

News

Work-related stress jumps by a quarter to reach 'epidemic' levels

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By Annie Makoff-Clark

Experts criticise 'half-hearted' attempts to tackle a crisis caused by workload and management style



Work-related stress has become an 'epidemic', employers have been warned, as new figures from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) reveal that 15.4 million working days were lost to the condition in 2017/18, a huge increase on the previous year.

The HSE said **595,000 workers were reported as suffering** from work-related stress, depression or anxiety over the last 12 months, with 239,000 of these representing new cases. The number of days lost to stress was up 24 per cent year on year.

A total of 26.8 million days were lost during 2017/18 due to workplace ill-health, including mental health issues, musculoskeletal disorders and workplace injury. But while self-reported general ill-health has more or less flatlined since 2011, the significant rise in work-related mental health issues over the last 12 months indicates a worrying trend.

Charles Alberts, head of health management at Aon, told *People Management* that the HSE statistics formed a 'worrying picture' for mental health. "It's concerning that despite awareness of mental health being greater than ever before, with many examples of good practice by employers up and down the country, the situation appears to be worsening. It's a startling reminder that there is much more to be done," he said.

Dr Wolfgang Seidl, partner and workplace health consulting leader for Mercer said: “The prevalence of mental health issues has now reached a crisis point. Half-hearted attempts to help those affected are no longer enough. Instead, employers need to urgently identify and collectively address the root causes of the problem.”

Research by the CIPD and SimplyHealth in May found that increased presenteeism – which had more than tripled from 26 per cent in 2010 to 86 per cent in 2018 – was associated with rising stress levels.

In September, the CIPD urged employers to ensure that line managers were equipped to recognise early signs of stress and mental ill-health as they often represent the first port of call for staff struggling with poor mental health. This was backed by an earlier study from the Mental Health Foundation, which revealed that less than a sixth of staff felt comfortable talking to their line manager about stress levels.

Rachel Suff, senior employment relations adviser at the CIPD, said: “The HSE’s findings chime not just with recent CIPD research but also countless others out there. It’s of particular concern that the CIPD research also found that just 58 per cent of organisations carried out stress risk assessments, despite it being a statutory requirement.

“Stress risk assessments are hugely important preventative steps which organisations should be taking. The HSE provides several valuable tools to support employers with this.”

Both Suff and Alberts pointed to workload, organisational change and management style as the main factors behind the growing trend.

Seidl, who called on employers to look at data to understand the underlying issues affecting the workforce, added: “Instead of enabling people to thrive at work – with reasonable demands being placed on them, control over their workload and supportive management in place – unhealthy working conditions are being allowed to fester. As this continues, disjointed wellbeing initiatives, such as standalone mindfulness seminars or one-off wellbeing days, will not even begin to address the current epidemic.”

TUC general secretary Frances O’Grady said: “Work-related stress is a growing epidemic. It’s time employers and the government took it more seriously. Warm words are not going to fix this problem. Managers need to do far more to reduce the causes of stress and support employees struggling to cope. This means tackling issues like excessive workloads and bullying in the office. Toxic workplaces are bad for staff and productivity.”

Meanwhile, Kath Haines, CEO of CABA, the charity that supports the wellbeing of chartered accountants, said the ‘always on’ culture was mostly to blame for Britain’s stress epidemic.

She added: “The knock-on effect from the culture of being constantly connected to work has led to an increase in presenteeism, a sharp drop in concentration levels and many employees considering handing in their notice. For a country struggling with productivity, this needs to change.”

