

Understanding the Need for Organisations to Deal with the Issue of Stress

HSE commissioned research has indicated that:

- Approx. 1/2m people in the UK experience work-related stress at a level they believe is making them ill
- Up to 5m people in the UK feel “very” or “extremely” stressed by their work
- Work-related stress costs society about £3.7bn every year (at 1995/6 prices)

Work-related stress has become such an issue that employers can now be found negligent under breach of common law duty of care to provide a safe system and conditions for work. This includes psychological as well as physical hazards. Recent court cases have shown that the duty of care is now taken very seriously and there have been several cases where the employee has won substantial damages against their employer. (See www.unison.org.uk)

Not only that, the amount of HR time involved can be huge and very demanding as people are dragged through the courts in lengthy cases. At the same time “No win no fee” agencies are actively promoting their services to act in these types of cases. Can you afford to ignore this issue?

What is Stress?

Stress affects different people in different ways, but what is it?

The HSE defines stress as “*the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them*”. Pressure is part of all work and helps keep us motivated. But excessive pressure can lead to stress which undermines performance, is costly to employers and can make people ill. Work-related stress is a major cause of ill health. That means sickness absence, high staff turnover and poor performance in your organisation.

Stress has been around for a long time and isn’t something that has been invented just for us. So what is it? Back in the days of our early ancestors we developed the ability to react to dangerous situations by either fighting or running away. The way that our bodies react in this situation is to release copious amounts of the hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline.

Initially they can have the affect of improving performance and they ensure that we have the best chance of surviving and living to fight another day. However, the excessive release of these hormones can then trigger adverse reactions, such as:

- Heart rate increase
- Blood flow and pressure increase
- Excessive sweating
- Breathing speeding up
- Muscles tensing, ready for action

Whilst these symptoms can be acceptable in the short term, they can lead to serious problems when triggered at inappropriate times or if left to fester over time.

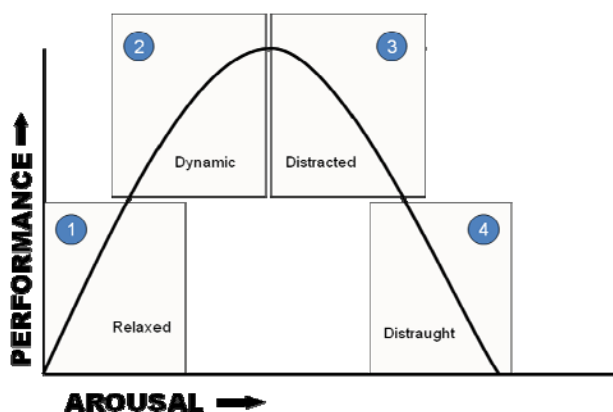


Stress is Good For You!

It's true! Some "stress" or pressure can be good for you. To perform at our best we need to have some pressure. The performance curve shows that lack of pressure can mean that we are detached from activities around us, but as we go up the curve, additional pressure can lead us to our peak performance. Here we are dynamic and engaged in activities.

But it can also be Bad for You!

Go too far however, and we tip over the top and start on the slippery slope down the other side, becoming initially distracted and ultimately distraught.



This figure shows the performance vs arousal curve. Performance is at its peak when arousal is at a "reasonable" level. If arousal becomes too strong however, performance starts to decline.

Stress is now known to contribute to a range of illnesses including: heart disease; high blood pressure, and IBS (irritable bowel syndrome), to name but a few. And stress significantly reduces brain functions such as memory, concentration, and learning, all of which are central to effective performance.

Some health effects caused by stress are reversible and the body and mind reverts to normal when the stress is relieved. Other health effects caused by stress are so serious that they are irreversible, and can lead to long term illness and even death.

Below are listed some of the triggers for work-related stress:

- **Organisational culture** - Poor culture being characterised by a lack of support for employees, poor communication, lack of commitment to employee well-being and employees not being valued or respected
- **Demands** - Work load (quantity, pace and content), work scheduling (shifts, breaks, uncertain hours), physical environment (violence, noise, thermal comfort, etc)
- **Control** - Lack of control over work, low autonomy, little decision-making
- **Role** - Role conflict, role ambiguity, low perceived status, inappropriate levels of responsibility

- **Training and support** - Skill shortfall, lack of support from organisation/management/colleagues
- **Relationships** - Interpersonal conflict and harassment and bullying
- **Change** - Poor or absent strategies for involving staff and for minimising adverse effects of implementation

The JamBerry Stress Survey Results

Over the past few months, JamBerry has been running a survey on stress. The results are shown in this paper.

We asked 24 questions, 12 relating to work and 12 relating to home activities. Some of these questions relate directly to the HSE Stress survey, some look at other issues. Each question was scored and the results are shown below.

The resulting scores for each individual can be seen on the graph below, where they have been split by male/female.

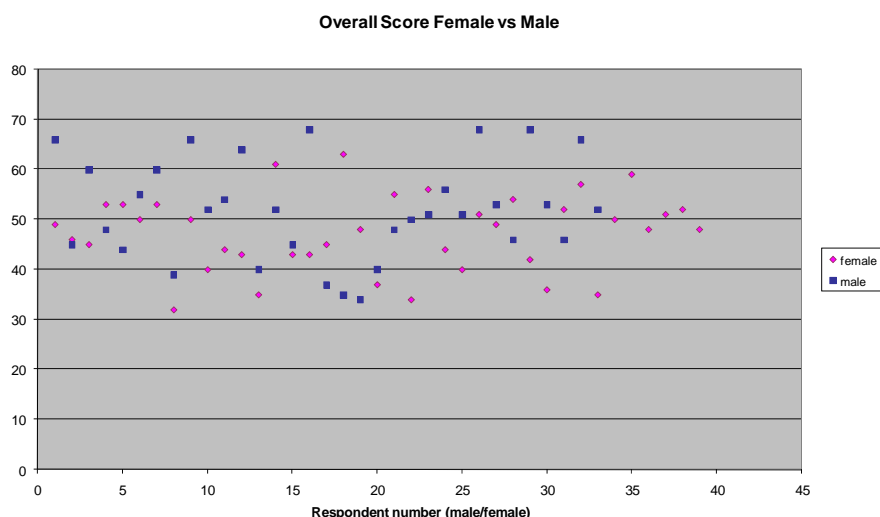


Figure 1. Overall score Female vs Male

The top of the stress curve is taken as being 60, with the majority of individuals falling below this point and managing their stress. However, a few individuals have scores in excess of 60 and on further discussion with them have indicated significant stress symptoms, arising from a variety of causes.

When looking at the average score over the 24 questions the male and female split shows that men in general appear to be more stressed than women. Of those individuals who had an overall score of higher than 60, the majority are men. See Fig. 2.

Average Male vs Female Stress Scores at Work

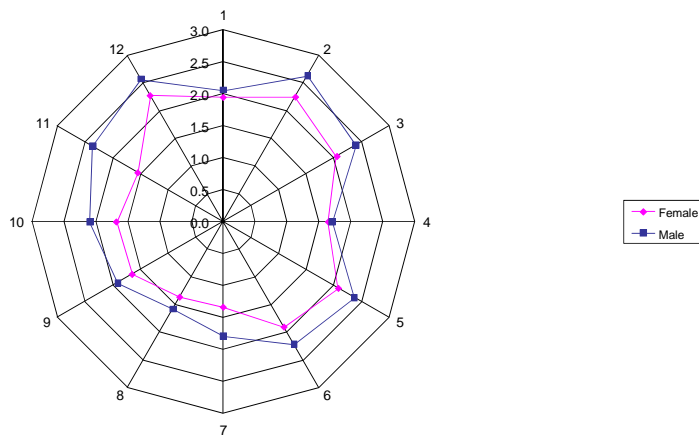


Figure 2. Average Stress Score Male vs Female

This level of stress can be seen at individual question level and shows that men are generally more stressed at work, whilst women, although stressed over some issues, seem to handle their level of stress better. This is also shown in the figures relating to home, although in this case women do show some areas where they become slightly more stressed than their male counterparts.

Stress at Work

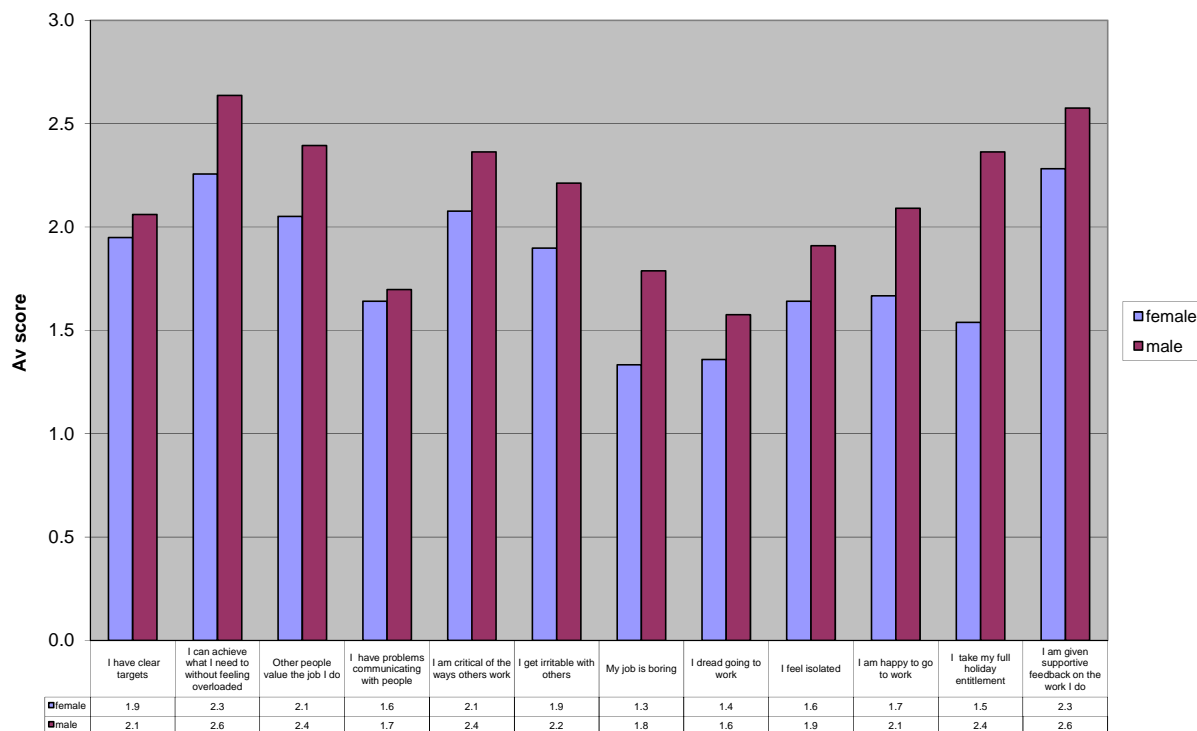


Figure 3. Average stress scores at Work (male/female)

Score Key

Detached = 1: Dynamic = 2: Distracted = 3: Distraught = 4

What causes Work-Related Stress?

Particular questions got a high score from all respondents. These included:

- W2. I can achieve what I want without feeling overloaded
- W12. I am given supportive feedback on the work I do

The causes of stress can be many and various but typical causes might include:

- Excessive workloads can lead to employees being unable to cope
- Inadequate training to be able to complete a job effectively and to standard
- Lack of control over the work environment
- Lack of support from managers and having no one to turn in a crisis
- The failure to build relationships can lead to problems related to lack of trust, discipline and bullying
- Organisational change needs to be managed effectively or it can lead to huge uncertainty and insecurity

Stress at Home

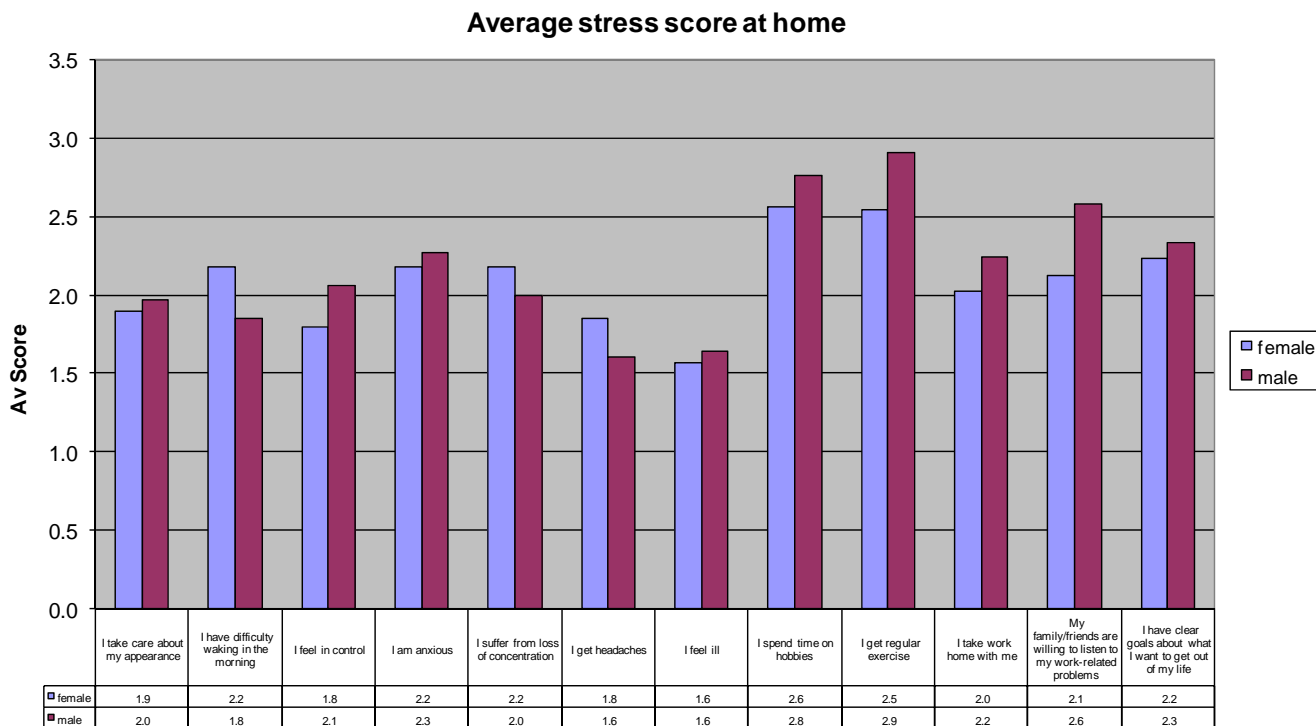


Figure 4. Average stress score at Home (male/female)

Stress at home is more evenly borne by males and females, although particular questions get a particularly high score from men

- H8. I spend time on hobbies
- H9. I get regular exercise

Women are more likely to take their full holiday entitlement, and generally seem to feel more supported. Men seem to feel more isolated and that people are not as willing to listen to their work problems.

Stress by Age Group

When looking at the breakdown by age, it can be seen that the 30-50 age group is probably the most stressed age group, with the 50 plus age group not far behind. The under 30 age group is the least stressed.

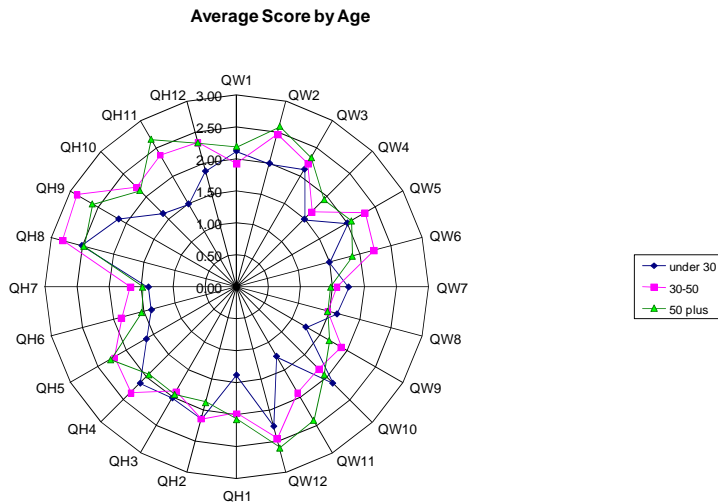


Figure 5. Average Stress scores by Age

Stress by Employee Size

The final set of results show that stress is not particularly affected by size of organisation. Those working for large organisations (101+ employees), have slightly lower stress scores than the others, however, there is no clear pattern.

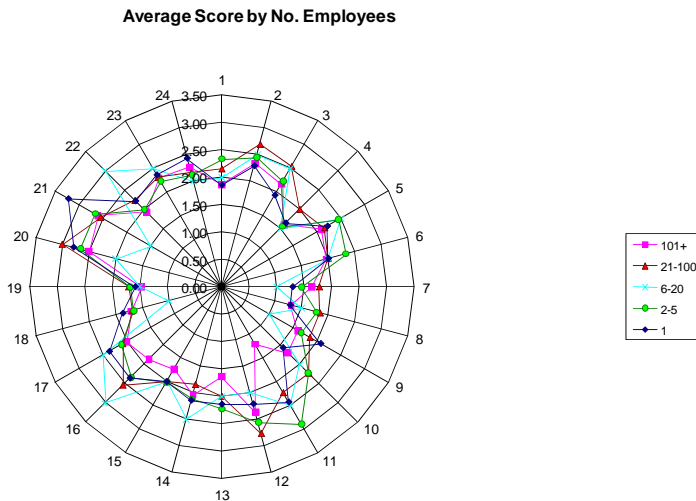


Figure 6. Average Stress scores by Number of Employees



Respondents Comments

Some of the comments back from those people who completed the survey included:

- *there is a crunch factor..for example...I might think I'm good at communicating but others may disagree...*
- *Always feel tired*
- *It's difficult to do set yourself high standards when you're having to do 3 full time jobs rolled into 1. When you add to this academic and professional training, it sometimes does weigh on my mind.*
- *I would thoroughly enjoy my job - if I had more time or perhaps a little less to do!*
- *In the past I habitually had unreasonable expectations of myself, believing them to be 'normal' and did not fully acknowledge my achievements (work and personal). Although I have made significant progress and am far happier with myself, I still have a tendency when I am severely stressed, to revert to setting 'unreasonable' expectations in my home life.*

Conclusions

Stress affects a large number of individuals over their lives and causes significant loss of work days as well as misery and upset for those who suffer from it.

By understanding stress better, how to recognise it in yourself and others, and how to alleviate it, can bring significant benefit to yourself, your staff and your business.

If you would like to find out more about how to deal with stress in your organisation call 0870 350 2595 and speak to Berry Winter.

Berry is Director of JamBerry Ltd, a training and coaching company and has written 2 books, "De-Stress You" and "Create a New You".

Visit www.jamberry.co.uk

