

The impact of stress on the team and how to manage it

KEY WORDS

- » Burn out
- » Culture
- » Duty of care
- » Health and safety
- » Moral leadership
- » Stress

In the previous two articles in this series, we identified some of the causes of stress in the workplace and how stress can impact member of staff. In this paper, we will look at some of the things every manager needs to know about managing stress in the workplace, at the impact of stress on the wider team and the strategies for preventing and managing it.

A lot is written about the impact of stress on the individual, but little is written about the impact of stress on the wider team. There is little doubt that there are occasions when stress affects the whole team because of a shared experience (for example, increased workloads or a particularly distressing incident in the workplace, such as the death of a young patient) while at other times stress affects the team because an individual is ill or going through a rough patch at home.

Whatever the cause, stress can impact the whole team and this could manifest itself in any number of ways:

- » Staff turnover: staff don't stay in the job for as long as is normal in the sector and may leave to take up jobs at the same grade or lower just to move on
- » The levels of sickness among the team increase above the norm with some individuals taking several episodes of short-term sickness
- » Staff arrive late for work on a regular basis or find reasons to leave early
- » Team leaders fail to take leave because they are always covering and feel that they can't leave the workplace because things will 'fall apart'
- » Petty issues turn into major problems for the team, so insignificant remarks cause offence and staff are constantly seeking support from senior management because of this
- » Episodes of bullying increase, with staff complaining about each other and episodes that previously they would have taken in their stride
- » Staff become less effective at their jobs and the incidence of incidents and complaints increases

» The team increasingly look to the leader for direction when in fact they have the skills needed to make decisions for themselves.

This is not an exhaustive list and any manager will need to take the temperature of their own team by talking to team members and ensuring they know what is going on day-to-day within the workplace.

WHY MANAGE STRESS AT THE TEAM LEVEL?

It is by working within a team, or within broader teams, that most of the work in the health and social care setting gets done; it is, therefore, in the managers', and more importantly, the patients' best interests, that managers pay attention to team stress.

As a manager, you have a 'duty of care' towards the people in your team. This duty includes a responsibility not to cause foreseeable harm or injury. The duty of care may be breached when a manager or organisation does something harmful (a deliberate act of harm) or fails to do something (negligence) and so fails to prevent harm from occurring. A manager may be in breach of their duty of care if they fail to prevent or reduce the likelihood of foreseeable work-related stress or by allowing a stressful work situation to continue.

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act (Health and Safety Executive (HSE), 1974) states: "*it shall be the duty of every employer to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of all his employees*". The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (HSE, 1999) require employers to

make a “suitable and sufficient assessment” of “the risks to the health and safety of his employees to which they are exposed whilst they are at work”.

Risk assessments are not just about physical risk, such as working with chemicals, working alone or moving and handling; they also include recognising and making provision for the management of stressful situations in the workplace.

Other important reasons for managing workplace stress include the fact that a workforce free of stress is better motivated and more effective (HSE, ND). Staff retention is also better in teams where stress is better managed (Anthony et al, 2005). Good stress management reduces the potential for conflict within team, and enables the team to work more effectively (Royal College of Nursing, 2005).

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING AND MANAGING STRESS IN A TEAM

Team behaviours flow downhill; that is to say, the manager often acts as the thermostat in the organisation: people copy their behaviours. More often than not, the manager is the role model for staff, who look to him or her not only for leadership, but also for how they should behave (Mintzberg, 1973).

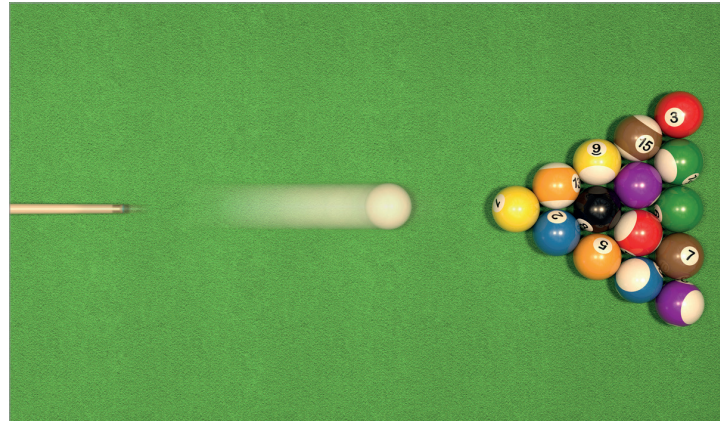
Understanding signs of stress within the team requires the manager to know their staff. There are two elements to this:

- ▶▶ Knowing staff allows the manager to be alert to employee stress (at work or at home) because the employee has told them
- ▶▶ Knowing how staff members behave and talk allows the manager to spot the early signs of stress (Ellis and Abbott, 2012a).

While a manager cannot manage stress that arises outside of the work, being sympathetic and understanding will be beneficial for the individual and consequently impact on the way in which they work.

Awareness of staff workloads, especially inequities, is also important for the manager.

- ▶▶ Overloading individual staff with too many responsibilities may lead them to be fatigued (Stordeur et al, 2001) and the fatigue will affect the team as the individual starts to perform poorly



Studies show that the attention-narrowing effects of stress associated with individual cognitive functions demonstrate comparable impacts on team awareness and information sharing behaviours (Salas and Fiore, 2004)

- ▶▶ Some team members may view this fact that one individual has been given extra responsibility as favouritism and this can generate disharmony.

The manager’s role is therefore one of setting the tone and good communication (Anthony and Preuss, 2002). A positive attitude and valuing staff as equals sends a message to the team that they are cared about and is a key component in the development of trust (Ellis, 2015). The absence of leadership with respect to the team, and failure of the manager to talk to the team as a whole are both potentially stressful for the team. Regular, structured contact with the team as a group and staff members individually is important as these provide opportunities to talk to the manager face to face. As well as time with their manager, staff will benefit from structured time with a peer, mindfulness sessions, time outs and clinical supervision (Koivu et al, 2012) can be helpful for the staff group — this may prove especially important at times of high stress.

Involving staff in decision making, is an important way of sending the message that the manager values them and their opinions, and can help prevent stress (HSE, 2001). Doing things ‘with’ rather than ‘to’ staff is certain to engender a feeling of involvement, which in turn prevents the occurrence of stress. Other strategies that make the workplace more staff friendly include:

- ▶▶ Sharing out roles equally between staff
- ▶▶ Giving staff the lead on some projects

- ▶▶ Shared governance
- ▶▶ Staff membership of committees and working groups

Lewis et al (2010) call this the participative approach to leadership, which is in essence inclusive and respectful.

Perhaps the single most important means of managing stress is to generate a positive team culture. Culture is *“the psychological environment that exists in a unit, team or organisation and may be seen in the ways in which staff interact with each other, with other professionals and teams and the patients that they care for”* (Ellis and Abbott, 2010).

Positive cultures occur when:

- ▶▶ Team members talk to each other
- ▶▶ There is a clear, shared understanding about the purpose of the team.

Positive cultures support constant development and improvement. Personal and professional development is an important aspect of this and the manager therefore needs to ensure staff have access to educational and training opportunities.

One of the biggest issues for managers is supporting the adoption of a healthy work-life balance in staff. That means setting the tone by not working excessive hours, taking holiday at regular intervals, having family-friendly policies (and sticking to them), having sensible duty rotas that allow people defined periods away from work, adopting flexible working, etc. In essence, the approach to managing stress in the team is about the manager nurturing the individuals within the team as well, as the team itself.

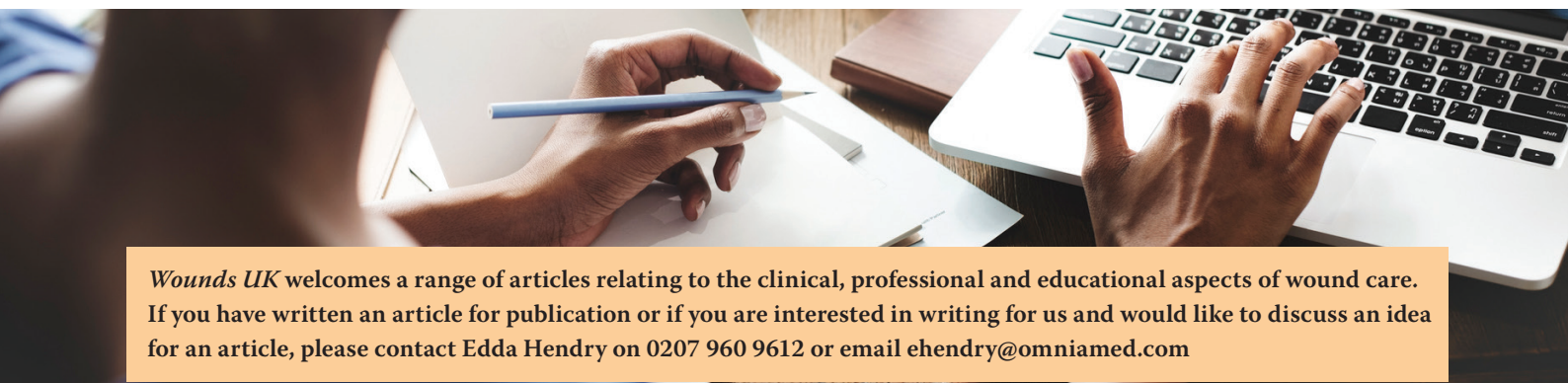
CONCLUSIONS

In the last two papers in this management series, we identified the causes and effects of stress in

the workplace. In this paper we have identified that the management of stress at the team level is, at least in part, a management responsibility. We have identified some strategies for reducing stress in the workplace through a leadership style that engages staff, develops a positive culture and invests in staff development. **WUK**

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