

A New Approach To Management Stress

by Michael Bland

A growing phenomenon

Stress has been called the disease of the nineties – and it is well set to continue into the next decade. There have been ground-breaking legal actions by stressed-out staff against employers, European regulations on working hours and a plethora of media attention on this catch-all complaint which is being blamed for everything from poor productivity to marital breakdowns, from cancer to cracking up.

Stress management methods

With the recognition of stress and its effects, an industry has grown up in ‘stress management.’ Methods employed to counter workplace stress cover a huge range, including:

The Pragmatic

- Psychometric profiling
- Time management
- Counselling
- Management training to recognise and reduce stress

The Spartan

- Physical fitness – company gyms or gym memberships etc
- Adventure training

Touchy-Feely

- Group activity/therapy
- Shoulder massage
- Soul-baring sessions

New Age

Feng shui
Reflexology
Yoga
Meditation sessions...

...and many others.

Some of the methods employed are based on sound psychological principles and implemented by experienced experts but as the demand for 'stress management' increases the vacuum is increasingly filled, as in any expanding market, by some highly questionable practices.

For example, some soundly based psychological practices – such as NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) – can do more harm than good if misapplied. And sleeping in a plastic dustbin liner on a windswept Welsh mountainside with only the sheep for company can be enormously beneficial for some people – but for others it can be even more stress-inducing than the original workplace problem, a fact which needs to be recognised by those companies which send their employees off for adventure training whether they like it or not.

A recent extreme was the case of the insurance company whose staff suffered from burnt feet after a corporate fire-walking 'experience' went wrong.

More stress, not less

However, despite the increase in stress management and the range of techniques involved, workplace (and non-workplace) stress seems to be increasing, not diminishing. The more we do about stress the more we seem to suffer from it.

One cause of this paradox is that much stress management counselling and training addresses stress *relief* more than it does an understanding of the *causes*. This stems from a Western cultural belief that if we make life easier for ourselves we will be psychologically happier – when in fact the opposite is true, as will be explained later.

If a family in the 1950's had been shown a modern hi-tech home with all its labour saving devices, communications technology and entertainment systems they would have

seen it as a vision of heaven. Yet that 'heaven' has eluded the modern family, which is more stressed and less cohesive than its 50's counterpart.

The same is true in the workplace. The IT and technological revolutions of the 1970's and 80's were supposed to improve communication and make work easier and more efficient, allowing more time for leisure.

But the reverse has happened. In an article for *Industrial and Commercial Training* (Vol 30, Number 4, 1998 pp.131–136) I described the management hell of a real-life British company where employees receive between five and seven internal newspapers and newsletters, endless corporate e-mail messages, frequent videos, a phone-in system to hear the local manager's latest outpourings and an Intranet (described by one consultant as the 'corporate Tamagochi'!). Yet face-to-face communication with even local management is almost non-existent and morale is appalling.

The baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. IT has many blessings to confer on mankind, notably in the medical field, but it has also replaced human contact and much of the need for good old-fashioned hard graft, which is a natural and stress-reducing aspect of human existence. In the old days a manager would get off his or her backside and walk the floor. Now he or she taps something onto a PC and presses a button. And hard physical work has been replaced by hard mental work – which is much more stress inducing.

Perceived causes of stress

This is just one example of how stress continues to be a growing problem because we are looking at the wrong 'causes' in the first place. When I run group workshops on the subject, the first thing that participants are invited to do is to think about what things are causing the stress in their lives and put them on a flip chart (if they want to). The same old favourites appear time after time:

- Too much work
- Not enough time
- Stressful environment
- Relationship problems (with partner, boss, colleagues etc)
- Money worries

In short, most people spend their lives wishing that they were *somewhere* else, doing *something* else, with *someone* else – and with more *time* and *money* to spend on them!

The idea that such a Utopia will reduce stress is a myth. By the end of the training, participants are ready to admit to themselves that if they could have everything they wanted, if they could move to a paradise island with the partner of their dreams and all the money they ever wanted they would soon be as 'stressed' as ever. A recent survey of lottery winners showed that the 'happy' ones were those who had basically carried on life much as before their win. And many companies run pre-retirement courses to help people through the damaging shock to the system that sudden inactivity can induce.

Of course, some life events are immensely stressful, such as redundancy, divorce, bankruptcy, major illness etc but these require their own special help and attention and are not the subject of 'normal' stress management training. Significantly, these life events usually leave the sufferer stronger and more able to cope with everyday stressors. When you have stared the Beast in the face, the things that used to worry you seem somehow less important.

Not enough stress?

Indeed, a new school of stress management is emerging which says, among other things, that the problem today is not that we have too **much** stress but that we have too **little**.

For example, we used to be regularly at war. This brought its own stresses but it also brought its own stress relievers. If a V bomb dropped on the house at the end of the street everyone would pitch in to help. Cups of tea would appear. People were allowed to cry in public and put their arms round each other (how often do these things happen in a modern office?!).

A common hatred would be focused on the 'filthy Jerry' or whoever the enemy of the day was. Psychologically this was very important as without an enemy to hate we have the much more difficult task of facing the evil in ourselves – what Jung defined as the 'Shadow.' A *common* enemy creates team building and group support while the *internal* enemy creates untold disturbance and stress if we don't know how to deal with it. Much of business and commerce is about creating 'enemies' in the form of rival firms with whom to compete, but somehow Bloggs's Ice Creams do not have quite the same mind-focusing effect as the enemy air force.

Of course, no-one but a lunatic would suggest that war is a good thing and that we should indulge in it to be psychologically happy, but students of Abraham Maslow will recognise his theory of the 'Hierarchy of Needs' here. If we aren't preoccupied with raw

survival we focus the same energy and effort on to trading derivatives, sending out press releases or some other equally useless and unfulfilling pursuit.

As stress specialist Angela Patmore says: ‘How can a few ‘phones going off be more stressful than seeing the plague carts going past?’ A survey by the mental charity MIND at the end of 1998 showed that Christmas and the World Cup were regarded as two of the year’s biggest causes of stress – both of them institutions that were invented to relieve stress and make everyone ‘happy’! But it must also be recognised that, in the absence of war or plague, something as trivial as Christmas or a few ‘phones ringing becomes just as stressful to us – because it is in our nature to have stress. It is in our ‘script.’

Need for a new approach

This is why the approach which seeks to remove causes and teach palliative-based stress management has not worked and never will. Removing the ‘causes’ of ‘stress’ is, as Angela Patmore says, ‘like taking the burglar alarm off the wall instead of looking for the burglar.’ It overlooks the essential Maslow dictate that we will always find something to worry about. Take away the bear that is about to eat us and we start to worry about our next meal. In modern terms, this is why teaching time management to stressed-out executives is as bad as giving an alcoholic a bigger bottle.

Increasingly, the failure of traditional stress management methods and a better understanding of the subject – combined with a more self-aware and touchy-feely approach to life and work by society – are leading to a new way of tackling stress.

The first task here is to help people recognise stress as a good and necessary thing. According to the Yerkes Dodson Law, which is well known to stress psychologists, too *little* pressure is just as bad for us as too much pressure. We need pressure in our lives and it is healthy to feel stressed by it.

Psychologists also recognise that children who are brought up too strictly adjust better than those who are brought up without rules – and a similar process affects adults. Many of the old rules of society have been removed and we have more ‘freedom’ – but freedom itself is immensely stressful to a species which has lived by strict rules, however wrong or irrational, for hundreds of thousand of years.

We are like a bunch of animals that have been let out of the zoo and told to feed ourselves. An example of this in the workplace is dramatic change such as ‘Business Process Re-engineering’ and ‘Empowerment.’ Both sound wonderful in the refined

offices of an up-market management consultancy. In reality they create enormous stress and inability to perform.

At the end of a hugely expensive one-day conference on Business Process Re-engineering run by one of the world's biggest management consultancies, after presentation upon presentation filled with amazing flow-charts, matrices, paradigms and a plethora of management gobbledegook I dared to ask what was being done to handle the human resources effects, especially the stress and shock that would inevitably be caused by such huge changes. 'We don't do anything about that' was the official reply.

This is symptomatic of one of the major stressors – management behaviour. Good HR training can be invaluable in helping managers to understand their people better and motivate them in a less stressful way. But the sad truth is that the great majority of managements – and those who advise them – are unlikely to change. Most do not even recognise the problem in the first place, let alone want to do anything about it.

The same goes for things like working hours, office and factory environments, pay and conditions etc. It would be nice if we could improve our working environment but most managers and employees are powerless to persuade those above them to do so.

Achieving a mind shift

So the first task of a modern trainer in stress management is to get the group to understand that stress is OK and that if we cannot change our environment we can at least change our response to it. One of the key mottoes of my particular course is: 'We can't make the problems smaller...but we can make *ourselves* bigger!'

This helps to take some of the myth out of stress and to make it less of what organisational psychologist Rob Briner calls 'psychological hypochondria.' Indeed, some of us go as far as challenging the group with the claim that stress does not exist at all. There is no catch-all syndrome which is the cause of all our problems and we do ourselves a disservice by thinking that there is. We have created a new entity with our minds as surely as a group of superstitious primitives could create a new god. In getting all stewed up about 'stress' we are worshipping that new god and being punished by it.

The secret, then, lies in creating a mind shift by getting people to look at themselves, their lives, their jobs and their relationships from a different angle. This is much harder to achieve than simply giving them lists of things to do – but it has a much deeper and more lasting effect.

A new type of stress workshop

Following is a description of a particular workshop which gets very positive feedback from participants and good results in terms of leapfrogging stress, looking at life differently and learning to relax and enjoy it. There are many permutations but this particular one can be run over one or two days, with one or two tutors, for between six and 15 people:

The first – and vitally important – task is to help people relax and feel free to say/do what they want. I assure them from the outset that they can participate as much or as little as they want. If they prefer to sit in the corner and just watch the whole proceedings they are welcome to do so – and in any case there will be none of the soul-baring, compulsory shoulder massages, new age music, chanting, fire walking and other trendy things that they may have encountered on other courses.

Given this freedom, people are more likely to participate actively, and as the course develops things like shoulder massaging and soul-baring might take place – but only when they are voluntary and spontaneous. To me, it is essential to treat people as intelligent human beings and to respect their inhibitions and feelings.

Next, people are given time to think about the things that cause them stress and/or prevent them from feeling fulfilled and happy – and then to call them out to be written on the flip chart. This is again voluntary, though most people seem perfectly happy to share their concerns.

As mentioned above, the regular favourites are things like time, money and relationships with bosses, colleagues and partners. At the end of the course the list is re-produced and participants are invited to say how important or otherwise it now seems. The mark of success is when everyone now regards their previous problems and stressors as insignificant.

Next comes some teaching on what stress actually is, how it affects us physiologically and psychologically, and how it is really a good thing (in the right amounts). Examples are given of how our worst problems are often our greatest opportunities – though I did once receive an amusing and well-deserved rejoinder to this rather Californian-sounding maxim. A participant said: ‘That’s all very well, but when Apollo 13 radioed back to base they didn’t say “Houston, we have an opportunity!”’ Fair point – some things really are a problem!

The human miracle

The physiology of stress leads naturally on to learning more about our bodies and how they work. There is a staggeringly low general level of knowledge of the miracle that is our body for 70-plus years – and it is important for people to have more respect for this incredible machine.

A few fun exercises to show how the body works are mingled with some staggering statistics – such as the fact that 98% of the cells that make up our body weren't there a year ago, and will not be there in a year's time. The body itself is effectively a template for the incredibly complex life cycle and orchestrated activity of something like 50 trillion cells. An even more staggering statistic is that, at the sub-atomic level we are made up of 99.999% empty space! We are nothing more than an incomprehensibly vast number of pulses of energy held together by an electro-magnetic force.

Seeing a bigger picture

In the light of such facts participants start to become aware of a much bigger picture than the one they are used to. If we respect our bodies we look after them better, which on its own is a big help in reducing stress and enjoying life. Being in awe of that body's amazing workings starts to help us feel 'bigger' about ourselves (and a little scared, which is a good thing). Understanding how everything in existence is actually made up of infinitely small pulses of vibrant energy, and not of material, solid 'things,' starts to get us looking at life from a different perspective, which is what the training is mainly about.

Also of great interest to participants is a simple look at the world of quantum physics – the theories of what everything is made of and how it works. This adds to the realisation that everything in existence is a) comprised not of solid matter but of moving energy, and b) interconnected. A change in spin in a single subatomic particle affects the behaviour of every other particle in the universe.

The more that people can see the bigger picture around them, the less important the daily worries become. People given a few months to live say that they then have the best few months of their lives and wish they had enjoyed themselves more before.

Learning to let go

The effect of this training is to help people enjoy their lives without the need of a death sentence – but it does call for an ability to let go of the things we deem important. As Lao Tse, the founding father of Taoism, said: ‘When I let go of what I am I become what I might be; when I let go of what I have I receive what I need.’

In modern life, this manifests itself in the fact that the less we need our relationships with people, jobs money etc the more we enjoy those relationships and the longer they last. Clinging to our jobs and partners like drowning people to wreckage is a guaranteed recipe for more stress in our lives – and also for being more likely to lose whatever it is that we were hanging on to in the first place.

Participants are shown how we create ‘comfort zones’ out of everything – our jobs, relationships, bank accounts, homes etc – and it is in trying to hang on to our comfort zones that we create the distress, pressure, illness and misery in our lives. It really does only take a small shift in attitude to become more accepting of change, which is an inevitability.

Another important ingredient is a series of simple meditations which participants can practice for themselves after the workshop. They are also given suggestions for books, courses, activities etc for their own personal development programme – including some daily ‘time out,’ which is an essential to reducing stress and enjoying life. Even a short nap at lunchtime instead of the frenetic office sandwich helps. Regular meditation of some sort helps to calm the system down and give people more energy, a fact proven by a number of medical studies.

Participants learn to see energy as a commodity which they can choose to have more or less of with their own ‘energy management’ programme.

This type of training has proved very positive in the short term but it is too early to establish the long term effects. What is certain, though, is that the ‘old’ approaches to stress management are inadequate and that the future lies in a change in perception. The ‘cure’ to stress does not come from changing our environment but from changing ourselves.

Conclusions

A radically new approach to the understanding and management of stress is needed to address the massive and increasing effects of the problem. The old ways are not working.

More success is likely to be achieved by changing people's attitudes rather than trying to change their environment. The ingredients are to help them to:

- Not feel inhibited by the training
- Recognise stress as a positive force rather than a negative one
- Understand more about their bodies, minds and physical environment
- Learn to let go of their 'comfort zones'
- Develop a personal programme, of which daily meditation and/or 'time out' is an essential part.

First published in Industrial & Commercial Training