

# STRESS MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

*Stress is not just a personal problem – it's a business problem that can be solved in four steps.* By Steve Garrett BSc, Ad.Dip.PC

Experience shows that stressed employees are treated a bit like radioactive material – no one wants to handle them, and the employee is sent on sick leave for a month (or several) in the belief that time alone will reduce their stress and that they will return healthy, motivated and more resilient. Nothing could be further from the truth. Stressed employees need support not isolation; fear of becoming unemployed or estranged from colleagues are two of the greatest stressors! Understanding this requires the spotlight to move from the individual and broaden to illuminate the whole organisation and workforce. This widening of focus also requires a change in perspective from re-action to pro-action.



A reactive stance is not only resource intensive, it fails to provide any meaningful understanding of the causes and contributing factors of stress peculiar to an organisation. Having a framework of the right policies, procedures, and resources, which protects your organisation and employees from the impacts of stress, is the only way to effectively take a proactive stance at reducing the financial and personal impact of work-related stress.

**1. Audit** To allocate resources cost effectively requires a deep understanding of workplace stressors peculiar to your organisation; this can be achieved through a preliminary stress audit, and then continued through a monitoring and assessment programme. It is prudent at this stage to not only expose the stressors, but also trace the financial and cultural impacts that result. This will give further incentive for developing and implementing a successful stress reduction plan. Typical indicators that work-related stress (we could say workplace-induced stress) is costing your business are: absenteeism, sickness, conflict, errors and accidents, staff turnover, low production, poor quality, sabotage and substance abuse.

**2. Training** Having first made a diagnosis, it is then necessary to put preventive and reduction measures in place. Such measures are built firmly on a foundation of education and training, and practiced through the cultivation of positive two-way relationships between line managers and employees. Awareness and self-management training for all can help individuals build an ability to reduce stress. More specific training will give managers the confidence and know-how to support employees (and therefore the organisation) achieve this.

**3. Support** Having thus raised the skill levels amongst management and workforce, the third task is to create procedures to manage an employee who is unable (or unsafe) to continue working due to their reaction to stress. Even if the relationship between line-manager and employee is excellent, this is no time for amateur therapy! A line-manager *should* act as the essential conduit for support and information, between employee and colleagues, rather than a faceless HR manager.

However, early intervention from a professional counsellor can recover a situation permanently. Immediate rest and relaxation may be prescribed in some cases, but it is far more constructive to agree (between manager, employee, counsellor and colleagues) a “return to work” programme. This keeps the employee engaged, removes a source of additional stress, and offers a positive target to aim for.

**4. Culture** Workers already have responsibilities for providing feedback on issues that affect production, safety and welfare. To include stress, and remove the stigma, direction is required from the top, cooperation from the bottom and appropriate stress awareness from the boardroom to the shop floor. Helping working practices match the policies is culture-building! Stress management systems will not



work without widespread belief in the value of managing stress. This culture-building must aim at positive self-disclosure (self-reporting), and this can only be achieved if workers “know” they will be supported and not punished. Self-disclosure will provide the organisation with priceless information about self-medication, oversights and errors, drug abuse and stress brought from the home environment. This knowledge will not only help to drive the stress-reduction programme, but also allow managers to make informed decisions based on Risk. An Air Traffic Controller who is experiencing divorce, a recent bereavement and caring for a child with special needs should probably not be scheduled for the busiest sector on a weekend! You will only know these things if a positive self-reporting culture exists around stress.

Proactive stress management will provide financial and personal benefits, and can be achieved through raising awareness, identifying stressors, measuring stress levels, supporting workers, and cultivating a positive self-reporting culture.



Through aim2 Ltd (registered in England and Wales 5856062) Steve Garrett provides stress, anger and personal development training as well as individual coaching and therapy. Steve is a psychotherapist, SMS trainer and coach with over 25 years experience in aviation. To find out more visit [www.aim2.eu](http://www.aim2.eu)

This is the third of 6 stress-related articles to be released early 2012. Contact Steve to obtain “Word” versions to allow editing for your internal publications and intranet.

1. Stress, Safety & Return to Profit
2. Stress Regulatory Framework
- 3. Stress Management Systems**
4. A Biopsy of Stress
5. Stress Toolbox for Managers
6. Stressing the Personal Responsibility