

SOME DEFINITIONS

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Stress management techniques are aimed at helping individuals deal with stress at work, rather than changing the behaviour of organisations. Techniques that have been found to be useful focus on improving problem-solving and using de-stressing techniques such as physical exercise. The greatest benefit may be experienced by people who volunteer for this kind of help.

THERAPY

By therapy, we mean help that gives an individual a greater ability to identify the problems they face and to solve them. In many cases this means help provided to an individual worker by a therapist, but computer programmes that individuals can access by themselves are also effective in the short term. The kinds of therapy found to work are quite brief; as few as six sessions may be enough.

One common form of therapy that has been found to be effective is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT helps individuals look at the way that they respond to situations. By helping them to understand their reactions, they change their behaviour so that it is less damaging to their mental health. CBT is becoming more widely available and is sometimes available through family doctor services.

WHAT WE DID

The British Occupational Health Research Foundation (BOHRF) organised a research working group to read the research papers on techniques to prevent, and to help people with common mental health problems related to work. Each paper was read by two members of the group. Papers were graded and only those with the highest grades were used to draw up the recommendations in this leaflet.

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WORKPLACE INTERVENTIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

A summary for employers and employees



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Employers - do you realise 15 to 20% of your workers may have a mental health problem of some kind which is not necessarily associated with work. This leaflet summarises the worldwide evidence on the measures you can take at work to prevent or relieve such illness and to rehabilitate workers effectively back to their jobs. Adopting best practice could prevent loss of skilled employees and increase productivity in the workplace.

Employees – if you are suffering from mental health problems that affect your work, whether or not you think they are caused by work, there are proven techniques that could help you. This leaflet summarises them. Ask your GP, or union representative about it, and find out if the kind of help we describe here is available at work or through local health services.

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This leaflet summarises the most comprehensive review carried out of worldwide published research on effective interventions for workers with common mental health problems.

The review looked at

- * Prevention of common mental health problems such as depression and anxiety
- * Helping individuals, who may be vulnerable to suffering such conditions, to stay in work
- * Helping rehabilitate and return to work those employees who have had periods of mental ill-health sickness

The review found evidence that work can have a positive effect on the mental health of some people; also that it can have adverse effects for others.

The review also found that a given intervention does not have the same effect on everybody.

What do we mean by common mental health problems? While mental health problems are common, most mental health problems are relatively mild in their effects and are dealt with by family doctor and primary health care services without professional psychiatric help. These mild to moderate mental health problems are the ones that we call common mental health problems in this leaflet.

PREVENTING COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS THROUGH ACTION AT WORK

The evidence shows that stress management techniques improve people's ability to cope with stress, and to avoid stressful situations at work. Techniques that have been found useful include teaching problem-solving skills, exercise and relaxation.

The Health and Safety Executive has prepared detailed guidance on prevention of work-related stress, with tools for assessing what aspects of work are particularly stressful. (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/standards/>)

HELPING PEOPLE WHO HAVE COMMON MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

For people who have common mental health problems that are affecting their work, the evidence is that brief individual therapy of up to eight sessions can work. This helps most for employees who have a greater level of control over their work. The effects do not necessarily last for ever; additional help of the same kind (booster sessions) may be necessary again in the future.

Exercise has been shown to help people to manage stress. At present there is no firm evidence that stress management techniques help people once they have common mental health problems.

HELPING PEOPLE TO RETURN TO WORK

When people are off work due to sickness caused by common mental health problems, an early return to work is aided by line managers keeping in touch at least once every two weeks. Cognitive behavioural therapy has also been shown to speed return to work. The evidence suggests that good medical management of anxiety and depression helps people to retain employment. In particular line managers, occupational health professionals and GPs need to work together to enable employees to have the best chance of rehabilitation.

OTHER POSSIBLE METHODS

There is little more firm evidence about what things work. This is because research of the kind needed to draw firm conclusions is hard to carry out. Also new methods of helping people are being developed all the time but most have not been sufficiently tested yet.

From the limited evidence available the following activities are probably helpful and worth doing:

- * Educational techniques that give workers more understanding of how they respond to stress and what the common mental health problems are
- * A combined approach involving changes in the way work is organised as well as help for individual workers so that they can cope with stressors at work better
- * Training that helps supervisors and managers support employees better.

THE FUTURE

Because there is limited evidence in the published research, employers are strongly encouraged to monitor and evaluate initiatives that seem to work in managing common mental health problems so that individual and organisational findings are captured and can help develop future good evidence based practice.