stress, we should be thinking about what can we do because we've got 64% of the UK workforce suffering from stress, that's the latest figures and of those 5 million, 500,000 actually say its making them ill so that's not the symptoms we all associate with stress, the little bit, the headache here or bit of a bad stomach, all, that's actually physically making them really ill where they're starting to worry about their health; it is now the biggest cause of working days lost through occupational injury

and ill health, it's the top of the list, nothing else causes more people to be off work in the average year and that's 13.4 million working days, horrendous figures for one occupational illness.

Organisations are rightfully you know, worried about tackling stress, its that reluctancy thinking, well if we start to talk about stress are we going to be opening that can of worms you know, we're going to take the lid off and its going to explode in our faces, suddenly we're going to encourage everybody to come out saying, oh I'm stressed, what you going to do about it and in general that isn't the case, if stress is handled in the correct way and if stress policies are footed in the correct way then in general that doesn't happen so you wouldn't normally get that sort of response.

Organisations obviously worried about litigation, that's a real worry but not tackling it is more dangerous from that point of view than tackling it is. We cant any longer hide behind, well we didn't know about it, we didn't know about stress, we didn't know people were suffering, that doesn't wash any more in the courts of law; if an organisation hasn't bothered to look at stress that's frowned upon and so we do need to think about litigation in terms of stress and we don't need to mention stress at work for employees to suddenly think about it because its mentioned to them all the time; only recently I came across a case where somebody had been to the GP for a sick note for stress and he had actually given them the card of one of these you know, no fee, no win no fee places and said, oh office stress, contact them, might be able to get you know, bit of cash and I was looking into it and apparently this had been going round to a lot of GP's, they'd been actually sending out and giving incentives to GP's for when people went with stress, handing out these cards and that is now being looked at and thankfully I don't think its happening too widespread but you know, it doesn't take you to mention stress at work for your employees to know that they can sue you for stress at work, coz most people these days know that anyway so its not really a reason to not tackle stress.

There's a real worry that if we do look at stress it will uncover poor management practices and frankly yes it will quite often, it will reveal that there are problems at certain management levels, people with problems with the way people manage people but in general those are solvable you know, its not something that we cant sort out and its better to know about them and put them right than leave them under the surface bubbling away and causing a lot of problems so its really insidious problem once you get that within an organisation and then obviously organisations are reluctant to look at street because they realise that once they thought looked at sources they have to actually do something about them, yeah, so you don't do a stress audit or stress risk assessment, highlight what the problems are and then put it in a drawer and say well that's all right we've done our stress audit, we've done our risk assessment you know, these, these are the procedures that follow that, looking at what the sources are and how we can change them if at all possible if practicable so there's nothing, as with any health and safety issue you know, you are only expected to do what is reasonable and practicable so you cant just keep going with making changes.

And so I thought as I've introduced some of the reasons we should be looking at stress it would be useful to just think about what, there are loads of definitions about but this is the one used by the Health and Safety Executive and so I think its a useful one and so, we're talking about an adverse reaction to excessive pressure and it is very much perceived excessive pressure so what's stressful to me will not be stressful to you, will be more stressful to somebody else so we all have different levels of dealing with pressure and different situations that we find stressful and so it is a difficult topic because its not an absolute where you can look at something and say yes that is stressful; yes that is stressful for that person but not for somebody else and so we need to recognise that it is to do with perceived ability to cope and as long as somebody perceives they cant cope then that's all we need to know, that's stress.

It's a natural reaction to excessive pressure to initially when we might find low levels of stress than in itself isn't necessarily a problem because we will all at times have those peaks of stress, will get pressure, all of a sudden we will get a peak where we feel we cant quite cope properly and that's usually short-lived and that's fine; what we're talking about is instances where people are at high level of stress constantly and they never sort of get back down to what we call the sort of steady state. Stress is not a disease in itself I mean the bottom point....its not a recognised medical condition so there is no diagnostic, we use a psychologist, we use diagnostic tools to highlight whether people might be suffering from stress but when you go to a GP he does not have a diagnostic instrument that says yes you are suffering from stress; if you go along and say I'm suffering from stress most GP's will then assume you are and write it down; so its not a medical condition in itself but excessive and prolonged stress can lead to physical and mental ill health so there are some really nasty conditions associated with prolonged periods of stress and also you know, thinks like heart attacks do that element of

stress in them and as the middle point in there is the one that I made earlier which is the fact that there is no such thing as positive stress, there's positive pressure but we would always want to talk about stress as a negative.

So we've got huge numbers of people within our organisations who are suffering from stress to various degrees and obviously that lack of performance has huge effects on the bottom line and we've discussed what some of those figures might be. There are real legal imperatives for action now in terms of, well there's the health and safety executive guidance which if you haven't seen it, if you go onto the website its all there, it tells you in detail what the health and safety executives ideas are in terms of what you should be doing but there are also legal imperatives in terms of stress having an impact with this (unclear) discrimination particularly; since December last year stress is classed within the disability discrimination act as one of the conditions, under certain you know, quite strict guidelines but it is possible for somebody who has been off work with stress to go through the disability discrimination process so it is really important that we look at the whole sort of legal side of stress.

If we don't then we have more and more accidents; obviously people who are to work, present at work as I said in body but but not in mind much greater chance of having accidents, if we can reduce stress levels we can reduce stress levels we can reduce accident rates. We can improve performance and productivity; as I say we can have a real impact on labour turnover because most people within an organisation who are stressed if they then don't get any sort of help or don't see the organisation as caring will leave and go somewhere else so we actually lose some really important you know, there's a part of you that wants to say well if they're suffering from stress you know perhaps they're a bit weak so they're better off going somewhere else anyway but that's generally not the case, generally with a bit of help, bit of development, but of a change people can get back to full functioning and probably work harder and better because they've got that commitment to the organisation so its really important to retain those key staff and to improve morale and obviously as I say, think the key one for a lot of organisations at the moment is that if we manage stress we do reduce our chance of legal action.

So companies who fail to manage stress are on average 14% less profitable; again it's a big figure and its because every employee who's absent due to workplace stress costs at least £1,000 a week so the on cost for replacing them and all the associated costs that go with that, about £1,000 a week because the average absence for stress is 29 days, most people go to a doctor with stress and get a sick note for 2 weeks, they go back after 2 weeks, they'll be given one for another 2 weeks and the problem that its quite often the worst way of dealing with stress is to take time off work because what you actually need is to be changing the source of the stress, yeah, so if you take somebody out of the situation they go home for a month, they have a month at home relaxing, taking care of themselves, they come back into work, the work's not changed, doesn't take them long before they're back to square one again, you know, they're back in there for a week and they start thinking, nothing's changed, the pressure is the same, I cant cope and it's a vicious circle which is why we need to look at changing what the problem is, getting to the root cause of that problem rather than just giving people time off work and in terms of stress costs or litigation at the moment there is no ceiling to the awards made in court or employment tribunals so people do get huge payouts for stress purely because its as I say on one level its such a sort of nebulous term and also because most organisations just don't look at stress and so you know it's a free for all on one level for employees; so how do we approach stress management in this country? Well in this country the HSE used stress as a workplace risk just like any other so its fully encompassed within management of health and safety regs, the health and safety at work act, all those things mention psychological risk as well as physical risk so traditionally we've gone in there and we're all getting really good now at doing the physical risk assessments; not many people still do the psychological risk assessments and the stress risk assessments and so what we've needed to develop is a methodology basically that businesses can adopt and change and more importantly understand coz for years we've been doing stress risk assessments but I think they're quite scary to organisations and they don't understand them, they don't know what they're about and therefore they're easy to avoid and as we've managed to develop methodologies that are more business orientated then people are much more willing to give them a chance and the reason why that is is because they've been developed from sound psychological background so they're robust, they've evidence based so we're not asking really sort of airy fairy questions about people's issues, we're talking about work related issues and possibly homework balance issues.

So these are the key steps that any business should be looking at in terms of stress, in order to protect yourself from a legal point of view and also to manage to really make your staff feel as if they are valued; we would want to have in place each of these four steps and the first is a stress policy so every organisation should have a stress policy of one sort or another; it may be

encompassed within something else or it may be an actually separate stress policy but there should be a clear policy which states to all employees what will happen if you are suffering from stress and you come forward and tell us about that; what will happen, what will we do, how will we help.

The second point which is on one level as important as or more important than the stress policy is the carrying out the stress risk assessment because the only way we can find out how many people are suffering from stress and what the sources of the stress are is to do a stress risk assessment and those are usually done on a company wide or site wide basis so you wouldn't necessarily do a stress risk assessment on every individual you know, individually go round and look at each person's job and role and say is that stressful for that person, you would do a company wide or site specific stress risk assessment and that's usually done without identifying names because people do find it so sort of difficult if they're asked to put their name on but there are all sorts of different ways that we can, we get round that.

The important step is also providing some form of stress awareness so a lot of people don't know what the symptoms of stress are, they know some of the basic ones; there's all sorts of other symptoms that people suffer from and they don't actually realise that they are indicators of stress and part of that is management training stress management training for managers, stress awareness training for managers, making managers aware of how to pick up on a member of staff who might be struggling but might not say so and how to deal with that and legally what they should be doing coz most managers if you speak to them don't know what they should be doing, they might have an idea that somebody's not coping well but they actually don't know what to do in that situation and they therefore ignore it and that's the worst thing you can do from a legal perspective and then finally we should be providing some sort of external confidential counselling support and a lot of companies these days have what we call EAP's, employ assistance programmes where that's offered externally but it doesn't have to be as comprehensive as that it can just be some access through occupational health or privately to some form of counselling help but that's really the last resort, that's you know the remedial, that's picking people up once they've actually got quite unwell and what we're looking to do is put in place those first three so that we can actually prevent stress from happening in the first place.

When we talk to organisations about stress risk assessments these are some of the myths that people have, so we cannot read people's minds, we might like to think we can but we cant so quite often we go in, oh no no don't need to ask everybody, I know, I know how they feel and particularly HR will say that, no I don't need to go and ask everybody coz we know, we hear it, we get the feedback and we know how they feel and I understand that point on one level but there are al...always lots and lots of issues that aren't brought to the attention of people within an organisation so we cant read people's minds, we don't know how they feel unless we ask them.

There's also a perception that there is no objective information that you know, say stress is this sort of nebulous term and there is nothing objective we can measure but there are, there are now 2 or 3 really really good standard instruments which are psychometrically valid that we can use for assessing workplace stress and there's also objective information we can link to that in terms of productivity, appraisal rating, absenteeism all those other sources of information that are really useful and we can still use those with the stress field, they're no different than any other risk; there's also a perception that anybody can see where the risks are and I think with physical risk sometimes that is the case that if, particularly for experience, you can walk round look and think yeah that's a risk, that's a hazard lets, let's have a look but with stress its different because as I said right at the beginning, its perceived ability to cope so you can look at a job and I'm sure we've all done it, you think, how can they be stressed doing that but if he is, he is and maybe its not the right job for him, maybe he should be doing a different job or whatever but its not for us to say that's not a stressful job, you should not be stressed doing it, we should be looking at why he finds that stressful and then changing what we can or maybe his choice would be to do a different job or to leave whatever and I think the bottom one again is key you know, the causes are obvious so we all think that we can pinpoint for other people where the sources of stress are so we can all pinpoint stressful jobs; if I ask you all now what jobs are stressful you know, you would, you would say things like, you know, air traffic controllers, pilots, all sorts of thing and yes those jobs are stressful but so are most of our mundane every day jobs as well.

So when we're doing a stress risk assessment we would ideally want to use a standard stress risk assessment tool or some sort of tailor made questionnaire and as I say those are available now, widely available and ideally we validate those findings with some interviews and focus groups so that we can really get a handle what the sources of the stress are. We use the, that

information to then identify what some of the possible causes of stress might be, and obviously what we want to do then is do the tailored interventions and you know, it sounds scary when you say tailored interventions to minimise the risk but you do it for physical risk and its just as easy to do it for psychological risk, quite often the changes are very very subtle so we're not talking in general about huge big costly interventions, we're talking quite, about quite minor changes quite often which make all the difference and so what we need is as I said earlier this robust model with the methodology quick and easy to implement with standard questions, few customised questions and reporting back on practical and appropriate solutions and outcomes so we don't want to be making it a longwinded process where people have to spend 40 minutes filling in a questionnaire; it needs to be quick, easy, simple to understand. On the HC website you'll see a case study which used a really good stress audit and these are some of the figures associated with that, so the sickness absence fell over 2 year period from 10.75 to 8.29 and that was a cost saving of 1.9 million pounds and that was not a big organisation at all, not a huge organisation at all but the savings from doing a good risk assessment for stress are immense and just to finish off really, I said the other parts of the jigsaw as it were after we have done the stress risk assessment would be some form of training in place and these are all the different sorts of training we might want to offer; as I say I've talked about the need to make people aware and particularly to make managers aware but also things like coaching for managers, raising confidence levels that type of thing.

And then finally there's a lot more information on this in your pack if you want to look at it but the role of counselling the AP's, as I said at the beginning we cant fail to implement a stress strategy without providing some sort of external help because obviously it will spill over into work life. Work life will spill into home life, home life will spill back into work life so we have to have some sort of help for people outside of the workplace so we need to integrate our whole stress strategy to include stress policy, stress risk assessment, training and some form of counselling provision in order to fully address stress and to do that you need a supportive climate in which we recognise stress and we don't misinterpret it as a sign of weakness or a sign of incompetence and that takes commitment from the top, while you have got people at the top who see stress as being weak then its impossible to implement a proper stress strategy or stress policy.

So that was a quick, very quick run through of the whole fiend of stress and hopefully it's given you a little bit to think about and if anybody has got any questions I'm going to be there in a moment to answer some questions. Thank you very much for listening, thank you.