
MWA UPDATE

The Return to Work **Stress** **Connection**

By Richard Pimentel

Two years ago, I gave a presentation to a group of executive Risk Managers representing many of the top one hundred companies in the United States. These "best practice" corporations had been on the cutting edge of disability management and to date had established programs that had saved their corporations hundreds of millions of dollars. The topic of my presentation was the evolution of corporate disability management programs during the last ten years. Everyone was feeling good about the report until I asked what they thought the fastest growing and most difficult employee health challenge would be over the next ten years.

The answer was immediate and unanimous. Employee stress and psychiatric conditions were identified as the clear winner. I then asked how many of the managers were satisfied with how their current disability management programs were dealing with this issue. Not a hand was raised. I asked how many were currently in the process of developing a corporate strategy to address the problem. Still not a hand.

As a consultant who develops and implements these programs for industry and government, the Risk Managers' responses were not surprising to me. It is not unusual for companies with otherwise top-of-the-line occupational and non-occupational return-to-work and disability management practices and procedures to simply "freeze like a deer in the lights" when confronted with an employee undergoing stress, whether the stress is work related or not. It would be a unique organization indeed that handled employees with stress and psychiatric conditions as simply and as straightforwardly as they do employees with physical injuries and illnesses.

Yet after two years of research and working through this problem, I have come to the conclusion that treating them the same is exactly what we should be doing. It is not that our present disability management and return-to-work programs do not work with this population; it is that we are reluctant, even afraid, to let them try.

That is not to say that there is not much for disability managers and return-to-work coordinators to learn about bringing persons with stress and psychiatric conditions back into the workplace. It is to say that once they do learn, they find out that the basic principles of return-to-work for stress and say "back injuries," for instance, are basically the same. The problem of disability management and return to work for employees with stress, especially if it is identified as work-related stress, may be less a matter of the employee's condition and more our reaction to it.

WHAT IS WORK-RELATED STRESS?

To understand work-related stress, we must first consider stress itself. We are all under stress. There is no such thing as a stress-free life. There is obviously no such thing as a stress-free job. Everyone is exposed to daily pressures. Most people cope with, even flourish on modest amounts of stress without suffering any ill effects. (Another name for this kind of stress could be *challenge*.) Challenges can come from our work as well as our private lives. Challenges may confront us, but if we feel that we are in control, stress can be experienced as a positive thing. It drives us to perform at the top of our game.

While there are many theories of stress, experts agree that the principal difference between healthy “challenge” and unhealthy “stress” is the reality or the perception of the person being able to **control** or impact the outcome. When the sense of control over the situation is lost and coping mechanisms break down, a potentially healthy challenge can become dangerous stress. Untreated and unrecognized, this stress can affect employee productivity, attendance, attitude, and often physical and mental health.

WORK OR HOME?

It is frequently very difficult to determine where stress comes from. Employers often ask the question, “Is the stress from *work* or stress from the employee’s *personal life* that is the main cause of his or her problem?” Take the example of an employee who is going through a reorganization at work and a divorce at home. Which is the main cause of the employee’s stress? Common sense tells us that it is hard to identify where one begins and the other ends.

On the plus side, the effects of stress are usually short-lived. Once the challenges cease and/or the sense of control returns, the employee’s perceived stress generally returns to normal. However, serious difficulties can occur when the pressures are extreme, drawn out and/or the sense of control is completely lost.

IS STRESS ALL IN THE EMPLOYEE’S MIND?

It is hard to separate the body from the mind. Rather than trying to judge whether an employee’s reaction to stress is appropriate or an overreaction, it is valuable to understand what is happening to a human being who is undergoing stress.

PHYSICAL/EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO STRESS

Simply put, stress causes a state of arousal that triggers physical, psychological and biochemical changes in the body. The stress itself can emanate from a variety of sources, such as:

1. **Personal issues**, such as worry about finances or the health of a family member.
2. **Environmental conditions**, such as excessive noise.
3. **Work-related pressures**, such as conflicting assignments or intimidating supervisors.
4. **Traumatic incidents**, such as a death in the family, divorce or job change.

5. **Growth or change**, such as marriage, buying a house or having a child.

As long as stress is short lived, these reactions can be considered a natural part of life and key to survival. However, when the stress does not resolve and the employee feels that there is no solution in sight, serious problems can occur. Heightened and prolonged levels of hormones and other biochemical changes associated with stress can lead to:

- ◆ Exhaustion,
- ◆ Insomnia,
- ◆ Depression,
- ◆ Anxiety,
- ◆ Headaches,
- ◆ High blood pressure,
- ◆ Weakened immune systems,
- ◆ Back pain, and
- ◆ Increased risk of heart attack.

Stress is more than an attitude. The results of prolonged stress are just as physically real as a broken arm or a critical illness. By taking stress seriously and understanding rather than discounting it, employers are able to help their employees recover from it, just as with any other illness or injury.

TRANSITIONAL EMPLOYMENT STRATEGIES

It is not possible to develop a standard Transitional Employment Plan for all employees with stress. Each case and circumstance is necessarily different. However, just as there are some common considerations for Transitional Employment assignments for physical impairments, so there are some common considerations for stress-related impairments. The following are some simple ideas that can be used to start thinking about possible elements of a Transitional Employment Plan for employees with stress.

CAUTION: Do not use these ideas as a substitute for communicating with the medical care provider and the employee. These ideas are only a tool to begin the work of tailoring the Transitional Employment Plan for the individual.

When considering modified assignments for persons with stress, there are at least three major issues to consider:

1. Employee's physical/emotional condition.

The employee's physical/emotional response to stress needs to be considered when developing a Transitional Employment Plan. Depression, anxiety, insomnia, exhaustion and headaches are common responses to stress. The physical symptoms of stress should be factored into the Transitional Employment assignment, just as they would be for anyone who had these conditions.

2. Effects of medication.

It is not only the employee's physical/emotional response to stress that can affect his or her Transitional Employment needs. Many employees experiencing stress are put on medications. These medications can be very effective, however, they can also negatively impact the employee's job performance. Consider the effect of medication on the return-to-work process for an employee with stress just as you would any other medication an employee may be taking, and develop your return-to-work plan accordingly.

3. Organizational issues.

The employer needs to consider all of the elements of management style. Some of the important issues are:

- ◆ **Employee feels “out of the loop” with regard to important decisions that affect him or her.**

Be sure to involve the employee in the development of the Transitional Employment Plan. Even the best plan, if created without input from the employee, undermines the goal of helping the employee to feel more in control of the situation. Experience has proven that employees are more successful in Transitional Employment Plans where they have had input.

- ◆ **Lack of clarity about employee's job responsibilities and goals.**

All employees need clear direction. Lack of clear direction and inconsistency about responsibilities and goals is a stress factor in itself. The duties and responsibilities of the employee and the supervisor in the Transitional Employment Plan also need to be spelled out in writing. The employee needs to understand that the goal of Transitional Employment is to help him or her to transition back into the regular job.

- ◆ **Lack of supervisory skills and knowledge about work-related stress.**

By the time an employee shows symptoms of stress, it is not unusual for the supervisor/employee relation to be filled with conflict, suspicion and frustration. Supervisor buy-in to the process is as important as employee buy-in. When provided with training, tools and direction to help make the Transitional Employment Plan work, the supervisor will be able to give the employee the support that he or she needs to work through the stress.

- ◆ **Communication.**

The success of the Transitional Employment Plan will often depend on the day-to-day interactions between the employee and the supervisor. When a supervisory style allows for employee feedback and problem resolution, the employee may be able to regain and maintain a sense of control, and the organization will be able to help the employee meet necessary productivity and performance goals.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that stress is a complicated issue. But often employer attitudes and feelings about stress are no less complicated or difficult than the issues themselves. By taking an objective, unemotional approach to the problem of stress, employers can bring resources to bear to the advantage of both the employees and the organization.

As long as corporate disability management programs fail to include stress and psychiatric conditions in their Transitional Employment and Work as Therapy strategies, the negative impact of these conditions will continue to grow, not only in the area of cost of treatment but also production, attendance and turnover. With the right attitude and preparation, companies and their employees with stress and psychiatric illnesses can and will benefit from Transitional Employment in the same way that their physically injured or ill counterparts have benefited.

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If you would like to receive information on the book when it is available,
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About the Author

Richard Pimentel is nationally renowned as a consultant, keynote speaker, professional trainer and author on job retention, attitude change in the workplace, return to work, workers' compensation, and cost containment. His vast and penetrating knowledge about issues related to disability and people of difference is communicated with humor and conviction.

Richard Pimentel is an acknowledged authority on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). His training has not only successfully enabled managers and supervisors to participate in cost reduction initiatives and implementation of policies and procedures to reduce work site accidents and re-injuries, but has also helped employers dispel stereotypes and embrace diversity.

Nationally acclaimed publications authored by Richard Pimentel include: **Developing the New Employee: Retaining and Enhancing a Diverse Workforce**, **The Taking Control Process: Beyond Light Duty**, **The Job Placement – ADA Connection**, **The Workers' Compensation ADA Connection**, and **The Return to Work Process: A Case Management Approach**. He has also produced award winning training videos **Return to Work for Employees and Supervisors**, and **Taking Control: The Workers' Compensation Return to Work Connection**.