

# Manage stress and burnout

## IDENTIFY AND PREVENT THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS IN YOURSELF AND YOUR TEAM IN ORDER TO KEEP EVERYONE IN SHAPE.

LAWRENCE WORDON

(a) According to a recent Gallup Organisation survey in the United States, almost two thirds of American workers are experiencing stress as a result of the economic recession; an estimated 28% of the workforce in Europe (40 million workers) are affected; stress also plays a role in the high suicide rate in Japan, where suicide is the thirteenth most common cause of death in Japan, with men in the 35 - 44 age group, being the most vulnerable. South Africans fare no better: an estimated 30 - 40% of South Africans experience high levels of stress.

Stress is not the preserve of executives, senior managers, managers and high-flyers: it affects employees at every level within the organisation.

Stress levels in South Africa are heightened by trauma, crime, violence, infrastructural problems and the fact that the country has undergone massive change in recent years.

Indicative of high stress levels in South Africa, the country boasts the third highest divorce level in the world, one of the highest number of motor vehicle accidents in the world and the fifth highest incidence of coronary disease in the world.

Stress is linked *inter alia* to

absenteeism, costly presenteeism, accidents, errors, high blood pressure, heart disease, asthma and osteoporosis.

While South Africa has not felt the full brunt of the global meltdown in the financial markets, stress levels are likely to increase, nevertheless, as a result of the current economic slowdown.

Arguably, now even more so than in the recent past, managers need to be able to identify the warning signs for stress and burnout. They also need to monitor their own stress levels as well as those of their staff, so that remedial action can be taken early.

Sadly, although there are clear warning signs for stress and burnout, these are often undetected as any slumps in performance are attributed to tiredness.

### SPOT THE SIGNS

What should one look for? During the first stage of burnout, individuals become anxious and struggle to control stress. They find that they are unable to deal with issues on a day-to-day basis, and may even "fall to pieces". Sleeping problems, particularly early morning waking, forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating are also warning signs.

Symptoms become far more pronounced during the second stage. Warning signs include absenteeism, lateness or a "don't care attitude". Individuals may constantly complain about tiredness. They may also procrastinate and struggle to make decisions. They may become overwhelmed by their workload and they may start withdrawing. There is a danger of substance abuse, particularly the abuse of over-the-counter medication such as sleeping tablets, followed by another tablet to help them wake up in the morning.

During the third stage of burnout, the so-called classic burnout, the

individual appears to be in a state of deep depression. There is a chronic sense of sadness and fatigue. The individual may experience self-destructive thoughts, including suicide as there does not appear to be a way out. The individual will become increasingly withdrawn and isolated. Even things that the individual usually enjoys may not give them any pleasure.

It is important to recognise that stress, per se, is not necessarily evil. As Hans Selye, who coined the term "stress", observed: "Without stress, there would be no life." The challenge is to strike the balance, to have sufficient stress to perform optimally, with passion and energy, with time to rest and recover.

Burnout is treatable. However, the earlier burnout is identified, the better. This may prove challenging as individuals suffering from chronic stress or burnout may not understand that the situation in which they find themselves is not normal, and even where they recognise that there is a problem, they may be extremely reticent to seek help for fear of being stigmatised.

A paradigm shift is needed in the workplace: managers need to move away from punitive patterns. They need to recognise that personal problems and stress have implications for an individual's ability to function at work. Their role is to refer staff to suitably qualified professionals for support. Employee Assistance Programmes play a very important role in this regard. In fact, South Africa is a world leader in this arena. Studies indicate that offering EAPs may result in various benefits for employers, including lower medical costs, reduced staff turnover and absenteeism, and higher employee productivity and morale. Recovery also increases exponentially with good social support. (*HRJ*)