

# The cost of stress: The case for open dialogue on mental health in the workplace

*The only positive aspect of the increase in cases of stress during the past decade is that people are at least talking about them. Conversations about stress and mental health have moved out of the shadows and into the light. This is important progress as a greater understanding of cause and effect can lead to more meaningful conversations about where stress comes from and the different ways in which it can affect people.*

Temps de lecture : minute

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27 June 2024

However, talking openly about the symptoms and causes does nothing to reduce incidence if the talking doesn't include strategies to address the sources. Open dialogue can be used to attract leadership attention and from there catalyse important conversations about the many ways in which stress eats into employee health, performance and ultimately business profits.

A secondary effect of increased openness about the topic is that attitudes towards stress have changed. It's now less often seen as a sign of weakness or, conversely, as a badge of commitment – a kind of observable evidence of more highly evolved engagement with the company's purpose. The stress response is neither of these – just a hard-wired neurophysiological response that stems from the core of what makes us human.

# Stress and mental health

In physiological terms, the structure of our brain hasn't changed all that much in the past several hundred thousand years, but our environment, social conditions and pace of life have changed beyond all recognition. The truth is that life is changing at a faster rate than our brains can cope with. The brain's in-built plasticity that enables a baby to be born anywhere in the world and absorb the cultural development instructions supplied by its environment means that brains can and do adapt.

However, the process takes time. When the stimulus changes, brains initiate their own software upgrades, yet the upload takes a bit longer than on your smartphone. For our purposes, we should acknowledge the current workplace stress epidemic as evidence of that struggle taking place. It shouldn't be taken in any way to be a deficiency - rather an ongoing process of employee adaptation in response to a rapidly changing environment. The pandemic years saw a dramatic increase in the negative effect on people's mental health, with a 25% increase in the prevalence of anxiety and depression worldwide.



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## The mental wellbeing continuum

If mental wellbeing can be seen as existing on a continuum with very good on the right-hand end and very poor on the left, then the stress response should be marked as left of the midpoint. In such a model stress needs to be seen as existing to the left of the centre because there's no such thing as 'positive stress'. When people use this term what they usually mean is 'positive pressure'. We call this a 'Goldilocks zone' of external stimulus that sharpens awareness and focus and gets us ready for action - enough stimulus to make you energised, engaged, fully alive and up for a challenge. It's a 'when the going gets tough' type of idea with enough pressure to stimulate an engaged and alert response but not so much that you're in cognitive fight or flight mode.

If we're to call into question a startlingly prevalent narrative that some stress is to be expected and even encouraged on the grounds that it's good for performance, it's an important distinction. These complex changes come at a high cost when repeated regularly. It's an unhelpful and potentially damaging conflation of the terms pressure and stress. The former is a neutral input that can produce positive or negative outcomes; the latter is a negative outcome. A full-blown stress response triggers powerful hormones that drive the rapid change in blood chemistry needed to support the physical exertion needed for combat or escape. These complex changes come at a high cost to health when repeated regularly. It's no surprise then that stress is a factor in a large number of mental health issues, including depression (reduced mood and interest) and anxiety (excessive or persistent anticipation of a future threat).

The Health and Safety Executive estimates that nearly one in six people of working age have a diagnosable mental health issue (HSE 2022). However, due to the culture of silence that still exists in many companies, the leadership is effectively insulated from the true extent of the issue – although, it should be noted, they’re not personally immune.

## Culture of silence

Employees have many reasons for concealing their stress and inner turmoil from colleagues and bosses. Among these is the fear of being seen as weak, unreliable or unfit for promotion. Programmes such as the *Time to Talk* campaign or the *Work Right* campaign have done much to encourage employees to talk about what they’re experiencing. However, the number of people not talking still vastly outweighs the number who feel able to speak up about how they’re feeling.

As a small but relevant sidebar, research carried out by psychologist Jamie Whitehouse suggests that human stress behaviours may have evolved as a communication tool to aid social cohesion. His work raises the question of whether external stress behaviours in humans serve a similar function to that of primates, where signalling stress seems to function as avoidance of conflict. This lack of acceptance and openness about the legitimacy and inevitability of the stress response might be fuelling even greater disconnection between colleagues and managers.

As a social species, our ancestors took their cues from each other. As modern humans, we’ve become so enthralled by our performance and professional progression that we’ve forgotten to value human wellbeing as well as the legitimacy of shielding work-life boundaries to protect it. Many companies we work with seem to display a culture of ‘every man or woman for themselves’, even though research suggests that we’re wired to communicate and share, not hide, our struggles so that others in the group can benefit. In other words, not feeling able to talk about our stress

and emotional health adds to both short-term distress and the longer-term incidence.

The need for open dialogue about stress and mental health issues at work is evident. But the bottom line is that most people affected by workplace stress don't feel comfortable enough to talk about the psychological or physiological effects they're experiencing. This means that the employer remains ignorant of the damage to their human assets as well as the contribution and profitability that's leached away through all that distress. A true lose-lose situation. Addressing this issue is crucial to creating a healthier and more productive work environment for everyone involved.

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