



Stress busters



Daniela Aroche reports

The holidays are over and no doubt stress is starting to kick in, fuelled by the extra negative of job insecurity in the current financial climate. For employees and employers alike - it's time to detox, according to Jim Taylor, psychiatrist and executive coach.

"During the first week on holiday our brain adapts to making fewer decisions in a given day. Issues such as when will we go to the beach or what will we have for lunch, seem relatively trivial and less time pressured compared with those we encounter in the workplace," Taylor said.

"There is less pressure to get it right and there is usually a reward to be had [compared to] work decisions which often carry the threat of disapproval or criticism if things go wrong," he added

It might seem like this is a statement of the obvious, but Taylor warns that the impact on the mind and body from a return to work and long-term exposure to this kind of stress can make workers more susceptible to what is commonly called 'burnout'.

Burnout is characterised by long-term physical and emotional exhaustion, diminished interest and motivation and reduced sense of accomplishment. More severe forms of burnout can manifest themselves in depression and can require the attention of psychiatrists and psychologists or counsellors.

"Burnout follows a pattern where people need to prove themselves and work longer hours. They begin to neglect their friends and their hobbies and interests. They deny that this is going on and become increasingly isolated and feel a growing sense of inner emptiness," said Taylor.

Clearly, the added stress of having to keep a job and perform at optimum levels under pressure in the current economic climate could be creating a volatile environment in the workplace and increase the likelihood of employees suffering such 'burnt-outs'. Michael Stone, director of operations & client relations at Holistic Services Group (Aust) said that this is one thing employers should definitely watch out for and try to counteract.

"Burnout affects the individual and their colleagues as well. A person suffering from burnout often creates anxiety and affects the morale of fellow workers, so communication and relationships at work are critical factors, in terms of productivity, as well as morale. It's easy for a vicious circle to begin: low morale leads to stress, which in turn lowers the morale and productivity of co-workers," he said.

"Burnout can also lead to other harmful habits, including alcohol and smoking, which over time, only serves to exacerbate the problem, and create more productivity-related issues such as sick leave, absenteeism and worksite safety issues." Employers therefore need to be aware that their staff are under immense stress, especially now and take action, said Stone. Leaving this potential problem unattended could result in a loss of valuable talent.

"Communication is key. Managers need to continuously engage their staff, and develop trust, so their staff feel that they can communicate honestly and openly. This approach will provide warning signals for managers, and in conjunction with turnover, absenteeism, and sick leave trends, become aware of potential issues," said Stone.

Being aware of when stress occurs is vital to preventing burnout. As an HR manager, key tools to managing stress include:

- * building relationships at work through fun team activities
- * ensuring morale is kept high through well-received staff benefits such as workplace massage, onsite yoga classes, etc.
- * providing wellness initiatives such as Health Fairs
- * communicating continuously with staff
- * ensuring workloads are manageable
- * having the right staff numbers to deal with the amount of workflow

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