

Staying Well at Work



“ Three rules of work: out of clutter find simplicity; from discord find harmony; in the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.”

- Albert Einstein, physicist

“ The best way to appreciate your job is to imagine yourself without one.”

- Oscar Wilde, author

“ We either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves strong. The amount of work is the same.”

- Carlos Castaneda, author

Returning to work after a long holiday can be a discouraging experience. We feel a little more relaxed, but somewhere deep down we know it's a state of affairs that is not going to last.

A couple of weeks away from the relentless demands of professional life may have given us a little more space to breathe, but as the pressure starts to mount again, that old sense of fatigue and claustrophobia begins to creep back in.

At this point, we slowly return to the same old bad habits to keep ourselves going; a few too many coffees during the day, more than the odd sugary snack at our desk, and some overly lavish top-ups of that after-work glass of wine. And before we know it, we're right back to where we were before we went on holiday; tired, overwhelmed, irritated and in need of a break.

It needn't be this way. Bad habits need to be seen for what they are, namely inefficient but deeply ingrained coping strategies in the face of constant stress. And although there is often little we can do about the amount of work that we have to do, there is plenty that can be done about how we go about it.

Staying well at work requires a firm decision not to be victimised by one's circumstances and a determination to take responsibility for the health of both one's mind and body. Employers have a legal duty of care to provide healthy working environments for their staff, but that means nothing if employees are not willing to take action themselves. If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

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The case for a healthy workplace

If the statistics are anything to go by, workers in Britain are not having an easy time of it, especially in the current financial climate. According to the Stress Management Society, more than 105 million days are lost to stress each year, costing UK employers some £1.24 billion. This makes stress the single biggest cause of long-term absence from work in the country.

A survey last year by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) listed the main causes of short-term absence as minor illnesses (such as colds, flu, stomach upsets, headaches and migraines), back pain, and musculoskeletal injuries (such as neck strains and repetitive strain injury).

So somewhere along the line, people are finding it difficult to cope. Of course, everybody gets sick from time to time, but there is every indication that the future health of the British workforce is not looking particularly rosy. A recent report by BUPA, the Work Foundation, the Oxford Health Alliance and RAND Europe predicts sharp rises in both mental illness and serious chronic diseases. Based on more than 200 pieces of research, the study warns starkly that an ageing population combined with unhealthy lifestyle behaviours, such as poor diet, smoking and lack of physical activity, will drive up the prevalence of long-term diseases in the working population over the next 20 years.

As gloomy as that prediction may seem, the authors of the report told the BBC that these behaviours can all be

effectively tackled, as long as there is a dedication to encouraging and influencing change on the part of both employers and employees.

Once an organisation and its staff start taking good mental and physical health seriously, the benefits are well documented. On an organisational level, there is reduced staff turnover and fewer days lost to sickness and absenteeism, which leads to greater productivity and higher profits. On an individual level, people feel more motivated, their morale is higher, they become emotionally more resilient and better at adapting to change and their relationships with each other and with management improve. Some studies have even shown that healthier people actually earn more money.



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From reactive to proactive

A healthier work life often requires a basic switch in the way we choose to cope with the challenges of everyday life. Put simply, we need to move from reactive to proactive ways of responding.

Reactive coping, as the term suggests, is a style of dealing with external demands by waiting for events to occur and then trying to find the resources to handle them. This may work up to a point, but it completely fails as a long-term strategy. Why? Because in today's relentless cost-cutting work culture, we are driven to be more and more productive for less and less cost. In practise, this means we try and fit an ever greater number of tasks into a finite amount of time.

As the time available to us gets ever more squeezed, we then start looking for ever quicker fixes in our attempts to keep ourselves going. Inevitably, this means resorting to ever healthier strategies. Caffeine and sugar, for instance, provide temporary bursts of energy, driving up adrenaline levels and offering a momentary sense of focus and concentration. But the high is always followed by a crash, which leaves us more fatigued than we were in the first place, and increasingly vulnerable to stress.

Thus drained of energy, people hold on for dear life until they get home from work, at which they point they collapse in front of the television with a large drink, quite unable to contemplate any kind of social or creative activity. On a physiological level, this does nothing to work off the stress hormones that are running around one's system all day. On an emotional level, it numbs out feelings of exhaustion without doing anything to repair them.

So we keep going and we keep going, drawing on ever dwindling resources, until one day we get sick – mentally or physically -- and we are forced to stop. This can mean coming down with a

cold, developing back-ache or finding oneself unable to sleep properly. At the extreme end of the spectrum it can mean depression, burnout, chronic fatigue, or even nervous breakdown.

There is an alternative.

In proactive coping, we decide ahead of time to build up the resources available to us and make it a priority to nurture them, regardless of the variable demands that we face in the outside world. Proactive coping is forward looking. It involves taking the initiative, accepting challenges and turning demanding events into positive experiences.

The true benefit of proactive coping strategies is that they eventually become self-perpetuating. The more you take responsibility for your wellbeing, the better you will feel, the more energy you will have, and the more motivation you will have to take responsibility for your wellbeing. A virtuous circle replaces a vicious one.

So how do we make the switch?



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Getting to grips with change

U.S. performance psychologist Jim Loehr and corporate consultant Tony Schwartz have identified a three-step process in effecting lasting change, both in the workplace and at home, which they call "Purpose-Truth-Action".

Define purpose. One of the most devastating effects of overwhelming pressure is its destruction of any sense of purpose and meaning. If all you're doing is trying to keep your head above water, it's very difficult to feel engaged, creative and motivated. One of the first steps that you need to take if you want to re-engage with a sense of wellbeing at work is to re-connect with why you do it in the first place. According to Loehr and Schwartz, the first stage must always involve clearly defining one's core values. Without them, it can be hard to find a reason to go on. Try writing a list of values and whittle it down to a top five. It doesn't matter what they are, but they need to resonate deeply with you. (Values might include compassion, excellence, friendship, generosity, health, integrity, perseverance or security.)



Face the truth. Most people find it much easier to complain about feeling stressed and overwhelmed than to actually do something about it. Facing the truth means taking a cold, hard look at one's present habits, both physical and psychological, and how they might be getting in the way of a sense of well-being. For instance, it's not much good complaining that one feels tired all the time if one never does any exercise. It can be uncomfortable to engage with these barriers because they will often be linked to deep vulnerabilities. Everyone has to identify their own underlying obstacles (which can include impatience, anxiety, chaotic thinking, lack of trust and indecision). But once one is familiar with one's points of fragility, it becomes much easier to devise targeted strategies to address them.

Take action. Once you have identified why you're not feeling great, it's time to get active. This will be different for everyone, depending on what it is they want to work on. There is general agreement, however, that action will always be more effective if it's turned into a habit. Going to work is, in itself, a ritual. The challenge then becomes to create other rituals around it and within that will revitalise your sense of wellbeing. If you feel isolated, you might want to arrange a regular lunch with colleagues. If you feel overwhelmed by the number of different tasks, you might want to set aside half an hour each morning for planning. And if you feel physically stale, introducing more exercise into your weekly schedule would be a good starting point.

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Practical suggestions

As we have seen, everyone will need to do something a bit different to maximise their sense of wellbeing at work. But there are a few guidelines that we can all follow.

- ▶ Get support. From giving up smoking to getting more exercise to eating more healthily to working through emotional blockages ... there is no activity that is not made much, much easier by the support and collaboration of others. Social support helps build motivation, it helps identify goals and it maintains motivation when energy begins to sag. When it comes to staying well at work, initiatives that include a group of colleagues will stand a far better chance of survival. Whatever it is you decide to do, you are far more likely to stick with it if you have some company. If you find yourself completely stuck, call the CiC Confidential Care Adviceline (see details below), and an experienced consultant will talk through the issues with you.
- ▶ Take regular breaks. Perhaps the most routine cause of burnout in the workplace is overwork. This is not to say that people shouldn't work hard. The mistake people make, however, is to assume that they can just keep going indefinitely. The internal energy cycles of our bodies (known as ultradian rhythms) mean that we are built to need a period of rest and recovery roughly every 90 minutes. If you think that sitting at your desk for hours at a time makes you a good worker, think again. Failing to take regular breaks leads to a build-up of toxins and stress hormones that will eventually wear you down.
- ▶ Incorporate exercise. The most common excuse for not exercising is lack of time. The latest guidelines promoted by the National Health Service (NHS) and National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) currently recommend a minimum of half an hour of moderately intense exercise on five or more days a week. That can sound like a lot, but with a little thought and planning, it's amazing how easily it can be fitted in. Going for a brisk walk or run at lunch-time is a great way to take a break, get your daily exercise, and energise your working day. Cycling to work often doesn't take much longer than driving or taking public transport. Alternatively, get off the train or bus a couple of stops early and walk the rest of the way. Taking the stairs instead of the lift is also effective. (The half hour that's needed can be broken down into smaller bursts of activity.)
- ▶ Stop smoking. There are few hard and fast rules when it comes to workplace wellness. But if you're still smoking, the simple advice is ... don't! Smoking a cigarette may feel like a relaxing break, but it's actually about as far from relaxing as it's possible to get. It triggers adrenaline, which makes you tense; it robs you of oxygen, which makes you tired; it numbs your emotions, which makes you lonely; and it shortens your life, which makes you dead. Giving up is hard, so once again, look for a colleague who also wants to stop and get connected. The NHS runs highly effective smoking cessation clinics and there is a wealth of literature now to help you on your way.