

People Management

“Well-founded firms”

Don't just cure staff – stop them from getting sick in the first place. That's the thinking behind the steps Royal London Group and E.ON are taking to boost employees' health

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Date: 25 January 2007

Source: Guide to Health and Well-being

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Organisational approaches to tackling sickness absence have more commonly been akin to shutting the stable door once the horse has bolted. Increasingly, however, companies are meeting the challenge by implementing preventative health schemes.

“Emotional” problems, including stress, account for a disproportionate amount of the damage companies suffer from absenteeism, low productivity, low morale, attrition and the cost of medical claims. And although many firms still direct most of their health provision towards treating physical conditions a growing number of businesses are taking a more holistic approach. They are introducing programmes that focus on improving the overall health and fitness of their staff, not as a “nice to have” but as a strategic business investment. Such programmes can reduce stress, absenteeism and staff turnover, while raising morale, productivity and perceptions of the organisation as a good employer.

Research by the Department of Health in 2005 showed that for every £1 spent on such programmes there was an average return on investment of £3.73, including a 34 per cent saving in absenteeism costs. Insurance company Royal London Group decided to shift the emphasis of the healthcare it provided for its staff from reactive treatment towards the promotion of better health and well-being as a way of reducing sickness absence and improving productivity. “But we believed a well-being scheme would serve as an attraction, motivation and retention tool too,” says group employee health manager, Marisa Pickerill.

While people are very receptive to health messages in the workplace, they are bored of the idea of “health promotion” and need something more “sexy” to engage them, adds Pickerill.

Royal London launched its Vitality at Work programme at the start of 2005. “The first year we got staff feedback, examined absence data and identified the key health issues that people needed help with,” says Pickerill. “We used the intranet to communicate health messages in an entertaining yet informative way. We focused on six issues, including cancer awareness, stopping smoking and healthy eating, trying wherever possible to link them to national initiatives.”

Last year the programme focused on particular topics every month, including one on men's health that coincided with the football World Cup. “We wanted to convey a serious message in a humorous way, and managed to get in all sorts of jokes and innuendo around “tackle” and so on. It generated lots of interest,” says Pickerill.

A programme of chair massage and reflexology also generated interest, despite Pickerill's initial scepticism. “We pitched it as a revitalising treatment that would combat stress and increase productivity. We subsidise the cost, but people have to pay for treatment because we believe that by doing so they value it more. Within two weeks, 80 per cent of available appointments were booked – by men as well as women – and once people had tried it most of them re-booked.”

Indeed, chair massage and reflexology have proved so popular with Royal London Group staff that in December they were incorporated into its reward and recognition scheme.

Because of the cost benefits seen across Royal London Group, the cost of the programme will rise this year to around £100,000, partly as a result of the introduction of two new strands: stress management and dietetics. "Obesity, lack of exercise and poor diet, along with stress, are major drains on employers' health costs, so we need to address them, but we intend to do rigorous cost/benefit analysis," says Pickerill.

Most of Royal London Group's 2,643 employees work at the company's two main sites in Edinburgh and Wilmslow, Cheshire, but there are other offices. So far some initiatives have been group wide, but others have had to focus on key sites. "This year we want to up the ante and cover as many staff as possible," says Pickerill.

At the time of writing, Pickerill expected the company's absence bill to have dropped by 33 per cent to £1 million, down from £1.5 million at the end of 2005. "Occupational Health wouldn't want to claim credit for all of that: Vitality at Work is part of a collective approach to absence management," she says.

Anecdotal feedback has been very positive, and Pickerill expects to see that reflected in the results of the annual staff satisfaction survey. "But our challenge now is to work more closely with HR to quantify the business case," she concludes.

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massage reducing anxiety and improving alertness

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Background

There are now a number of research papers demonstrating the beneficial effects of massage therapy in relation to the physiological and psychological aspects of stress. One of the latest controlled studies conducted at the Touch Research Institute, Florida, shows once again that massage therapy has an important role to play in the alleviation of stress and stress-induced illnesses.

Methods

In the study, twice a week for five weeks, twenty-six adults were given a chair massage and twenty four adults were asked to relax in the massage chair for 15 minutes to be used as controls. On the first and last days of the study all of the participants were monitored for EEG, before, during and after the sessions. In addition, before and after the sessions they performed math computations, they completed POMS Depression and State Anxiety Scales and they provided a saliva sample for cortisol. At the beginning of the sessions they completed Life Events, Job Stress and Chronic POMS Depression Scales.

Results

It was found that frontal delta power increased for both groups, suggesting relaxation. The massage group showed decreased frontal alpha and beta power (suggesting enhanced alertness); while the control group showed increased alpha and beta power. The massage group showed increased speed and accuracy on math computations while the control group did not change. Anxiety levels were lower following the massage but not the control sessions, although mood state was less depressed following both the massage and control sessions. Salivary cortisol levels were lower following the massage but not the control sessions but only on the first day. At the end of the five week period, depression scores were lower for both groups but job stress score were lower only for the massage group.

Conclusions

This small-scale study suggests that massage therapy offers benefits in not just alleviating the physiological effects of anxiety, but also in improving mental alertness. Massage therapy reduces anxiety and enhances EEG pattern of alertness and math computations.

Publication Types

mi Neurosci (ENGLAND) Sept 1996,86
(3-4) p197-205.

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