

ON-SITE MASSAGE: AN EMPLOYER'S ANSWER TO WORK-RELATED STRESS

Introduction

Stress is part of many, if not all, of our daily lives, at home and at work. However, statistics show that stress in the workplace is on the increase and now costs UK industry £14 million per day. Every day, around 250,000 workers take sick leave due to stress. A certain level of stress may simply come with the territory in the modern workplace, and may be acceptable – even good. However it becomes a serious matter when it crosses the line and leads to stress-related illness.

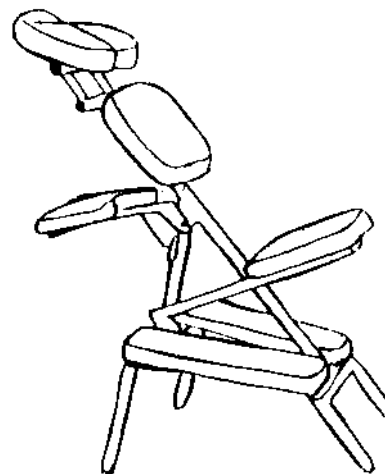
Today's employers must be sensitive to an employee's mental health as well as his physical well being. Current legislation requires employers to treat stress in exactly the same way as any physical illness and minimize its occurrence. Recent changes to Health and Safety laws have placed an obligation on the employer to take a pro-active stance in the prevention of stress.

One of the fastest areas of growth in Occupational Health, and the prevention of stress, has been the use of On-site Chair Massage in the workplace. This type of massage is gaining recognition throughout the UK, due to the significant results that it is delivering.

The stress factor

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), in the UK, as many as one in five people are suffering from high levels of work-related stress – that's around 5 million workers. An estimated half-million individuals report experiencing stress at a level they believe made them ill. The cost to Britain's economy is estimated at approximately 6.7 million working days lost per year. However, the cost to UK society as a whole, is approximately £11bn. And yet, despite this, only 3% of UK organisations, and one in seven workers benefit from wide ranging occupational health support at work.

But why is this so? It is well documented that improved health for people at work offers substantial benefits to employers and employees through reduced absenteeism, improved productivity, lower rates of sickness, less time to recovery and a quicker return to work, fewer accidents, reduced resistance to change, improved relationships with customers, colleagues and suppliers, and reduced staff turnover.



What exactly is work-related stress?

Work-related stress can be defined as a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and harmful aspects of work content, work organisation and the working environment. It is a state characterised by high levels of agitation, exhaustion and distress. Feelings of not being able to cope, and being overwhelmed, are common among stressed employees.

It is impossible to state categorically what will cause an individual to become stressed, as events and circumstances can have very different effects on individuals. However, a number of specific stressful working conditions, such as repetitive work, assembly-line work, having too much work, unachievable targets and deadlines, threat of redundancy, working long inflexible hours, poor supervision and management, have been shown to produce high levels of stress in employees.

However, external factors such as bereavement, changing jobs, birth of a child, ill health, divorce, moving house, redundancy, planning a wedding, financial worries, major life changes, loneliness or feelings of isolation, can also have a major detrimental effect on stress levels.

Effects of stress on the body

What can be agreed upon are the physiological changes which take place in the body in response to stress. Our reaction to stress is a primitive 'fight or flight' response. The brain tells the adrenal glands to produce more adrenaline and noradrenaline. These hormones cause:

- raised blood pressure and increased heart beat to pump blood through the system faster
- restriction of blood flow to the skin as blood is diverted to the brain and muscles
- heightened muscle tension
- reduced stomach activity, causing a feeling of 'butterflies' as blood is diverted elsewhere
- increased perspiration

At the same time, the body produces another hormone called cortisol, which

- releases sugar and fat into the system for muscle energy
- reduces the efficiency of the immune system, so we fight infections less well, as vital body resources are concentrated elsewhere.

Chronic or long-term stress leads to a resetting of the body's resting base lines for its internal systems. Blood pressure is permanently increased to a new normal level for the individual. As stress also suppresses the immune system, there is an increasing likelihood of becoming susceptible to colds and infections, and we take longer to heal and repair damaged tissues.

With continued increasing stress, resting base lines continue to be re-adjusted until there comes a breaking point where health and well being are seriously put at risk.

The effects of maintaining unhealthy high levels of stress, without sufficient rest and relaxation can create anxiety, lack of energy, muscle tension, fatigue, tiredness, concentration lapses, illness, cravings, alcohol, drugs, destruction of family, self-destruction, inability to cope, loss of job, high cholesterol, etc. Do these sound familiar?

Stress is now estimated to be the most common reason people take time off work sick. Stress is also considered to be a contributing factor in many conditions, including:

- Muscular – headaches, neck pain, back pain,
- Circulatory – high blood pressure, angina
- Nervous system – unable to relax, insomnia, anxiety and depression
- Skin/hair – psoriasis, eczema, spots and acne
- Reproductive – period pain, irregular periods, infertility problems
- Immune system – colds, flu, infections
- Digestive – IBS, ulcers, indigestion, constipation, diarrhoea, over-eating, weight loss
- Respiratory – asthma

How often do we hear work colleagues complaining of some of the above conditions? How easily could these conditions be alleviated if we just took some ‘time out’ for ourselves and relaxed on a regular basis? Even 15 minutes a day could make the difference to most people.

The emerging approach for intervention focuses on a pro-active response to stress, with emphasis on preventive measures, rather than on the treatment of its effects. But as massage therapist, how can we help?

Massage and stress

Massage is a wonderful way of making time for oneself. The ‘feel good’ factor of massage is surprisingly effective in rejuvenating an individual and melting away the tension and the aches and pains.

Recent research by the Touch Research Institute in Florida, have shown that when we are massaged we increase the production of natural painkillers and give our immune system a boost. We also tend to lower our blood pressure and respiratory rate, which improves the function of our heart and lungs. Excess fluid and metabolic wastes are pushed back into the circulation for removal. Muscles are warmed up and stretched, and given more space to move. Imbalances between neural activities of the 2 hemispheres of the brain (linked to depression) are corrected with just 20 minutes massage. Massage can also realign the body. Taking tension out of tight muscles can restore normal pain free movement to joints. We also get the soothing effect of touch, which sedates our body and calms our nervous system, resulting in us feeling calmer and less stressed and anxious, which usually allows us to sleep better.

Being in a deeply relaxed state for 20-30 minutes at least 2-3 times each week can not only be used as a preventative measure against becoming overly stressed and fatigued, but can be used to reduce the effects on the body from stress.

Benefits of on-site chair massage to employees (and employers)

On-site chair massage is the ideal way to relieve stress in the work place. The massage focuses on the upper body and consists of a 15-20 minute routine (not much more than a coffee break or a cigarette break), which is applied through the clothes, while the client is seated on an ergonomically designed chair. The massage allows the client to release accumulated tension, and to experience a greater sense of well-being, relaxation and renewal.

A recent study conducted at 3M Corporation, in cooperation with The University of Texas Department of Kinesiology and Health Education examined employee perceptions of onsite massage therapy at work, whether the claims made by massage therapists were substantiated and some of the general perceptions of massage therapy.

A group of employees at 3M in Texas was surveyed as part of a trial onsite massage programme within the company. Participants and massage therapists were surveyed to measure several variables – perceptions about massage therapy and feelings about this form of therapy, perceived stress – using a global measure of perceived stress, symptoms of illness, core wellness.

Massage was shown to:

- Increase alertness and concentration (more productive employees)
- Reduce stress (happier work environment)
- Reduce the instances of common cold or flu symptoms (less sick days)
- Decrease the number of headaches (employees can focus on work)
- Increase quality of sleep (employees arrive refreshed and ready to work)
- Decrease the likelihood of being tired (employees will think on their toes)
- Enhance a secure sense of self (employees work with confidence).

It is no wonder that more and more people are choosing massage-based therapies to restore and then maintain health. It is non-invasive, non-chemical, and relies on ‘touch’ – essential for life, but so often forgotten or lacking in our lives.

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BLACK ISLE NEWS *Indian Head Massage* DIPLOMA

Catherine and Margaret are delighted with the success of their Indian Head Massage Diploma Courses and would like to thank all who attended. They have just completed their fourth course in Inverness, and first one in Aberdeen. The next Diploma courses are due to start in **February 2004** in both **Inverness** and **Aberdeen**.

For an application form please contact either: Catherine Smith or Margaret Beattie.
Tel: (01349) 861155/877688 E-mail: Mbmmoves@fsmail.net



**INDIAN HEAD MASSAGE
DIPLOMA**

**Indian Head Massage Diploma course in affiliation with the
Scottish Massage Therapists Organisation**
*For information on courses running in you area, please call:
Black Isle Complementary Therapies and speak to Catherine or
Margaret*
TEL: 01349 861155 / 877688 or E-MAIL: Mbmmoves@fsmail.net

One day Workshops continue to run in **Inverness** for both therapists and the general public

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Summary

Until recently stress was considered a normal part of working life, and excessive stress merely a by-product of a person's poor organisational skills. However, in the last few years, stress has been increasingly recognised as a legitimate and serious workplace concern, which has created a responsibility on the part of employers to develop adequate mechanisms for preventing and dealing with it.

Failure to take steps to deal with the causes of workplace stress can have direct and significant consequences for employers, both in terms of lost productivity, and also in terms of increased risks of employee compensation claims. An employer has a duty to take reasonable care to *avoid* illness or injury to employees in connection with their employment.

On-site Massage Therapists are increasingly being used in the workplace and shows a responsible attitude towards employee's health and wellbeing.. Therapists can help ease physical tension in the head, neck, back and wrists, and ease the mental and emotional effects of stress. In one call centre the sickness rate historically ran at 8% per annum. However, one year after introducing a massage therapist, this rate had fallen to just 2.5%. Although this cannot be attributed solely to massage, the company concerned believe it is an essential part of staff welfare.

"If UK businesses are to succeed in the national and international market place, companies need the competitive advantage of highly trained, healthy and motivated teams. To achieve this, employers must help their staff to not only minimise the risks of poor health, but gain the many benefits from good health." Andrew Cubie, Chairman, Scotland's Health at Work Steering Group.

ON-SITE MASSAGE DIPLOMA COURSE DATES FOR 2004

- **Edinburgh:** **Weekend 1 – 29 / 30 May** **Weekend 2 – 26 / 27 June**
- **Aberdeen:** **Weekend 1 – 18 / 19 September** **Weekend 2 – 16 / 17 October**
- **Inverness:** **contact Kit on 01540 661689 for more details.**