

## **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 £50bn per year in lost productivity. 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.

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

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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?

### **Benefits of massage to employees (and employers)**

Massage is the ideal way to relieve stress in the work place. One of the most widely used type of massage is On-site Chair Massage. This type of 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 examined employee perceptions of on-site massage therapy at work. Several variables were monitored, including perceived stress, symptoms of illness, and core wellness.

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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)
- Reduce the number of headaches (employees can focus on work)
- Improve quality of sleep (employees arrive refreshed and ready to work)
- Reduce 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.

### **Summary**

Given the exponential rise in law suits against employers for stress related illness and injuries since changes to employment laws, the use of On-site Massage Therapy has increasingly become a must for employers. Massage not only offers proven health benefits to the employees, but shows that an employer is serious about their responsibility towards their employee’s health and wellbeing. The cost savings and increased profitability of the company are another important benefit which if monitored will more than out weight the cost of introducing On-site Massage Therapy.