RESEARCH ARTICLE

Manage Stress to Tackle Mental Health Problems in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

The number of people suffering from mental health problems in the workplace is alarming. As costs resulting from lost productivity increase, so does the need for work organizations to address mental health issues. Because stress negatively affects mental health, employers are encouraged to tackle mental health problems by assisting employees with stress management. In addition to creating a supportive environment, training employees on boundary and coping strategies, promoting and supporting daily recovery efforts, and encouraging and facilitating access to social support are described in this article as three alternative approaches work organizations may want to embrace.

Keywords: mental health, stress management, employee assistance

1. INTRODUCTION: The prevalence of mental health problems is striking. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 264 million people worldwide suffer from depression, with many of these people also suffering from symptoms of anxiety (World Health Organization, 2019). It is reported that one in every four people suffer from some type of mental health problem in the United Kingdom (The Shaw Mind Foundation, 2018) and one in every five adults in the United States (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019). Moreover, the majority
(70%) of these individuals is employed (Attridge, 2019).

Considered integral to a person’s overall health and wellbeing, mental health is defined in ways similar to the definition provided by WHO:

“Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which an individual can realize his or her own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively, and make a contribution to the community (World Health Organization, n.d.).”

Due to the fact that mental health has a direct impact on a person’s work productivity and ability to cope with life stresses, it is not surprising that mental health in the workplace is receiving increased attention by work organizations and scholars, in addition to government and non-governmental agencies. The purpose of this review article is to highlight the need to tackle mental health problems in the workplace and to suggest ways to do so through stress management. These recommendations are selected from a collection of academic studies examining effective ways to manage stress.

2. MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE: In this article, ‘mental health problems’ is a broad term used to describe some combination of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that impede a person from achieving a positive state of mental wellbeing as described in the introduction: a state where “an individual can realize his or her own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and make a contribution to the community” (World Health Organization, n.d.). Mental health problems include conditions that are often not reported to clinicians but still interfere with one’s ability to achieve a healthy mental state such as depression and anxiety. This term also encompasses more severe mental health illnesses (e.g., bipolar affective disorder and schizophrenia) that often result in more serious functional impairment and can be disabling (National Institute of Mental Health, 2019).

In this section, the cost of mental health problems to work organizations are described, followed by a discussion of how mental health and stress are related. This section concludes with the recommendation for work organizations to assist employees with stress management in efforts to tackle mental health problems in the workplace.

2.1. Impact on Work Organizations: Mental health problems in the workplace have serious negative consequences, including costs to work organizations and economies. Mental health problems are estimated to cost the UK economy approximately £70 billion annually and USA businesses between $80 billion to $100 billion (The Shaw Mind Foundation, 2018). The World Health Organization estimates the cost to the global economy at US$ 1 trillion per year due to lost productivity (World Health Organization, 2019).

In addition to health care and disability costs, presenteeism (i.e., working but not fully functional due to impaired mental or physical health), absenteeism, and staff replacement represent a significant portion of the direct and indirect costs to work
organizations. In the United Kingdom, these costs are estimated at £15 billion for presenteeism, £8 billion for absenteeism, and £2.4 billion for staff replacement each year (The Shaw Mind Foundation, 2018). It is important to also note that employees in healthy mental states can have a positive impact on organizational success as well as on employees’ overall health, professional fulfilment, and quality of life (World Health Organization, 2019).

2.2. Mental Health Problems and Stress:
While there a number of factors that contribute to mental health problems in general such as genetics, traumatic experiences, and environmental factors (World Health Organization, 2018), stress is a key contributor to mental health problems in the workplace (e.g., O’Driscoll & Dewe, 2001), for stress is directly linked to poor psychological and/or physical health and wellbeing (Webster, Beehr & Christiansen, 2009). Stress can both contribute to the onset of mental health problems and exacerbate symptoms related to an existing mental illness.

Stress can negatively affect important organizational outcomes, in addition to individuals’ physical and mental health and overall wellbeing (e.g., O’Driscoll & Dewe, 2001). Stressed employees report being less engaged in their jobs, having lower job satisfaction, and increasing desires to leave their jobs (e.g., Aumann & Galinsky, 2008). Stress also leads to reduced job performance (e.g., Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008) and increased absenteeism (e.g., Darr & Johns, 2008).

One stream of research focuses on understanding what factors – in addition to mental-health-related constraints – might influence one’s ability to cope or manage stress. Mickel and Dallimore (2012) identify four “internally-based” factors (i.e., self-related or personal factors) that have a high potential of influencing one’s ability to manage stress. These factors include: (a) self-efficacy/beliefs about self (i.e., beliefs about their stress-management capabilities), (b) fatigue/exhaustion (i.e., physical and emotional depletion), (c) mood, and (d) age/stage of life. By understanding what contributes to one’s ability to cope or manage stress, organizations can better assist those suffering from mental health problems.

In sum, mental health problems in the workplace are prevalent, and stress often contributes to the onset of such problems and exacerbates existing mental health conditions. Due to substantial costs incurred by work organizations and to the fact that employers have a moral responsibility to their employees (Mickel & Dallimore, 2012), the case to address mental health and stress in the workplace is compelling.

To date, there are some large-scale efforts (e.g., World Health Organization’s Mental Health Action Plan 2013-20201) to increase

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1 Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020 is an example of one of the more comprehensive mental health initiatives within the past decade. Adopted by the 66th World Health Assembly, this worldwide initiative calls for changes in attitudes towards mental health, more services for those suffering from mental health disorders, and increased awareness and research (World Health Organization, 2013).
overall awareness of mental health issues and access to medical services worldwide. There are also calls for work organizations to promote more supportive work environments by ensuring that employees’ workloads are manageable and by providing support services that facilitate access to professional assistance (e.g., The Shaw Mind Foundation, 2018). These efforts are excellent first steps in tackling mental health issues across the globe. However, more can be done. Work organizations can integrate practices to assist employees in managing their stress. Selected from a collection of academic studies, alternative approaches are described in more detail in the next section.

3. ASSISTING EMPLOYEES WITH STRESS MANAGEMENT: If organizations are concerned about mental health problems and stress in the workplace—whether they feel that is the moral thing to do or to prevent significant costs to them—organizations are highly encouraged to first look at how their cultures and norms may be contributing to stress and attitudes toward mental health issues. Organizations might consider establishing norms of encouraging any organizational member experiencing mental health problems and/or stress to: (a) discuss their situations with others, (b) take the necessary action to address mental health problems and/or stress, (c) identify workplace stressors that are contributing to or exacerbating mental health problems, and (d) feel that dealing with mental-health-related issues in the workplace is acceptable (Mickel & Dallimore, 2012). To enforce these norms, organizations are encouraged to improve their communication channels around mental-health-related topics, by adopting such methods as “authentic dialogue” and “authentic discussion” (i.e., focusing on understanding the other person, questioning and sharing doubt) (Hadjiouannou, 2007; Kohlrieser, 2006).

In addition to promoting a supportive culture, it is important to also have structural support such as specific practices (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). Mickel and Dallimore (2012) describe specific strategies and stress-management practices related to the four internally-based factors they identify as influencing the stress response. Discussed in more detail below, suggested practices include: (a) training employees on boundary and coping strategies, (b) promoting employee recovery activities, and (c) facilitating ways for employees to have social support. By incorporating these practices along with conventional stress-management tactics (e.g., time management), work organizations should experience positive increases in employees’ overall mental wellbeing.

3.1. Boundary and Coping Strategies: A range of boundary and coping strategies with specific implications for managing stress in the workplace is identified in relevant research (Daniels, Beesley, Cheyne, & Wimalasiri, 2008; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009; McCleese, Eby, Scharlau, & Hoffman, 2007; Mickel & Dallimore, 2009). Organizational trainings on these strategies could function to assist employees in better managing stress in the workplace by increasing self-efficacy, improving mood, and/or shifting one’s
perspective (i.e., making a concerted effort to view life events through a more positive lens).

3.1.1. Establish and maintain boundaries: Kreiner et al. (2009) identify four types of boundary-setting tactics that could be useful for stress management. (1) *Communicative tactics* emphasize setting boundary expectations with those in the workplace and/or confronting those who violate them. (2) *Temporal tactics* focus on controlling work time and finding respite. (3) *Physical tactics* promote creating physical boundaries by erecting or dismantling barriers between work and home domains. (4) *Behavioral tactics* include using other people (e.g., mentors) or technology to facilitate boundary work.

If employees are trained in using these boundary tactics, it is believed that two of the factors influencing one’s ability to manage stress – self-efficacy and mood – will be improved (Mickel & Dallimore, 2012).

3.1.2. Adopt a guiding philosophy or an ongoing practice: The strategy of adopting a guiding philosophy (e.g., family or God first) and/or an ongoing practice (e.g., church attendance or exercise) is effective for some people struggling with difficult work-life decisions and associated tradeoffs (Mickel & Dallimore, 2009). If organizations help employees gain a clear sense of their priorities and the relationship of those priorities to their work, organizations should benefit from employees who are better able to make difficult decisions, manage stress, and take care of their overall wellbeing (Mickel & Dallimore, 2012).

3.1.3. Shifting perspective or orientation: Strategies related to shifting one’s perspective or orientation can also influence a person’s mood and subsequently his/her capacity to cope with stress. Mickel and Dallimore’s (2009) research reveal two additional strategies that employees effectively used when navigating difficult work-life decisions: (a) framing a decision outcome as “no perceived loss” and (b) adopting a future and/or present orientation (i.e., choosing to forego present benefits in exchange for future anticipated gains and vice versa). These strategies can help a person manage stressful life events in ways that minimize one’s sense of loss or that something of significance is being given up without something of value being gained in return.

Employee assistance in the form of training employees on a range of specific strategies—from boundary use to shifting one’s perspective or orientation—should prove useful in helping employees manage stress and minimize the negative impacts of mental health problems. These trainings could also incorporate discussions around the power of “positive thinking.”

3.2. Employee Recovery:

It is well-accepted that expending effort at work activates individuals’ psychophysiological systems (e.g., the Sympathetic-Adrenal-Medullary system)

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2 Proponents of “positive thinking” see value in embracing optimism and promote cognitive framing as a means of using the power of thoughts to shape reactions.
and that these systems need to return to baseline levels on a regular basis through “recovery” efforts (Geurts & Sonnentag, 2006; Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Failure to do so causes poor mood, fatigue, and exhaustion which can lead to chronic mental and physical impairment (Sluiter, Frings-Dresen, Van der Beek, & Meijman, 2001). The need for recovery (i.e., taking a break from demands, when fatigue builds up) is real (Demerouti, Taris, & Bakker, 2007). It is shown that ongoing “recovery” efforts—especially daily efforts—can help mitigate or prevent negative outcomes (Geurts & Sonnentag, 2006; Meijman & Mulder, 1998), and such efforts are crucial to one’s overall wellbeing and job performance (Demerouti, Bakker, Geurts, & Taris, 2009). It is also argued that such recovery efforts can assist with stress and mental health problems by mitigating fatigue/exhaustion and mood issues (Mickel & Dallimore, 2012).

3.2.1. Supporting recovery efforts and recovery experiences: Although recovery can occur during short breaks while at work, most recovery efforts occur after work, during weekends, and longer periods of time-off such as vacations. Research suggests that daily recovery activities are the most effective over time (Demerouti et al., 2009). In addition to sleep, the following are daily activities that promote recovery: low-effort activities (e.g., watching TV), relaxation (e.g., yoga, meditation), social activities (e.g., dining with others), physical activities (e.g., exercise), and creative activities (Demerouti et al., 2009). Moreover, leisure is highlighted as a key component to recovery (Sonnentag, Arbeus, Mahn, & Fritz, 2014), and leisure activities serve as means of reducing stress (Joudrey & Wallace, 2009; McCleese et al., 2007).

Recovery efforts result in different types of recovery experiences (i.e., outcomes resulting from engaging in recovery activities). Five types of recovery experiences have been shown to have beneficial effects including decreased fatigue and enhanced mood (van Hooff & de Pater, 2017). (1) Detachment is the act of mentally and physically disengaging from work during off-hours (Smit, 2016). (2) Relaxation involves decreasing arousal and activation and increasing positive affect (Stone, Kennedy-Moore, & Neale, 1995). (3) Mastery focuses on activities that provide new opportunities for personal growth and development (e.g., overcoming challenges, learning, and achieving success) (Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008). (4) Control emphasizes to what degree employees feel they have control in deciding which activities they pursue and when and how to pursue them (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). (5) Pleasure is a positive state—feelings of happiness or satisfaction—resulting from an experience that one enjoys (van Hooff & de Pater, 2017).

It would be wise for work organizations to seriously consider how they can best support employees in their daily recovery efforts when promoting employee health and wellbeing. Subsidizing workshops designed to help employees discover which recovery activities create the most beneficial recovery experiences for them individually could be one approach.
3.2.2. Creating plans for incomplete goals:

Work organizations might also want to consider additional ways to help employees psychologically detach from work by understanding what might impede detachment. Smit’s research (2016) finds that employees often have a hard time detaching from work if a goal is incomplete (vs. completed) at the end of a workday. This is more likely to occur if the goal possesses high valence, for employees’ minds continue to linger over goal-related content post-work hours.

Smit (2016) purports that making plans to resolve incomplete goals can aid employees in psychologically detaching from work. He suggests the following as effective, low-cost interventions: (a) create plans at the end of the day that describe where, when, and how unfulfilled work goals will be completed; (b) target specific types of employees (i.e., those who typically have difficulty detaching from work during leisure time); and (c) encourage employees to focus on smaller, concrete goals at the end of the day. It is suggested here that work organizations also integrate these practices.

Employee recovery is proven to be a key element in maintaining employees’ work productivity through mitigating fatigue, exhaustion, negative moods, and burnout. It is recommended that employers promote and support recovery efforts in efforts to assist with stress management and overall mental health.

3.3. Social Support and Employee Mentoring:

Work organizations should also encourage and facilitate ways for employees to seek general social support for mental health and stress-related issues. One way to facilitate social support within the work organization is to provide informal opportunities for employees to learn from others and formal mentoring programs (Mickel & Dallimore, 2012).

3.3.1. Social support: Research regularly documents the importance of social support (e.g., Joudrey & Wallace, 2009; Sanz-Vergel, Demerouti, Moreno-Jiménez, & Mayo, 2010) in managing stress and mental health problems. Work organizations may want to consider how they can help support employees’ efforts in seeking social support from their family, friends, self-help support groups, and professional providers.

Employers can also facilitate social support within their own organizations through a range of approaches, such as: (a) train managers on how to recognize the signs that a person is struggling and how to be supportive (The Shaw Mind Foundation, 2018), (b) organize and subsidize support groups within the workplace, (c) be flexible in allowing employees to seek support and help during work hours—when necessary, and (d) have an employee assistance program with professional providers (if financially viable). Described in further detail below, mentoring is an additional way to support employees in coping with stress and mental health issues.

3.3.2. Employee mentoring: Effective mentoring programs typically incorporate formal and informal components and recognize the importance of effective mentor training, strong communication skills, and trust. Pairing newcomers and less
experienced employees with more senior organizational members is recommended. The value of more senior employees relative to stress management is reflected in research findings (Shirom, Gilboa, Fried, & Cooper, 2008) which suggest that as “age increases people tend to obtain higher coping resources that benefit them in performing stressful work demands” (p. 1387) and that “coping mechanisms associated with both age and tenure may complement each other to help these individuals develop better coping skills than younger less experienced counterparts” (p. 1389). In addition, pairing those who have experienced similar personal-professional demands or struggled with similar mental health problems should prove beneficial.

4. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: Mental health problems are prevalent across the globe, and stress contributes to mental health issues. By helping employees manage stress, work organizations can start tackling mental health problems in the workplace. Training employees on boundary and coping strategies, promoting and supporting daily recovery efforts, and encouraging and facilitating access to social support are three approaches work organizations may want to embrace. To truly reap the benefits of these practices, organizations also need to create environments supportive of those struggling with mental health problems. Decreased costs associated with lost productivity and increased overall life quality for employees are just two of the many reasons why employers would want to tackle mental health problems in the workplace.

References:


