

Facilities Management from A to Z

Based on The FM Lexicon by Martin Pickard
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S tress

Stress is a major issue in the modern workplace and one that facility managers need to keep a close eye on. An estimated 10.4 million working days were lost in 2011/12 due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety. Stress is the second most commonly reported condition in the self-reported work related illnesses with an estimated 428,000 workers in 2011/12 suffering from stress caused or made worse by their current or past work.

Stress affects different people in different ways, and everyone has a different method of dealing with it. The chemicals that are released by the body as a result of stress can build up over time and cause various mental and physical symptoms. Stress symptoms can be many and varied including anger, depression, anxiety, lack of appetite, difficulty sleeping, tiredness, loss of concentration, chest pains, digestive problems, loss of libido, breathlessness and chest pains.

Defining a case of work-related stress is complicated and is the subject of a 128-page report commissioned by the Health & Safety Executive. The conclusion drawn from the report is that no simple and universal case definition is possible, largely because of the complex nature of work-related stress. The report suggests that stress should not be treated as an illness but rather as a process, where the emotional experience of stress largely resulted from exposure to psychosocial hazards at work, and in the worst cases led to impairments of physical and psychological health of clinical and behavioural significance.

If organisations can reduce stress they can reduce its cost to the business, and good management is the best way of doing this. Recent research links effective people management to good performance and productivity. The need to tackle stress is also recognised in law. Under the Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, employers are obliged to undertake a risk assessment for health hazards at work and to take action to control that risk which includes the management of stress.

When exploring stress reduction in the facilities team the FM should consider the way jobs are designed in terms of their specific goals, overall importance and the structure of the work-flow; the personal abilities of an individual and the level of training needed to carry out specific tasks; and whether the introduction of more flexible working hours could help to reduce the demands on employees.

The focus needs to be on prevention rather than treatment. The loss of working days may be the most visible cost of work-related stress, but there is the additional burden of a high turnover of staff, and the loss of trained individuals. There is also the 'knock-on' effect of the extra demands placed upon other staff, who have to cover for absent colleagues. For the company, this may result in reduced productivity and quality of their services and possibly loss of income from settling claims against the company.

The National Health Service has a very useful site with information about handling stress.
www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression