

Recession increases work-related stress by 40 per cent, study finds

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(Medical Xpress) -- One in four workers experience work-related stress in times of recession -- and work-related stress increases by 40 per cent overall, according to new research.

A study, published in the journal [Occupational Medicine](#), also found that the number of staff taking time off due to job stress increased by 25 per cent during an [economic downturn](#). Total time off due to these types of [psychological problems](#) increased by more than a third.

The findings are a stark warning to employees and employers at a time when gloomy predictions of Britain's economic prospects suggest a 'double dip' [recession](#).

The study, undertaken by researchers at The University of Nottingham and University of Ulster, questioned 17,000 civil servants in Northern Ireland. It compared the findings of two surveys: the first was conducted in 2005 prior to the onset of the recession, and the second in 2009 after

the economy had been severely hit.

The pressures of work

Scientists assessed how exposed respondents were to the pressures of work by looking at areas such as the demands of the job, control over work and the support they felt they had from managers. They also measured workers perceptions of how stressed they were at work and how much time they had taken off because of work related stress. The findings show the importance of focusing on looking after workers' mental health and wellbeing during difficult economic times.

Dr Jonathan Houdmont, of The University of Nottingham's Institute of Work, Health and Organisations, was the study's lead author.

Dr Houdmont said: "We were fortunate to have access to staff survey data collected before the emergence of initial signs of a forthcoming recession and again four years later at the height of the recession.

"The stark differences in the responses given at these two time points clearly show that national economic crises can have substantial implications for workers' health and organisational performance. The findings suggest that those organisations which seek to reduce work-related stress during austere economic times are likely to experience lower staff absence and greater productivity."

Risk to productivity

The Society of [Occupational Medicine](#), the UK organisation for all doctors and associated health practitioners with an interest in [Occupational Health](#), claimed that the results showed firms that they should use occupational health services or risk long term damage to their

productivity.

Dr Henry Goodall, President of the Society of Occupational Medicine, said: “Occupational health provision is even more important in times of recession as specialists can help with the stress caused by mounting workloads, organisational change and job uncertainty. We can help businesses look at how they manage stress levels and improve the working environment for workers.”

BT is one company that has recognised this as an issue and been proactive in this area.

Catherine Kilfedder, BT group health advisor, said: “BT has a wealth of information and support for its people and families on many aspects of health and wellbeing, including the impact of the recession and stress. When the recession first hit, we partnered with Relate to make additional support available to employees across the UK, in the form of a confidential web chat with counsellors. We continue to promote and develop our resources in these difficult times.”

Depression and anxiety are now the most common reasons for people starting to claim long-term sickness benefits. By investing in occupational health services, senior management teams can play a key role in helping people like this return to work. This will improve the overall performance of the organisation and of individual employees and reduce the costs of sickness absence. Occupational health doctors and nurses are trained to assess whether someone is fit to do their job.

By understanding the nature of the work and the specific tasks that someone does, they can help employers break down some of the barriers that prevent people returning to work. They are able to look at the context in which someone has become unwell and provide a holistic approach — something which is difficult to do in the seven-minute

consultation at a GP surgery.

Dr Goodall believes that alongside providing good occupational health services, effective communication is key.

He said: “When recession hits, management needs to be pro-active in letting staff know what is happening so that they remove any uncertainty. When people are worried about their job security they can sometimes over interpret signals and hold irrational beliefs. Clear and timely communication is vital.”

Provided by University of Nottingham

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