

Surviving the stresses of stress

Mr Paul Frisby, Coordinator Regulatory Services, Rockhampton City Council

Introduction

There are legal requirements for employers to look after their workers. Significant financial consequences may ensue for employers who don't, with increased insurance premiums for firms with poor injury records, and also criminal penalties for outright negligence in protecting workers. However sound preventative strategies will not only mitigate the chance of injuries occurring, but will demonstrate that action has been taken to ensure the safety of employees, and keep injury rates and insurance premiums at a financially acceptable level.

For management in a large organisation the occasional claim for stress related injury can be taken as a matter of course. In any large population it is inevitable that there will be people who are less resilient to the vagaries of life. For all managers, workers' compensation claims, while a problem to a lesser or greater degree, can be managed with the assistance of the firm's worker's compensation insurer and their legal teams.

For the injured worker, particularly one suffering a stress related injury, having to decide whether to declare their injury and then to gather resources to fight what can be a protracted battle in the legal system, which can be adversarial in the extreme, is more than problematical.

The Management Point of View

Generally large organisations are very good at dealing with the potential for all kinds of workplace injury. They work hard to be able to demonstrate that appropriate preventative steps are in place to minimise the chance of injury occurring. They can afford to hire the necessary specialist staff in human resources, risk management and site safety to deal with the issues. Moreover with the flexibility available in a large organisation it can offer suitable duties to all manner of rehabilitees to assist in their recovery from a workplace injury, including a stress related injury.

On the other hand the opposite can also be true. The large organisation can be set up to deal ruthlessly with staff that claim a workplace injury, but especially a stress related injury. They can, and sometimes do, put all of their capacity and expertise to making the progress of such a claim an intimidating and difficult process. The theory is not based in a concern for the welfare of the individual worker but in a policy of discouraging claims by making examples of claimants. In some jurisdictions large companies are self-insurers for worker's compensation matters, and the possibility of conflicts of interest arising are of real concern.

For an organisation that is only of moderate size or smaller there is a lack of unallocated management resources, especially to meet the demands of a protracted matter such as a stress related injury. With the difficulty in establishing a degree of impairment, matters involving stress related injury may take five years or longer to resolve.

Small business management with no training in the area and a raft of other things to deal with, can find the problem not only unknown territory but also one that competes for time and energy to the detriment of ordinary business. Dealing with a stress related injury can sometime feel like trying to bottle fog with one's bare hands while standing on quicksand, especially if one hasn't had any experience of the processes previously.

The management tools presented here are universally applicable to all kinds of management situations but for some they may be new in the context of managing the issue of workplace injury, especially stress related illness.

Stress related injury is a serious matter in terms of its potential duration, prognosis and administrative burden. The businesses we are in, that is veterinary practice and urban animal management, have all the characteristics of environments that generate substantial stress burdens. Given the magnitude of the potential threat it is suggested that management apply the disaster management cycle of Planning, Preparation, Response and Recovery, as a useful guide for action.

Planning

In planning for meeting the potential for an occurrence of stress related illness the first step should be to conduct a risk analysis. A simple tool like the one below can give managers a good idea of how much of a threat the problem could represent.

Consequences/ Likelihood	Insignificant	Minor	Moderate	Major	Catastrophic
Almost Certain					
Likely					
Possible					
Rare					

This exercise should be carried out separately for stress related injuries to any assessment for another kind of injury. Stress related injuries often lead to long term absenteeism or recovery periods, and a greater administrative burden on management. It should also be done for every class of person in the workplace, including you, the proprietor or manager. The potential for stress related illness in one group can be higher than others, and the consequences of the loss of certain types of staff can be more or less significant in organisational terms.

In the grid you can use any rating system you like. Usually four ratings are used to signify levels of concern, either numbers or words. One example is **Extreme**, **High**, **Medium** and **Low**. An **E** for extreme means that you need to do something now, and **H** for high means you need to do something soon, an **M** for medium means you need to plan to make some changes and **L** for low indicates that you can probably leave the problem to be dealt with by routine procedures.

In the process of doing your risk assessment you will no doubt identify the things in the workplace that are potential stressors. Now identify the things you can do to remove them or mitigate their effects.

Accept suggestions from your people. They will have ideas you never would have thought of yourself and can agree to make the more difficult options work. Consultation will also lead to a more general acceptance of the fact that the problem does potentially exist and can be dealt with. If you like, do it in the context of a general workplace health and safety review.

Preparation

Once you have decided that something needs to be done you move into the preparation phase of the disaster management cycle. You should prepare by both trying to avoid the problem occurring, and by knowing what you are going to do if it does.

Whatever else you do check that you have complied with the legal requirements in your State and have paid your workers' compensation insurance premium to the correct insurer, and are covered for the type of work all your employees carry out. Failure to insure or to correctly insure can carry heavy legal and financial consequences.

If you haven't done so already, obtain a copy of your insurer's handbook or leaflet on the procedure that will be adopted when a worker's compensation insurance claim is made. If it does happen you will know something about the process that will ensue, and just as importantly you will be able to advise and work with your injured employee on the process.

There are many things you can do to try to avoid oversteering people and these include cross training people and job rotation as well as providing counselling support, either internally or by contract counselling services.

Management and supervisors should try to encourage an openness about the issue among staff learn to identify the symptoms of excessive levels of stress in individual staff members. Learn about the team's normal patterns of behaviour and how the patterns of team members' lives are made up. If patterns change, look more closely for causes.

One of the most important things you can do is make staff feel that they are in charge of their situation. A loss of a feeling of control is one of the major contributors to higher stress levels.

Be aware that oversteering can occur because of the total stress load a person has to bear as well as the effects of long-term stress and critical incident stress. Management can find their organisation blamed for a workplace stress related injury when in fact a substantial contributor to the problem may be from an external unrelated area.

The message here for management is to make yourself open to assist staff with all their problems. The message for staff is to be as open as you can with your boss about major problems that may affect you. This is why larger organisations that can afford to have in house or contracted counselling services which are available to all staff, at no cost, on call. If you are too small an enterprise to have such things then find out what is on offer through the doctors and public health services in your area. Use them, and document how they may be contacted as short notice.

It should be noted that ideas about the usefulness of *Critical Incident Stress Debriefing* are changing. Fifteen years ago this tool was very much in vogue, but current thought sees it as just one of many available tools, and one that may not be of use, in fact may be contra-indicated, for some people. Moreover it is a reactive tool, part of the response to a situation, not a preventative measure.

Response

In moving into the response phase it needs to be recognised that a matter of stress related injury in the workplace can in due course become a legal claim for compensation for a workplace injury. If this happens both management and the injured worker are faced with having to try to solve their problems against the background of the legal system which is adversarial in nature. It tends to force

employer and employee apart at the time when their level of communication should be the greatest.

The adversarial system is testing for the employer who has to deal with endless enquiries from his insurer and the insurer's solicitors. If you are a vet running your own practice or the manager of an animal control unit, this is not what you signed up for. It is disastrous for the rest of your team too, as they be called upon to act as witnesses for or against you or the injured worker.

It is disastrous for the overstressed employee who is immediately loaded up with a whole raft of new stressors, including the need to get the best legal advice he or she can afford, the need to maintain an income, the need to maintain family relationships, and the need to get treatment for themselves and possibly also family members. Stress related illness is hard on victims' families.

If ever there was a system designed not to help in the resolution of a stress related injury it's the adversarial legal system.

Ideally the employer and the injured employee should get together with a view to working through the problem in partnership. This ideal is rarely met and the reason for this can be partially attributed to the fact that both sides have to consider the worst possible results of the adversarial system. The employer does not want to exacerbate the problem and the size of any insurance claim, especially by accidentally admitting liability. The employee wishes to be seen as cooperative as possible in solving their problems and getting better, but may feel too much cooperation may reduce their chances of a proper damages payout if their prognosis is poor.

At the very least both the employer and the employee should know what the process is going to be in handling the claim and the major milestones along the path. Both parties need to feel as much in control of what is happening as possible, but for a stressed employee surprises from process can cause major problems and indeed slow recovery.

At this point it is worth noting that the earlier that both the employer and the employee start keeping a documentary record on the matter, the better off they will legally be. Large organisations do so automatically and have the administrative capacity to do so.

It should not be a cause of offence between the parties that each maintains a diary of events and copies of documentation. It should be accepted as a necessity dictated by the adversarial system and discounted between employer and employee working together to deal with the injury.

As far as the employee is concerned, the best person to help them initially and in the longer term is their General Practitioner. Maintaining a continuing relationship with one GP can be most advantageous in terms of both prevention and treatment, and in any legal action the doctor can trace the onset of the injury and its effects with objective data from their records. If the doctor is also the family doctor as well, so much the better. Stress related illness, as mentioned above, is very hard on families and an holistic approach from the family's medical advisor can be of great assistance.

If things do get to an acute stage with no previous communication or warning to the employer, the first likely scenario is that that the employee's doctor will recommend the employee take several weeks off work, at short notice. This can have a disastrous effect on a small business or a small specialist operational unit in a larger organisation, and may be a risk for which a plan needs to have been made.

The question also arises for the employee as to what extent he or she wishes to conceal the reason for their absence from their employer. This depends very much on circumstance and there is no one answer. The ideal open relationship with mutual trust and confidence between the parties, understanding and sympathetic support is not always going to be there.

Other factors come into play. Some employers, particularly in the public sector, will top up the worker's compensation payments so the injured worker remains on full salary so they do not get behind with their commitments. Many employers don't, and that can produce more stressors.

The employee must also consider what it does to their employability. Whether or not a history of stress related injury will affect their chances of employment if they have to move on, particularly if they are going to be competing with younger, fitter and possibly better technically qualified applicants.

The employee may decide to seek to take recreation leave at short notice, take regular sick leave, or take leave for a work injury and claim worker's compensation. It should be remembered however that if the employer is not told what is really wrong they can't do anything about the problem. When the employee returns to work it is probable nothing will have changed to mitigate the original causes of the illness.

Employees, if your doctor diagnoses a stress related work injury start your diary immediately whatever you tell your employer.

If the employer does become aware of an incident of stress related work injury then they have both a legal and moral duty to not only assist the individual immediately of concern, but also to take steps to ensure that other employees do not suffer from the same injury, just as if a dangerous piece of machinery or procedure were to come to notice when an injury is caused in a workshop.

There are stories about organisations developing epidemics of stress related illness, just as twenty years ago there were stories about epidemics of repetition strain injury. Many of these stories seem to be put about in order to try to deny the existence of the condition in one or all of the sufferers. So-called stress epidemics may be very real and indicate some deep-seated problems with an organisation. When one or two people are prepared to admit a problem, more overcome their embarrassment and potential loss of face and follow suit.

There are also lots of stories about how easy it is to invent stress related injury to go with the stories about invented back injuries. Employers can't win on these issues and must accept expert advice. However some of the symptoms of stress related injury can be readily measured objectively, while a patient's medical and social histories correlated with workplace events can also lend weight to a claim.

Just as in a case of physical injury the employee has a right to ask for suitable duties to assist in their rehabilitation. This can pose a big problem in a small organisation particularly if the affected employee is not trained to do other available duties.

Further, the organisation may need to not only support the injured employee but also recruit to find another person to carry out their normal duties. While payments from workers compensation insurance will assist, this can produce significant extra costs to the business in both financial and administrative terms.

A mature employer recognises the opportunities in such situations. It is amazing how those projects you never thought would get done can be accomplished with the extra person you have available on workers compensation. Moreover, if it's a stress related injury they have all their physical capacities remaining and their medical and psychiatric advisers will have told them to stay as active as possible.

It is not recommended that injured employees be given part time work in their existing jobs. Inevitably the same stressors will be there and the employee will just have less time to deal with their same problems, and possibly have to try to do all their old work within a part-time time frame.

Recovery

For management, recovering from a stress related injury claim requires three tasks to be completed.

Firstly management needs to review what has happened in a financial and legal sense. The aim is to analyse business systems to see what could have been done to prepare for and manage such matters better. A debriefing with your insurer can be valuable.

The second involves rebuilding confidence within your team. If the injured staff member has returned to work they need to re-establish their place as a reliable member of the team. This means that you as a manager and other staff have to accept that they are capable of performing their duties and playing their part as a team member.

The third task is to reassess what happens to people in your workplace and do as much as you can to organise to avoid a recurrence of stress related injury. This is the process of closing the loop on the disaster management cycle of Planning, Preparation, Response, and Recovery.

If as an employee you do get a stress related injury don't sit around at home. It's easy to say, but staring at the walls is not going to help. People don't "snap out" of the symptoms of stress related injuries. It's a long a sometimes difficult climb out of the black hole. The first step on the road to recovery is to decide that you want to get out of that hole.

One of the biggest problems for the employee who has suffered a stress injury is guilt. Because the injury was not physical and caused by an obvious workplace accident, the employee feels that they have let themselves and others down, particularly when they can see the results of the injury affecting their income, the lifestyle of their family and their relationships with other people, and even affecting their employer's business. Guilt has a multiplier affect on depression.

If you have a religious faith, you may be able to use that to help you through your problem. If you can, do as much work as you are able. Even home renovations or hobbies can be great interest generators. If you can't face regular work, volunteer somewhere totally different. Exercise as much as possible and get out and about and interact with other people.

If you are so low that you can't organise these things for yourself initially, find someone who can. You should aim to take charge of and plan your recovery.

Stay away from alcohol. Alcohol is a depressive drug. If you can, give it up. Also stay away from illegal drugs. The high is always followed by a massive low. A low can be an inescapable abyss. Cigarettes are also a problem as they affect your general health.

If your doctor offers you drug therapy, ask lots of questions. Newer and more effective medications come onto the market regularly. The chemistry of the brain is becoming better understood all the time. For some people prescription drugs are literally a lifesaver. Some take them for a short term, some for longer, some can never do without them again. Others battle on successfully without them and come out the other end.

Look after your partner so they can look after you. If you have other people close to you such as children, take the time to tell them what is going on. The worst that that happen is that you will find some of your friends aren't. Set it as a goal that you will be kind to other people.

Knowing who you are and managing your condition is really what the doctors call a cognitive approach. Once you have started managing yourself again you start to build your self esteem, and your capacity to take more decisions and plan further ahead will increase. Deciding to take charge is the first step on the road home.

Conclusion

Every workplace is different and so is every employee. People react in different ways in similar situations and some shrug off problems that are major concerns for others.

Good planning, knowledge of, and the confidence of your workforce can dramatically reduce the possibility of stress related injury in the workplace. If injury does occur it need not be disastrous to the employer or the employee. With knowledge and the right approach it can be managed.

The legal system is a necessary evil in the whole process of managing stress related injury but the worst of its adversarial qualities can be mitigated. Employers and employees should try to remain cooperative and objective in the face of stress related workplace injury if they want to make the best out of a bad situation. You can survive the stresses of stress.

Recommendation

Be kind to one another. Remember life is too short to look for ways to waste the good parts.

About the Author

After what he describes as a misspent youth Paul Frisby joined the NSW Public Service as a junior Consumer Affairs Inspector in 1977. Following 8 years in consumer protection he moved into management working for his home Department and the NSW Office of Public Management in management review and change management. At the same time he was a senior volunteer officer with the NSW State Emergency Services specialising in disaster response planning and management.

In 1992 he resigned his position as Director, Audit with the NSW Department of Corrective Services for a "sea change" position with Queensland Corrective Services at the Rockhampton Correctional Centre. Following a career which included managing for workplace stress related injury he then fell prey to the problem himself. He subsequently managed his own rehabilitation by running a small business and is currently employed as Coordinator Regulatory Services with the Rockhampton City Council. Paul has graduate qualifications in Management from the Central Queensland University.

Paul Frisby

Paul Frisby was born in the UK and immigrated to Australia in 1961. Paul had a mis-spent youth in media including ATN Channel 7 Sydney, WIN Channel 4 Wollongong and 2WG Wagga Wagga; and two years overseas travel with work in casino security and as a horse-riding instructor. In 1977 he joined the NSW public service as a field Inspector for the Department of Consumer Affairs and was promoted as an Investigating Officer based in Sydney. Paul was seconded to the office of Public Management, NSW Premier's Department for a review of the NSW State Emergency Services Organisation and re-organisation of administrative functions in the NSW Department of Corrective Services and in 1989 was appointed Director, Performance Review and Audit with NSW Department of Corrective Services. Paul is currently Coordinator of Regulatory Services with the Rockhampton City Council.