

# STRESS NEWS

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***SPECIAL ISSUE***

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# OPTIMISING EMPLOYEE RESILIENCE

## Coaching to help individuals modify lifestyle

BY DR KENNETH NOWACK

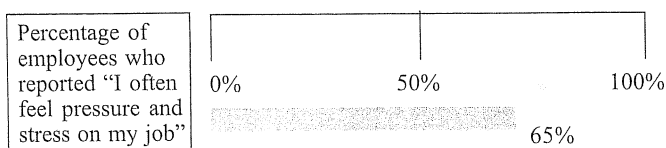
IT'S NOT difficult today in most coaching sessions to hear employees share perceptions of high levels of stress, work/family balance challenges and other non-work stressors that are associated with a wide variety of outcomes including job burnout, anxiety, exhaustion, fatigue, inability to concentrate, lower performance and physical illness. Increasingly, employees in coaching sessions are looking for a way to both increase effectiveness on the job and juggle work/family demands.

Perceptions of stress at work are quite high with several studies suggesting that 20% to 65% of all employees rate their jobs as being very or extremely stressful (source HSE). For example, the 2004 fifth biennial TUC survey revealed that 58% of UK workers complain of being stressed at work, an increase of 2% from 2002. The main reasons cited for stress were increased workloads, change at work, staff cuts, long hours and bullying. Estimates from the 2003/2004 Self-reported Work-Related Illness survey indicate that perceptions of work-related stress, depression or anxiety account for an estimated 12.8 million reported lost working days per year in Britain. In a recent poll by US based TrueCareers, more than 70% of workers do not think there is a healthy balance between work and their personal lives. More than 50% of the 1,626 respondents reported they are exploring new career opportunities because of the inability to manage both work and family stressors.

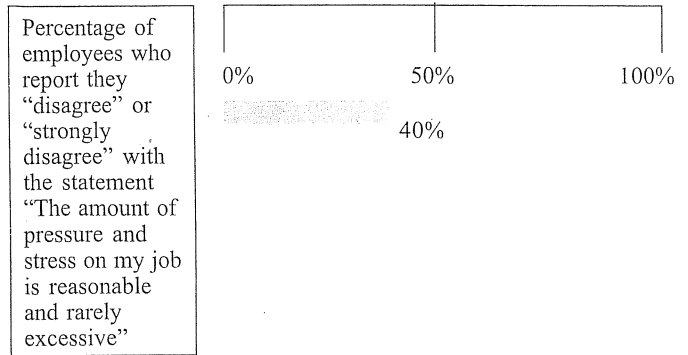
Similarly, lifestyle practices such as exercise, eating/nutrition, preventative practices and coping skills may not only be the strongest contributors to reducing the most common causes of deaths in Europe and the United States but focusing employee attention on them through wellness and health promotion efforts might result in bottom line cost savings for organisations.

### What employers say about stress on the job

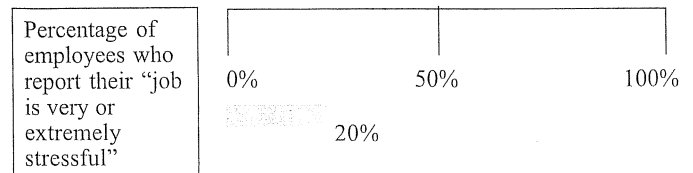
Survey by Consulting Tools in 2002



Survey by Consulting Tools in 2004



Survey by Health & Safety Executive



For example, earlier this year the company vielifie, the Institute of Health & Productivity Management (IHPM), Harvard Medical School and Unilever completed a six-month study exploring the link between health and productivity. Sponsored by Standard Life Healthcare and Philips, 2,300 (600 pilot group, 1,700 control group) employees participated in a comprehensive employee wellness and health promotion programme. Compared to the control group, employees participating in the workplace health programmes experienced, on average, a 5.9-hour reduction in short-term disability per employee and self-reported performance improvement of 2%.

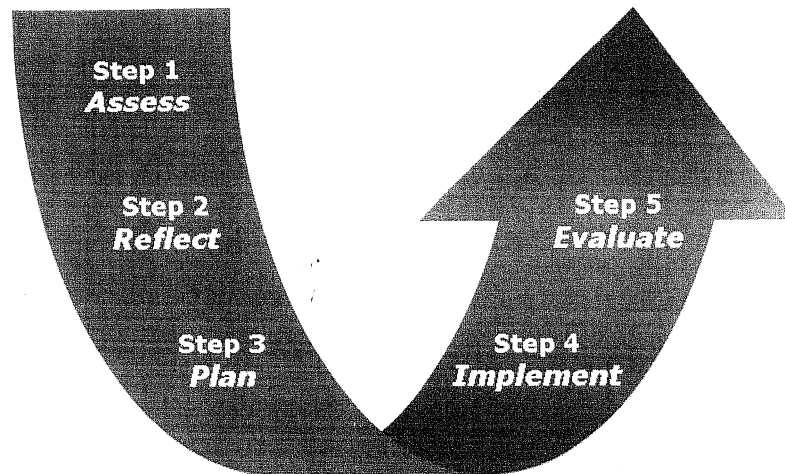
These improvements represent a gain of over two days a year in actual productive time. Additionally, according to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the annual cost of sickness absence – which is directly influenced by lifestyle habits – was £13 billion, or £531 per employee per year in 2005.

### Lifestyle modification coaching

Consultation regarding lifestyle behaviours has seemed to be part of the domain of physicians, psychologists and other health professionals – not the realm of executive coaches. It can be argued that coaching for lifestyle modification fits well into the concerns of coaches attempting to increase effectiveness and performance of clients within organisations.

The increasing prevalence of work stress, job/family imbalance and chronic health problems related to lifestyle including obesity and coronary heart disease have a direct adverse affect on absenteeism, health costs and productivity. Helping employees initiate and maintain healthy behaviour changes is of increasing importance for

## Coaching model to help individuals modify lifestyle



the prevention and management of these problems. Lifestyle factors have been shown to be associated with the leading causes of death such as coronary heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and cancers in both the UK and US.

In two recent prospective studies by ConsultingTools, employees in a large aerospace and public utility organisation who exercised more regularly, practised positive overall health habits and utilised threat minimisation coping had higher scores on resilience/hardiness and reported significantly less absenteeism due to physical illness, less job burnout and greater job satisfaction at the end of a one-year period. Improving the total health of the workforce (physical and psychological) might be one of the important strategies for increasing productivity and competitive advantage.

One of the biggest challenges for a coach is attempting to link an individual employee's health goals to an organisation's profitability and productivity goals. Despite the challenge, a growing body of evidence in the field of Health and Productivity Management (HPM) suggests that investments in the overall health of an employee do contribute to the organisation's bottom line through decreased absenteeism, lowered disability/insurance costs and increased productivity. Familiarity with the HPM literature is important for coaches in this specialty area as a way to demonstrate value to both the individual and organisation.

For one's client, the HPM literature can help make a convincing case that productivity and health are not incompatible – they are supported by the same lifestyle behaviours. The role of the coach is to facilitate a process for employees to gain awareness of his/her behaviours and translate them into meaningful lifestyle change efforts. This will result in optimising both health and organisational effectiveness. These lifestyle coaching steps include:

- 1) Assess
- 2) Reflect
- 3) Plan
- 4) Implement
- 5) Evaluate

Coaches who contract with an organisation to enhance a client's individual effectiveness can help focus the behaviour change effort to provide awareness, skills and motivation creating better productivity and health at the same time.

### Case example

Chris is a 48-year old European Sales Director for a large manufacturing organisation. Chris has been with the company for over eleven years and has risen through the ranks based on strong performance and demonstrated competence. Chris is an ex-smoker who experienced a mild heart attack eight months ago requiring surgery and participated in some rehabilitation therapy to help modify poor eating and exercise habits. Chris is currently on medication to treat high blood pressure and is overweight. Chris travels because of the global scope of the position and typically does not exercise or eat properly while on the road. Chris tends to work tremendously long hours and has grown sales immensely for the company.

The CEO of the company has known Chris for a long time and expressed to Chris that future health problems are likely if some type of lifestyle changes aren't made. The CEO indicated that Chris is a valued team member and believes that Chris could be even more productive and effective if there is attention to more effective management of stress and health. The CEO suggested that an executive coach might be helpful to Chris who agrees but feels the need for a 'personal trainer' isn't really going to be helpful. The CEO decides to utilise the coach for the entire

senior management team with a focus on both health management and leadership effectiveness. Chris begins the coaching engagement without great expectation or tremendous motivation.

## **Lifestyle modification coaching steps**

### ***Step 1. Assess***

The 'what's in it for me' (WIFM) is a critical leverage point for coaches to be successful in lifestyle modification. Helping clients to become more aware of areas of risk and resources can be useful to help increase readiness for behaviour change as well as being an important step in successfully setting specific goals.

The use of a personal stress and health assessment can be invaluable at this step for coaches to utilise to facilitate awareness and motivation to change behaviour. In working with Chris, the coach suggested taking an established and valid stress and health assessment called StressScan which is based on over fifteen years of published research showing a relationship between scores on the tool and both individual health and organisational outcomes (e.g. absenteeism). StressScan measures 15 specific scales including perceived stress, lifestyle habits (exercise/physical activity, eating/nutrition, sleep, preventive practices, substance use), social support, Type A behaviour, resilience/hardiness, coping style (positive appraisal, negative appraisal, threat minimisation, problem-focused coping), psychological well-being, health risks, health resources.

The coach can use the comprehensive report and results from the personal stress and health assessment to help increase awareness of specific lifestyle practices and behaviours to possibly modify during the coaching engagement. The results of StressScan with Chris validated that work/life stress was high, he seemed to have a sedentary lifestyle with poor eating habits, lack of adequate rest/sleep and a tendency to express anger when frustrated and impatient with others. Furthermore, Chris's score on resilience/hardiness was moderately low suggesting that empowering Chris to set meaningful goals to maximise success and teaching specific relapse prevention strategies would help facilitate long term success in the coaching intervention. Confronted with the data from StressScan, Chris mentioned that putting some energy into becoming healthier would seem to have some positive payoff with the demanding work pressures and job stress that he faced.

### ***Step 2. Reflect***

Once the coach has some specific data about possible areas of health resources and risks, they can assist the client to reflect on resistance to change, ambivalence, or unrealistic goals that might interfere with lasting behaviour change. Motivational interviewing (MI) is a

useful approach for coaches in working with lifestyle change engagements to assist clients to reflect and target specific lifestyle goals to work on. It is a style that values and emphasises the client's values, interests and motives and utilises reflective listening and probing to help the client make lasting behaviour changes. MI is a collaborative approach to identifying motivations to change, potential barriers, goal setting and reappraisal to ensure long-term success without being overly directive with the client.

From an MI perspective, coaches working with Chris would listen carefully to understand his achievement orientation and acknowledge the challenges encountered in maintaining a healthy lifestyle given his travel and schedule. The coach would ask open-ended questions to help the client see an association between one's ability to maintain high energy, be productive and concentrate could be related to eating/nutrition, sleep and physical activity as well as inadequately coping with work/family stress. The coach would help Chris reflect on the advantages of maintaining optimal wellness and the readiness to begin to set some specific behavioural goals that could be monitored and evaluated.

### ***Step 3. Plan***

Successful behaviour change is in the planning process. The coach's role is to ensure the lifestyle modification plan is realistic, specific, and measurable. In helping Chris translate awareness and motivation into actual behaviour change, the coach can begin to ask some critical questions to facilitate a successful behavioural change plan including:

- How can I make my behavioural change goal realistic and achievable?
- How can I track and monitor my progress on my behavioural change goal?
- What are some possible barriers to successfully changing my behaviour?
- What actions and steps can I take to anticipate and prevent these barriers from interfering with my successful behaviour change effort?
- How can family members, friends, or co-workers assist me to successfully change my behaviour?
- How will I reward myself for successfully maintaining my behaviour change goal for 30 days?
- What can I do to continue to motivate myself to keep a high level of commitment to my wellness goal, even if I temporarily slip back into my old habits?

Chris decided to focus attention on increasing physical activity and to practise meditation to help manage work/

life pressures. Chris set a target of a minimum of three days a week to work out for at least 30 minutes and to practise meditation once each evening for 15 minutes.

#### ***Step 4. Implement***

In the case example, Chris was initially successful in exercising on a regular basis until his subsequent travel schedule interfered with his goal. Chris maintained the goal of daily meditation but seemed to lose the motivation to begin exercising after lapsing during a month of travel.

The coach's role is to assist Chris with re-evaluating the importance of physical activity and exploring some relapse prevention strategies to both prepare for subsequent travel plans ahead and to explore alternatives when fatigue, jet lag and schedule might interfere with maintaining the goal of three days a week (e.g. using local facilities in the hotel). Encouraging ways for Chris to reward sustained behaviour is also something the coach can discuss during their follow-up meetings.

#### ***Step 5. Evaluate***

The strategy of goal reappraisal should be emphasised during the entire coaching process with a client. Chris should be encouraged to find ways to track, monitor and evaluate progress on the specific lifestyle goals that were set. The coach should help Chris anticipate future unavoidable high-risk situations and prepare in advance for inevitable lapses. For example, the coach can review with the client these steps to evaluate progress and ensure long-term success.

- Practise coping with unavoidable high-risk situations.
- Think about what you could say and do when faced with temptation.
- Use relaxation and other stress management techniques to handle strong emotions (e.g. anxiety).
- Get advice and watch others who also are striving to make behaviour change in this area.
- Develop a set of self-instructions and self-talk that will help you in high-risk situations.
- Test your coping skills in actual high-risk-of-relapse situations (e.g. a smoker could interact with other smokers without smoking; a dieter could go out with friends having fast food and just have a healthy choice; a business traveller could schedule some light exercise into his/her busy day; a student studying during final exams can go to bed early enough to get adequate sleep, etc.).
- Prepare in advance for a lapse (to avoid a relapse)
- Attempt to limit the loss of control and reduce the

feeling that you have failed. Instead, if you slip, just admit that you have made a mistake.

- Make an agreement to limit the slip (e.g. one dessert, one day without exercise).
- Make an agreement to use family, friends and co-workers to help you succeed.
- Learn from your experience and plan how to overcome them.

In a six-month follow-up with Chris, he had successfully maintained a three-day-a-week physical activity schedule but had stopped practising meditation on a daily basis. Chris reported less overall fatigue, less work/family stress and a feeling of being in better shape. Chris mentioned that he now planned to look into losing some weight and perhaps getting some professional advice on nutrition and eating habits to prevent any further coronary problems in the future. Overall, Chris felt the lifestyle modification coaching was beneficial to successfully implementing and maintaining his exercise programme even if he was a little sceptical about the programme to being with.

#### **Conclusion**

With growing global competition, organisations today are looking for a workforce that is well trained and using the latest technological equipment to increase productivity. Increasingly, the most successful businesses of today understand that investing in their most important asset – their employee's physical health and well-being – can have tremendous bottom-line results including promoting retention, reduced costs due to health insurance and absenteeism and improved performance.

A focus on Health and Productivity Management can become a competitive advantage to organisations with an emphasis on reducing employee stress and focusing on optimising wellness in the workforce. Successful lifestyle modification can be facilitated by coaches using structured engagements to assist employees to increase awareness, set behavioural goals and develop effective stress and health management coping skills. Using a motivational interviewing style, coaches can help clients successfully make meaningful lifestyle changes and contribute to the health of both the individual and organisation.

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