

Stress, Resilience and Mental Health

There is so much spoken about stress these days, but it hasn't always been like this. Prior to us recognising stress as an emotional issue, stress was generally referred to as some type of fracture; whether it was within the building trade (with a fractured building, bridge etc.), or a bone (as in a stress fracture).

The analogy "if too much is placed upon it, it will bend, break or crack" holds true and describes well the type of emotional stress many experience today, both in and out of the workplace.

Before 1995 when the first case of work related stress was highlighted (Walker vs Northumberland) employers had been focused on the physical safety of its work force in terms of work appropriate safety equipment. Mr Walker was able to prove that too much had been placed upon him in terms of workload and the Authority was taken to court for failing in its Duty of Care

Walker v Northumberland County Council [1995] IRLR 35

Stress, 'Breach of its duty of care in failing to take reasonable steps to avoid exposing the employee to a health endangering workload. ... Established the precedent that an employer can be held liable for mental injury to an employee caused by work-related stress.

Following this, it fell to the workplace not just to be responsible for people's physical wellbeing, but also their emotional wellbeing

So what does stress look like today? What does it look like for you? How much of what we do and feel is actually stress? For sure, stress looks different to every one of us. How do you manage it? These are all important questions to take the time to consider.

If we think of a bath as a container - The size of this is dependent upon a person's level of vulnerability; the lower a person's vulnerability the bigger their stress bath can be. The size of this is down to many factors including difficult life experiences. The more difficult issues there are, the smaller the bath will be, which means it will overflow more quickly than for someone who has a large bath.

A person's ability to be resilient plays a large part in stress management.

So, what do we mean by Resilience? Resilience is having the capacity and ability to quickly recover from difficulties. We speak of being able to cope in spite of setbacks or barriers in our way. At times, it's easier to be resilient if there is something we really want or want to do because we are willing to overcome obstacles which may be in our way. It is about being determined, tough and "driven" to get to what you want or want to achieve. Being resilient does not mean that people don't experience stress or emotional distress. Building resilience is important because it gives people the strength required to both process and overcome extreme difficulties.

Someone who experiences emotional stress and perhaps isn't that able to be resilient, may go on to experience poor mental health or even a form of mental illness.

How is mental health and mental illness different? Are they? We tend to refer to mental health as our day to day mood scale. It is possible to begin the day feeling great, but something happens either within work or our personal life which affects our mental health and by the end of the day we may feel miserable and low. The opposite can also be true in that the day starts badly, we are tired and grumpy and feeling generally under the weather, then something good and positive happens and lifts our spirits. We all have mental health, it is our day-to-day wellbeing metre. Some go on to develop a mental illness and that will need a professional medical diagnosis. It may be treated with appropriate medication or perhaps by using talking therapies and for many, a combination of the two.

Mental health and illness, stress and resilience will mean different things to different people, we are not all the same and difference must be recognised.

Stigma and discrimination surrounds mental illness, so wellbeing events are useful in challenging some of the myths, which will hopefully in turn give people an insight into what mental illness really is and how to understand what it might be like to live with a mental illness.

It is an aim of Mental Health organisations to increase the public's knowledge, so that the gap between physical and mental illnesses become more even and that discrimination becomes a thing of the past.

If you feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.