

Bullying & Stress in the Workplace

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Bullying in the Workplace

- Common cause of work related stress
- Increasing cause of certified sick leave
- Projected by 2020 that 5 out of 10 top illnesses will be stress related - WHO
- High financial impact
- High human impact – for the person bullied, the accused, their families and work colleagues

Health Safety & Welfare at Work Act 2005

- Employer duties
- Employee duties
- Bullying and Stress included:
 - ‘prevent...so far as reasonably practicable any improper conduct or behaviour likely to put....employee at risk’
- Focus on Prevention & Safety

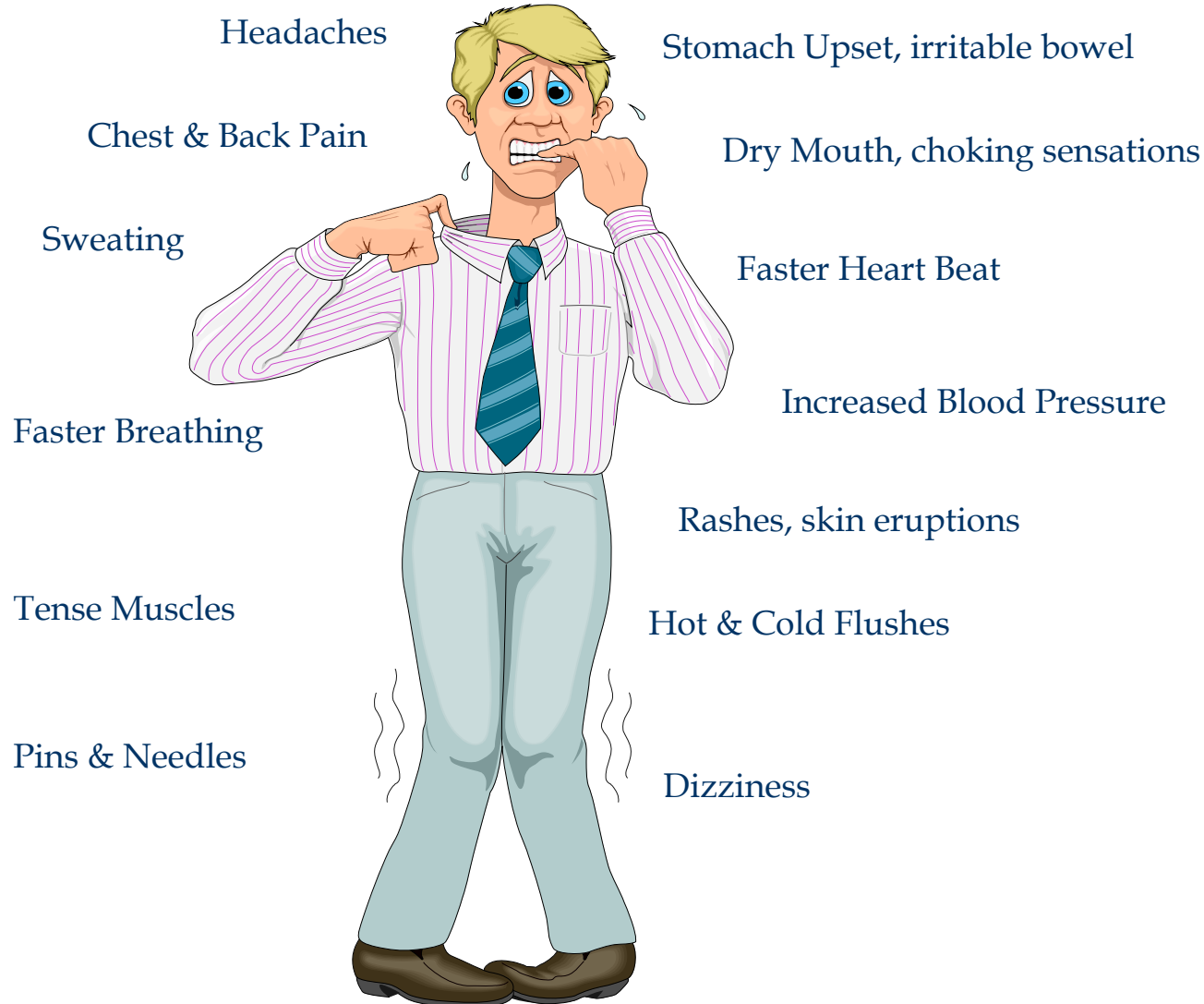
The Personal Impact of Bullying

- Repeated, unwanted interaction
 - Excessive criticism, undermining, belittling, ridiculing
 - Refusing to communicate, isolating
 - Aggression, threats, sexual innuendo
- May be subtle and covert
- Person feels ‘under threat’ – bully & bullied...
- Activates ‘The Stress Response’

The Stress Response

- Fight or Flight or Freeze
- Adrenaline released in acute situations
 - Uncomfortable & on edge
 - Sleep, worry, tension, physical complaints
- Cortisol released in prolonged or repeated exposure
 - More subtle brain effects
 - Memory, decision making, thinking, mood
- Frightening experience for many
- ‘am I going mad’ - STIGMA

Physical Indicators of Stress



Psychological Indicators of Stress

Error rates increase

Procrastination occurs

Changes in concentration

Cynicism increases

Distractibility increases

Ability to plan and
organise deteriorates



Worry, despondency, fatigue

Depression, hopelessness, suicidal

Frustration, anger, irritability

Self blame & guilt

Excessive Smoking, Drinking

Withdrawal, inability to cope

Change in sleep, eating, energy patterns

The Impact of Stress

- Anger –
- Poor sleep –
- Frequent physical investigations –
- Poor concentration –

- Fall off in performance, mistakes, accidents, reduced productivity, low morale, staff turnover, absenteeism etc etc etc

Stress or Illness

- Stress – Distress – Stress Related Illness
 - Acute Stress Reaction 6%
 - Adjustment Disorder 22%
 - Anxiety Disorders & panic 28%
 - Depressive Illness & Suicide 34%
 - Psychotic Illness (brief /enduring) 5%
 - PTSD 5%
- Diagnosis of 'illness' is based on duration symptoms and impact on functioning

Stress Related Illness

- Needs medical intervention
- Psychological & Pharmacological
- May last 3 to 12 months or longer
- Certain medications may interfere with ability to perform job
- May require long term follow up
- Some may not make a full recovery
- Some will consider suicide as an option

Not every person develops illness...

- Increased likelihood of stress and illness if –
 - Under stress already either work or personal
 - Using alcohol or drugs
 - Past history of psychological difficulties
 - Difficult early life experiences – abuse
 - Certain personality traits
 - Overall organisational change – restructuring etc
- On the other hand – many thrive under challenge...

Personality Traits

- Heightened sensitivity to criticism
- Excessive sensitivity to setbacks/rebuffs
- Tendency to bear grudges persistently
- Perceive slight & suspiciousness
- Misconstruing friendly actions as hostile
- Combative sense of personal rights
- Excessive self importance

Individual Response

- Assessment needs to take each persons situation into account
 - Past & current factors
 - Coping style
 - Personality
 - Organisational profile
- Psychiatrists explore these areas in determining if illness is the impact of bullying or other

Identification...

- Bullies come in all shapes & sizes
 - Individual or group
 - Management or peers
 - Male – female
- The bullied
 - Loyal, committed workers but few studies....
- Health behaviour
 - Absences, time keeping, appearance, demeanour
 - General conduct – often best spotted by peers
 - Be alert at times of organisational change, introduction new technology etc

Strategy to Manage

- Assume there is a risk of Bullying – ‘a hazard’
- Increase awareness by education, information
- Develop policy & procedures and inform
- Foster employer & employee initiative
- Foster employer & employee responsibility
 - Assertion skills
 - Life skills – ‘stress inoculation’ ‘stress hardiness’
 - Training in performance reviews, managing change
 - The ‘how’ of saying things rather than the ‘what’

‘RESPECT – DIGNITY- CONSIDERATION’

If you think you are being bullied -

- Monitor the situation
- Keep a record
- Discuss with relevant manager, HR
- Review policy
- Consider possible interpretations
- Keep to the facts not the emotions
- Present your view clearly

When you are approached.....

- Meet with person
- Obtain & record details
- Check policy & procedure – seek advice
- Inform the other person involved
- Confidentiality & Rights of the Accused
- Offer EAP – Occupational Health support
- ‘Informal or Formal’ Routes as per policy
- Be aware of time frame & manner of process

Outcome & Prognosis

- Recovery from ill health may take months
 - Delayed by personality problems
 - Delayed by alcohol
 - Delayed by litigation
 - ‘life on hold until case settled’
- The longer the duration of illness the poorer the outcome for all involved including the organisation - Cost implications

Final Comment

- Bullying always possible
- Situations are open to misinterpretation
- Clear guidelines needed on acceptable practice
- Promote healthy work practice
- Intervene early
- Clear sanctions
- Do not underestimate the potential impact on workplace and outside