

Stress at work

In the latest of our series looking at the emotions likely to be dealt with during coaching, **Gladeana McMahon** focuses on stress

Stress has legal as well as financial implications for organisations and causes considerable distress to individuals (Clarke, Cooper 2003).

The Confederation of British Industry's 2006/07 *Self-reported Work-Related Illness Study* states that 530,000 individuals believed they were experiencing work-related stress at a level that was making them ill and the CBI estimated that 20 per cent of sick employees accounted for 80 per cent of a company's health costs.

Stress coaching is now used as a way of helping individuals return to work more quickly and avoid relapse.

What is stress?

The human body is equipped with an important biological survival mechanism called the stress response, which automatically kicks in when an individual perceives a threat. For example, if you were halfway across a zebra crossing and saw a car coming that you believed would not stop, your body would produce a range of stress hormones providing you with the extra energy and strength to either jump back or run out of the way more quickly than you would normally be able to do (Palmer, Cooper 2007). This is often called 'fight or flight'.

Once the threat has been successfully dealt with, the body starts its recovery process and begins to eliminate the stress

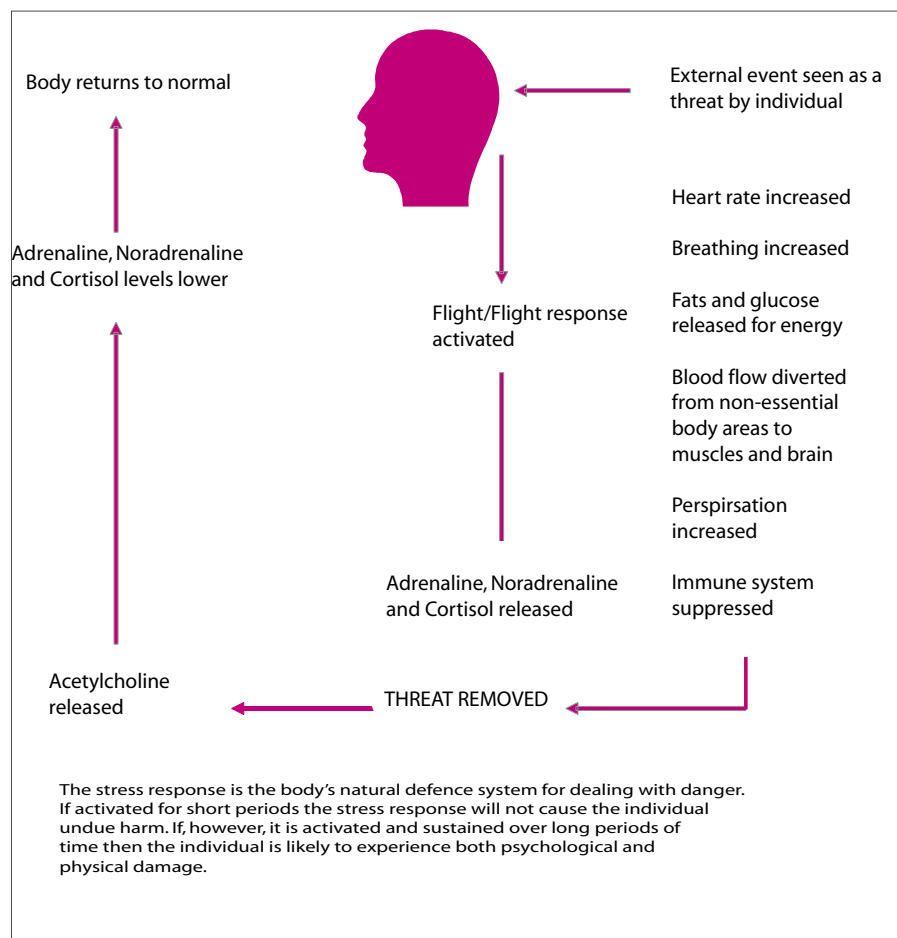
hormones to return to its normal state. Figure 1 below outlines how the body reacts in such situations.

If the stress response is activated for short periods of time, it does not cause undue harm. But if it is sustained over longer periods, individuals are likely to experience psychological and physical damage (Cooper, Dewe 2004).

While the stress response is

important in survival situations, it can also be triggered when an individual faces situations he is unable to deal with or when the pressures of everyday life become overpowering. The brain does not make a distinction between an actual threat and a perceived one, such as when individuals feel unable to deal with their workload (Sapolsky 2004).

Figure 1
The Stress Response:
a simple guide



These pressures include working consistently long hours, being asked to do too many things, feeling out of control and engaging in perfectionistic thinking (Petersen 2003). It is also interesting to note that boredom and lack of challenge also cause stress, as do periods of change containing a sense of uncertainty (Holmes, Rahe 1967).

Biologically, a human being is no different to a machine: work it too hard and for too long, leave it idle and rusting away, or ask it to undertake functions it is not equipped to deal with and something will eventually go wrong. Individuals who experience on-going job stress may develop a condition called ‘burnout’, a term that relates to a state of total exhaustion (Ross, Altmaier 1994). You can never predict when this will happen as some people have a higher stress threshold than others, just in the same way that some people have a higher tolerance to pain. While individual tolerance may be linked to genetic predisposition (Glover, O’Connor 2002), everyone has a breaking point and no one is immune given the right set of circumstances.

People manifest stress in different ways: physically, emotionally, psychologically and behaviourally. Figure 2 (right) outlines various stress-related symptoms.

There is a big difference between ‘pressure’ and ‘stress’. Pressure is healthy and provides the opportunity for individuals to work hard, stretching their abilities, and many people thrive on it. Stress is only ever experienced when the body’s stress response kicks in, depleting the ability to perform effectively. One of the key differences between pressure and stress is whether the individual feels a sense of personal control over his day-to-day activities (Karasek, Theorell 1990).

When someone becomes stressed, the body does not rid

itself of the effects of producing too many stress hormones. It is one thing experiencing a one-off event or short-term difficulties and it is another if the individual is constantly being stretched beyond his physical, emotional, psychological and behavioural capabilities. In such circumstances, the person’s body never manages to clear the debilitating side-effects of the stress hormones, and it is the build-up of these that undermines the individual’s physical state and performance (Cooper 2004).

For example, when produced consistently, adrenalin associated with both excitement and fear can cause problems with the body’s adrenal system as it is also associated with tiredness and sleeplessness. Excessive production of cortisol can destroy brain cells, leading to short-term memory problems.

It has been argued that producing stress hormones on a short-term basis can make an individual more effective, given the boost in energy. However, while it’s a valid argument, it falls down because of the debilitating effects of long-term stress hormone production. Individuals either don’t know when to stop or feel unable to do so because of the external demands being made.

Personality Type also plays a part. For example, Type As have great capacity when it comes to energy and drive and are often highly productive. However, as such individuals are more likely to focus on outcome, ignoring physical and emotional needs, they tend to suffer more from stress when they allow themselves to become seriously overloaded. Type As are more likely to find achieving a sensible work/life balance a challenge as they tend to be more compulsive in the way they approach their work and delivery often takes priority over health.

Type Bs are more laid back and find it easier to keep matters in

perspective and are likely to ask for help earlier (Friedman 1996).

In recent years, cognitive behavioural coaching has been used to offer individual stress coaching programmes. CBC owes its origins to cognitive behaviour therapy (McMahon 2007).

CBC works in a holistic manner based on effective psychological principles and works by examining situations, thoughts, emotions, behaviours and the effect that these have on individual physiology.

When undertaking a stress coaching programme, the coach will need to know the seriousness of the condition of the person concerned. For example, if the individual has been off work with stress-related depression, the programme, its length and ways of working may be significantly

Figure 2
Common
stress-
related
symptoms

Physical	Cognitive
Headaches or backaches	Memory problems
Muscle tension and stiffness	Indecisiveness
Bowel problems	Inability to concentrate
Nausea, dizziness	Trouble thinking clearly
Insomnia	Poor judgement
Chest pain, rapid heartbeat	Negative thinking
Weight gain or loss	Anxious or racing thoughts
Skin conditions (eczema)	Constant worrying
Loss of sex drive	Loss of objectivity
Frequent colds	Fearful anticipation
Emotional	Behavioural
Moodiness	Eating more or less
Agitation	Sleeping too much or too little
Restlessness	Isolating yourself from others
Short temper	Procastination, neglecting
Irritability, impatience	Responsibilities
Inability to relax	Using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs
Feeling tense and ‘on edge’	nervous habits (eg nail biting, pacing)
Sense of loneliness and isolation	Teeth grinding or jaw clenching
Depression or general unhappiness	Overdoing activities (eg exercising, shopping) Over-reacting

different to someone who has been identified much earlier and who may still be at work even if experiencing difficulties.

The four areas that a CBC programme covers are physical impact, thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Physical impact

Part of an effective stress management coaching programme focuses on understanding the impact stress has on the body. The individual is introduced to the biological concept and implications of the stress response and how producing stress hormones can damage the body, including the immune system (Palmer, Cooper 2007). In addition, individuals are taught to identify what are seen as the physical 'early warning signs' of stress. This stage considers the impact of diet, exercise and relaxation.

For example, exercise reduces stress hormones and is also excellent for raising mood and general health. Diet is important as stress hormones have an impact on blood sugar levels, which, in turn, have an impact on mood and stamina. It is not uncommon for someone who is feeling tired to drink more coffee than normal as caffeine is a stimulant. If the individual is already producing excessive amounts of the stress hormone adrenalin, all coffee does is make the effects of this worse.

Many people who are stressed do not sleep properly and part of the programme may focus on such issues. It took time for the body to become worn down and helping it return to normal also takes time (Cooper 2004).

Thoughts

The cognitive part of the programme helps individuals identify their core beliefs, life rules and negative automatic thoughts. Many people become



stressed due to an unrealistic thinking style. Hard-working, perfectionistic thinkers are far more at risk (McMahon, Rosen 2008). This rather challenges the commonly- but erroneously-held belief that it is only inadequate individuals who become stressed.

Core beliefs are formed about ourselves, other people and the world from the messages we receive in early life. Life rules are the strategies we employ to enact our core beliefs in day-to-day life and negative automatic thoughts are triggered in response to the situations we face.

For example, a core belief of "I am not really clever", or alternatively "I am clever", may lead to a life rule of "If I don't deliver, people will realise I am not clever and that would be awful", or "If I don't always give 100 per cent, I will be letting myself down", which, in turn, manifests itself when the individual is asked to do more than he can manage.

There are many strategies employed during this part of the process. For example, identifying cognitive distortions such as 'all or nothing' (where the client thinks in extremes like "I must do everything I am asked to do regardless of whether it is possible") or catastrophising (where the client paints the worst case scenario like "If I can't keep up, I am useless and this will mean I am weak and inadequate and will lose my job").

There are many ways in which an individual can distort the reality of his situation through this type of thinking. The skill of the coach is in aiding understanding about the relationship between thoughts and beliefs and in providing the counter-strategies that can be used to reappraise individual thinking.

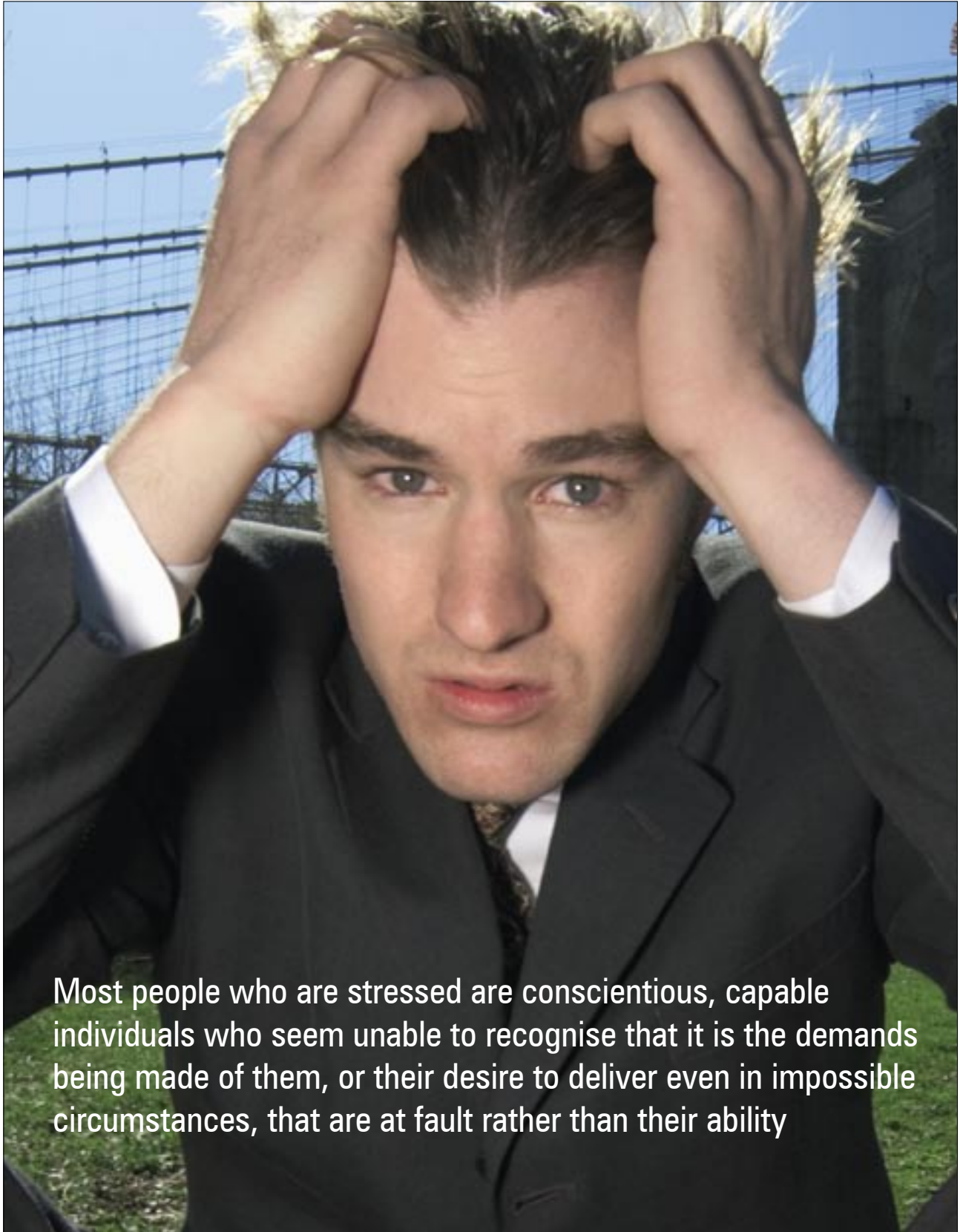
By reframing a thought of "I have to get this done at all costs" to "If there is more to do than I can manage, I need to analyse what can be done, by when, and discuss this with my manager", the client is more able to communicate effectively with his manager in a way that is likely to ensure tasks are completed and that the business is able to secure a positive outcome.

Most people who are stressed are conscientious, capable individuals who seem unable to recognise that it is the demands being made of them, or their desire to deliver even in impossible circumstances, that are at fault rather than their ability.

Feelings

This part of the programme focuses on the emotions the individual experiences and, while linked to the individual's thought processes, they are treated as a separate entity. As individuals become more stressed, they also become more emotional. If someone finds that he is feeling anxious or irritable, the coach works with him to identify the origins of these emotions and to diminish or eradicate them.

For example, many people who experience stress fail to recognise that their anxiety may be related to taking on too much responsibility. They forget that, if a system or process is at fault or if the demands being made of them are unrealistic, this needs to be identified and practical strategies put into place to counteract it.



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Even simple strategies such as the Three Step Model taken from assertiveness training in Figure 3 below can provide a structure for handling difficult, emotionally-charged conversations. This is especially true if the client is learning to communicate more effectively.

Figure 3

Three Step Model

Situation:

Manager asks an already overstretched staff member to produce a report.

Step One:

Acknowledge what the other person has said.

"I appreciate you need this report by the end of the month"

Link Word:

Words such as 'however', 'alternatively', or 'on the other hand'; any word except 'but' as this is associated with an argument.

Step Two:

State what you feel or think

"However, I already have two other reports to complete and cannot complete a third in the time"

Link Word:

When you have a suggestion you state it here by using the word 'and' to link to it.

"And I would appreciate your help in deciding which two reports are most important so that I can deliver these to you and agree a date for the remaining one"

Behaviours

The behavioural part of the programme focuses on the skills required to change the way the client behaves and/or to develop more appropriate skills to manage workload. For example, a client could be helped to devise a 'decision-making matrix' to aid effective analysis of situations or to develop a more effective communication style.

At the end of the day, there are only 168 hours in a week and no one can work 24/7. Balance is the key to success and considering the behaviours to support effective working practices is a priority.

A typical cognitive behavioural



stress coaching programme is likely to be between eight and 12 90-minute sessions spread over eight to 12 months.

In stress coaching it is important that the coach helps the client avoid relapse. Many people who return to work following a period of absence often fall into the trap of returning to their old patterns of behaviour. Unless new behaviours are developed and maintained, a reoccurrence is likely to take place.

Stress may be a fact of life but it also is something that can be managed effectively. Organisations can ensure their employees remain focused, effective and healthy. ■

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