

# STRESS and WELLBEING 2006

Report on new research into knowledge of stress and attitudes towards it in the UK\*



\* Produced as part of the DPP's Dealing With Stress campaign 2006

# Introduction

Stress is the buzzword of the 21st Century and new findings in this report, provide a stark insight into how stressed we all feel, how stress is misunderstood by the UK population and our failure to adopt effective coping mechanisms.

It also includes top tips for tackling stress at home and at work and shows what employers can do to support their staff in dealing with stress.

The fact that 'new technology' is top of people's list as one of the major stressors of the last year is a real sign of our times and given that nearly a third of people (30%) would turn to alcohol to help relieve their stress we may be looking at a mental health time-bomb.

Many people are unsure about what true stress is and confuse it with normal life problems like having a bad day, common worries and conflicts. Such misunderstanding means that stress is often not taken as seriously as it should be, and attempts to reduce the problem are impeded by the stigma often associated with mental ill health.

**79% of people believe they have experienced stress in the last year**

For the purpose of this report a survey, conducted by ICM\* Research, was undertaken. The survey findings feature throughout the report unless otherwise referenced. ICM Research interviewed a random sample of 1003 adults aged 18+ by telephone between 7-8 December 2005. Interviews were conducted across the country and the results have been weighted to the profile of all adults.

\* ICM is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. For more information visit [www.icmresearch.co.uk](http://www.icmresearch.co.uk)

# Misunderstanding stress

DPP commissioned a survey of over 1000 adults to try to gain insight into the understanding the British public have about stress. Although the majority (79%) of people say they have suffered stress in the last year, when asked to identify what stress is;

- **68% believe stress is having a really bad day**
- **63% identify stress as dealing with difficult people**
- **58% believe stress is having too much to do.**

While these factors are certainly pressures which can build up to cause stress, they are not in themselves direct causes of stress. This finding highlights the confusion around what true stress is compared with normal everyday problems and worries.

**68% of people believe stress is  
having a really bad day**

Misconceptions such as this can mean the issue of stress becomes trivialised which is likely to be the reason that stress is often not taken seriously. If people do not truly understand the concept then it is unlikely that they will know how to identify it, deal with it and even prevent it. DPP's **Dealing With Stress** campaign aims to help people recognise when they are stressed and what to do to manage it.

**58% of people believe stress is  
having too much to do**

# What is true stress?

According to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) stress is<sup>1</sup>:

**“The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them”.**

It generally occurs when people perceive they cannot cope with what they are expected to do or indeed what they expect of themselves.

64% of people believe stress is an illness, however, although stress can lead to illness it is not an illness in itself.

There is a difference between stress and everyday pressures which the above quote highlights.

We all experience pressure from time to time in our lives and this is perfectly normal. Some pressure is actually good for us as we all need this stimulus to operate at our best. If we are able to unwind and recover after these types of events there are no adverse effects.

It is only when this pressure becomes excessive or prolonged that the troubles begin and we start to experience the adverse reactions of stress. At first we may just become irritable, or tearful; make silly mistakes and be unable to think clearly. However, if the pressure continues and is not dealt with effectively mental and physical illnesses can result. (See list of stress symptoms at end of report).

**64% of people  
incorrectly believe that  
stress is an illness**

# So what is stressing us out?

**Almost a third (30%) of people report  
IT related pressures as a  
major source of stress**

In the survey respondents were given a list of severe and less severe pressures and asked which they believe have contributed to their stress in the last year. Top of the list was IT cited by 30% of respondents. Change in financial status and personal injury are joint second (24%) while travel to and from work is third (20%). This is seen as more stressful by 18-24 year olds (40%) and people living in the South East (24%).

**20% of people find  
travel to and from work stressful**

The more severe, longer lasting pressures do not appear to have the same impact as the more short term pressures. This is likely to be because many of the more serious life events such as bereavement of a loved one and divorce do not occur very often. This finding supports the idea that the build up of hassles has a dramatic effect on stress<sup>2</sup>.

**People in the South East get more  
stressed about travel to and from work  
than people in the rest of the UK**

# Stress: a sign of the times

Most people are familiar with the stress scale developed in the 60's (Holmes and Rahe<sup>3</sup>) showing that certain life events could be seen as predictors of subsequent ill health. The more events people had experienced, the more likely they were to experience a certain illness.

Although this research has a number of flaws it does give an indication of how stressful people perceive various life events and also provides a snapshot of the time. For example, new technology and travel to work were not included.

DPP's survey attempted to carry out a small scale study similar to that of Holmes and Rahe to see if there had been any changes in attitudes towards life events since the 1960s\*. Nine marker events were chosen from the original 43 Holmes and Rahe events and two modern events (new technology and commuting) were then added to the above to make 11 events in all. People were asked to rate each event as to how stressful they thought they were in relation to marriage.

Apart from death, which was rated lower, and divorce which rated about the same, other scores were higher. Here is how the survey compared:

## 2006

1. Death
2. Divorce
3. Change in financial state
4. Personal injury
5. Job security
6. Marriage
7. Trouble with boss
8. New technology
9. Retirement
10. Commuting
11. Vacation

## 1967

1. Death
2. Divorce
3. Personal Injury
4. Marriage
5. Fired at work
6. Retirement
7. Change in financial state
8. Trouble with boss
9. Vacation

\* Although attempts were made to produce similar scoring, methodology was slightly different so a total direct comparison cannot be made. However, relativity can be measured.

From this it can be seen that 'death of a loved one' and 'divorce' are still deemed the most serious life events but change in financial position is now seen as more of a problem. Where its position in the original scale is 7/9 it is now seen as 3/11.

**Change in financial position is now seen as a much greater cause of stress than in the 60's**

For DPP's survey, 'fear of job security' was swapped for 'getting fired from work'. Although fear is more of a feeling rather than an event it now features much more highly than 'getting fired' did in the 1960's.

## **Fear of job security is now seen as major a cause of stress**

In the original list 'retirement' was seen as a relatively stressful experience but this no longer appears to be the case. Retirement has received a similar score to 'taking a vacation' which is bottom on both ratings.

## **Retirement is no longer seen as stressful a life event as it used to be**

'Trouble with the boss' is rated as much more stressful than it used to be. In the original study it was very near the bottom with only a few more points than vacation. However it is now rated nearly as high as marriage.

## **Trouble with the boss is now rated as much more stressful than in 1967**

Although many things have changed since 1967, major life events which may cause stress are still seen as the personal ones - death, divorce and personal injury being the highest three analysed. **However, work related issues have crept further up the scale which reflects our increasing awareness that stress at work is a major cause of our personal stress.**

The two new life events added i.e. new technology and commuting are both work related stressors and while they were not seen as major issues, new technology received a score of 44 which was not far below marriage. Commuting was rated quite low with a similar score to vacation.

As new technology and commuting were lower on the events hierarchy but were experienced most often by the people surveyed it is more likely that they contribute to stress from the accumulation of hassles.

# What do we do to reduce our stress?

The next part of the survey was to determine the answer to the question “what would you consider doing to help you feel less stressed?”.

The responses to this are obviously affected by respondents’ perception of stress. If they do not feel seriously stressed they would be unlikely to go for professional help and more likely to take trivial actions. The results support this as the more trivial actions have the higher scores. However the results still make interesting reading as they illustrate the first real difference in responses between men and women. Although some differences were unlikely to be significant, in all but three scenarios females show more desire to help themselves than males.

## **80% of people listen to music to reduce their stress**

The most popular ways of trying to reduce stress for both sexes is by listening to music. This is followed by speaking to a friend.

## **75% of people talk to a friend to reduce their stress**

However, only 67% of males said they would talk to a friend in comparison with 82% of women. Conversely, men are more likely to have an alcoholic drink (34% men and 26% women), cigarette (27% men and 23% women) or work longer hours (25% of men and 22% of women) than women.

## **Men are more likely than women to turn to cigarettes and alcohol**

## **A quarter of men would work longer hours to try to reduce stress**



# Professional Help

Respondents in the survey were given a variety of options for seeking professional help if stressed and asked which they would choose. Almost half (41%) of respondents say they would speak to their GP about feeling stressed. A significant number of people (15%) buy medicines from the chemist to help them deal with their stress which shows that pharmacies have an important role to play in managing stress. This suggests that more could be made of this facility in helping people to manage their health and wellbeing.

## **41% of people would go to their GP to help them feel less stressed**

People are more reluctant to take their stress problem into the workplace with only 23% speaking to their manager and 15% seeking the help of their occupational health department. Responses here will also obviously depend on what services are available at work and may reflect the lack of available occupational health support rather than the under-use of services, but clearly there is some stigma to overcome for employers who recognise the need to support their staff in reducing work based stress.

Qualitative research from a focus group conducted by DPP shows the perceived stigma still associated with stress at work.

When asked if DPP's **Dealing With Stress** leaflet would encourage them to talk to someone the following responses were received.

***“Possibly, if it were overtaking my life. It would be the GP though, not work, it would get round the office like wild fire.”***

***“Possibly. Not work people though, its not the culture.”***

***“Quite likely if I was feeling stressed. I'd talk to friends. There is a bit of a stigma to opening yourself up - I definitely wouldn't talk to anyone at work.”***

***“I wouldn't talk to the boss, my doctor is bad too- she tried to put me on antidepressants when I only went with stress headaches.”***

# Helping employers tackle stress

The DPP survey found that 25% of people would not take time off work with stress because they would not want their boss to know and 20% would not want their colleagues to know.

**25% of people would not take time off work with stress because they would not want their boss to know**

Unfortunately the stigma of stress is very much tied up with the lack of understanding. Some managers do not appreciate that stress can happen to anybody and many describe it as an excuse for malingerers. It may be true that some people use stress as an excuse to take time off work but does this view mean that those who are genuine are not helped in case the malingerers "get away with it"? There is huge potential benefit for both employers and employees in helping people to manage their stress. The answer lies in supporting managers to understand the concept of stress so they can help their staff.

## HSE Guidance

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) have produced guidance for managers to help them tackle work related stress (see [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk) for more information). Organisations that are following the guidance are starting to see improvements in staff health and morale which also have strong financial benefits.

**Through introduction of risk assessment and stress management initiatives Somerset County Council have shown a saving of £1.13 million pounds in reduced absence in 2 years<sup>4</sup>**

According to Chris Rowe head of HSE Psychosocial policy:

***"The HSE recognises that much stress is created by managers not managing people properly. The HSE standards aim to prevent this situation happening by describing the sorts of things that should be in place in good high performing workplaces."***

Although many organisations are now starting to take the matter of stress seriously and some are starting to follow HSE guidance, many are not. There appears to be a number of reasons for this.

A survey commissioned by The HSE and conducted by ISMA in August 2005<sup>5</sup> showed that ignorance about stress is a major problem. As part of the survey, respondents were asked what the obstacles were to carrying out the HSE guidelines and although 61% said it was lack of time, 50% said it was lack of understanding about stress.

In addition to this 48% said it was due to lack of line manager commitment and 34% said it was due to lack of senior management commitment. It is possible that this is interrelated. If managers do not understand what stress is and confuse it with everyday pressure then they are obviously less likely to take it seriously. This in turn will reduce the commitment. It is therefore important that managers are educated to understand what stress really is and the DPP information is being provided to do just that.

A final point in the HSE/ISMA survey is that 46% of people surveyed believed they had been unsuccessful in introducing stress management initiatives because of the stigma of stress in their organisation

## ***Tips for managers to reduce organisational stress***

1. Adopt the attitude that stress is not a weakness and try to develop this culture in your own department.
2. Ensure that you yourself are not suffering from stress. A stressed manager has a “knock on effect throughout the organisation.” Dealing with your own stress will prevent your staff from suffering and results in a more relaxed and productive atmosphere.
3. Analyse your own management style and behaviour (honestly); ask is your management style causing any stress? Good management is the best proactive way of reducing organisational stress. A good manager:
  - ensures a realistic knowledge of the workload and the time it should take
  - sets individual work objectives and targets, consults and discusses before setting these
  - gives clear effective instructions
  - makes sure he/she defines roles and tasks adequately – discusses priorities
  - prepares workforce for times of high workload
  - varies work where possible and provides opportunities for individuals to influence the way they do their jobs
  - delegates effectively (and not just the boring bits!!)
  - ensures staff have adequate training to do a good job. Coaches where training is not possible
  - gives fast feedback. Both positive and negative. Praises when appropriate. Does not shy from giving negative feedback. Gives constructive criticism when criticism is necessary
  - is approachable, admits to own weaknesses and takes responsibility for own mistakes

4. Regularly do an informal risk assessment of your staff to check nobody is subjected to work related stress.
5. Provide information to staff telling them where to go for help and what to do if they are suffering from stress.
6. Encourage staff to attend a personal stress management course or provide staff with tips to help themselves.
7. Carry out a formal risk assessment process to reduce stress in your department.
8. Improve communication between yourself and staff and encourage communication between colleagues.
9. Help your staff to cope with change no matter how big or how small.
10. All in all create an environment that promotes well being and reduces stress for staff.

As stress at work is causing many problems, more needs to be done in the workplace. The HSE have started to raise this issue with their standards and guidance but misunderstandings are preventing this being as successful as it could be. Managers therefore also need to be educated and this can partly be done by distributing information via occupational health departments. If there is a problem at work staff need to learn how they can best raise the issue and the DPP leaflet provides useful information here too.

# Tips for dealing with stress

- 1.** Adopt a healthy lifestyle – if we eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly and ensure we get adequate rest our body is better able to cope with stress should it occur.
- 2.** Know your limitations and do not take on too much. Learn to be assertive and how to say no without upsetting or offending people.
- 3.** Determine what causes you stress and try to change your behaviour to reduce it.
- 4.** Avoid unnecessary conflict. Look for a solution to a dispute where both parties can achieve a positive outcome.
- 5.** Learn to manage your time more effectively.
- 6.** Practice saying 'no' without feeling guilty.
- 7.** Take time out to relax and recharge your batteries.
- 8.** Try to see things differently. Talk your problem over with somebody before it gets out of proportion and accept the things you cannot change.
- 9.** Find time to meet friends. Friends help us see things in a different way. The activities we engage in with friends usually help us relax and we will often have a good laugh. Laughter is a great stress reducer.
- 10.** Avoid alcohol, nicotine and caffeine as coping mechanisms. Long term, these faulty coping mechanisms will just add to the problem.

# Symptoms of stress

Symptoms shown by an individual will depend on that particular individual and his or her particular vulnerabilities. As stress symptoms are so numerous it is easier to think of these under 3 different headings. **Physiological, Psychological and Behavioural**. Some of these are listed below:

PHYSIOLOGICAL	PSYCHOLOGICAL	BEHAVIOURAL
Excessive tiredness or insomnia Headaches Dizziness Blurred vision Teeth grinding Difficulty in swallowing Aching muscles – backache Non specific aches and pains Chest pains Asthma Palpitations Cardiovascular disorders High blood pressure Nervous indigestion Excessive blood sugar Sexual difficulties Excessive sweating Nervous rash Low immunity to opportunistic infections Frequent coughs and colds Allergies Changes in inflammatory diseases Stomach ulcers Mucous colitis Constipation Weight gain or loss	Bad temper Anger Upset, crying Over worrying Depression Anxiety, panic attacks, phobias Low self esteem Loss of confidence Self critical Faulty thinking Feeling got at	Drinking too much Taking drugs Smoking too much Under or overeating Insomnia Boredom Withdrawn Apathy Over active Lack of direction Poor memory Confused Untidy Becoming obsessive Over exercising Working long hours Poor performance Lateness Absence from work

Reading a list like this is rather like reading a medical dictionary. You are likely to identify with many of the symptoms you read. However, do take care and avoid thinking you must be stressed. There may well be an alternative explanation and **it is therefore advisable to consult a doctor**.

## REFERENCES

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