



Managing stress in the creative workplace

Words Louise Lawton

Kevin Baker knows all about stress – and how to handle it. As northern development manager at the Mental Health Foundation, he is part of a team of specialists and field staff who work to improve the policies, practices and behaviours around mental health and wellbeing.

Q. The pressure put on people in the creative industries can be quite immense; working long hours to tight deadlines and constantly having to find solutions. Any suggestions on how to cope?

A. For pressured creative people and for everyone, the mantra is work-life balance. Try to work closer to the hours you are employed, most of the time. Lighten the diary tasks close to deadlines so you have more time to complete the job; put off new demands and schedule them for post deadline. You don't need to say "No", rather say "Yes, I can do that later", or "I will get onto it next week".

Working really intensely and putting in overtime should be an occasional thing in your work life. Good team work and support are essential in the run-up to a deadline, so last minute co-ordination is occurring.

If you feel you are about to burst, take a short break, eat some food, or drink and even a fresh air break with some deep breathing will disperse a bit of the physical stress build-up, so you can return to the task. Having the opportunity for a brief, friendly chat, some fun, laughter, or an exercise break is also a good way of dispersing stress build-up.

Q. How can you tell when someone is suffering from stress?

A. Ongoing sleep disturbance is the classic sign – look for frequent waking, worrying about work, trying to solve all

the problems. Others are being more short tempered and irritable at home and work; feeling pressured all the time (there seems like no quiet or downtime); loss of enjoyment for friends, family, and fun things; sore and tensed muscles and feeling tired all the time; increasing fears, worrying, or feeling stuck or depressed. Drinking lots of tea, coffee and alcohol are themselves stressors and can negatively affect your sleep.

Q. Is there a specific type of personality that deals with stress particularly well?

A. We are all individual in our responses to stress – in other words, life's demands. We all have to manage stress and mostly we do okay. The problem is when we allow stress overload to build up on us and start to erode our health. As humans we need purposeful and rewarding work, healthy relationships, recreation time, good nutrition, sleep and quiet time, to feel accepted and to be healthy.

Q. Any advice for those who don't deal with stress well?

A. Get practical help to structure your work plans better: a friend or supervisor. Employers do have a legal responsibility under the Health and Safety in Employment Act to address stress in the workplace and you have a responsibility to your employer to identify areas of workplace stress and concern, so they can deal with it.

Research shows us that there are major benefits of regular and moderate exercise in reducing stress and improving our physical resilience. It reduces blood pressure, improves immune function, improves physical strength, weight control, and overall mental wellbeing.

If you feel helpless, hopeless or

powerless you need to talk to someone you trust, or a professional advisor to get perspective and support.

Q. Do you recommend that companies take steps or measures to detect and monitor stress in employees?

A. Effective prevention of stress makes good business sense. Healthy and functional organisations gauge stress levels and staff performance and wellbeing. There is a clear difference between a busy day and an overloaded day.

What are the expectations and climate in your work setting? Some workplaces are naturally more pressured than others and sometimes you have to make a choice about the right environment for you and the nature of that business.

Q. Are there any steps you recommend companies should take to enhance their employees' work environment?

A. All companies should have a health and safety group that looks out for everyone and the business's interests, in these areas. Good supervisory support, with clear expectations, good organisation and respectful interactions between managers and staff is important.

Looking out for and dealing with problem situations and conflict directly, and practically, is good practice. Open communication and humour are also important in a positive team work environment. Good communication within organisations is the key factor to business efficiency – and the greatest challenge. p4

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