



BUILDING A WHOLE PERSON HEALTH APPROACH TO CHRONIC STRESS AT WORK



Building a Whole Person Health Approach to Chronic Stress at Work

It is well known that chronic stress has a major impact on people's ability to perform in their jobs and engage with society. What is less well known is that it often manifests itself as physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal complications and back pain. This means that in many instances, people are trying to find cures to the symptoms of chronic stress, without recognising the root cause.

The deeper we dig into mental health research, the more severe we find the impact to be. For example, there have been many studies over the years which link chronic stress to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

That's why we need to adopt a more open approach to healthcare - and chronic stress in particular - that addresses both the physical and mental wellbeing of the individual, what I call 'Whole Person Health'. It's effectively a tripartite approach. *Employers* need to create safe and supportive environments for staff. *Employees* should do their best to recognise the impact their lifestyles have on their mental and physical wellbeing. Lastly, *healthcare professionals* need be aware of their patients' interconnected physical and mental health – both body and mind – before they reach for the prescription pad.



Rethinking the value of work



As we learn more about the cause and effect of chronic stress, many employers are fundamentally rethinking how they judge value at work. Some still confuse productivity with attendance, taking a view that their most dedicated employees are those who are in the office longest, take the fewest leave days and even attend when they're unwell.

Cigna's 360 Wellbeing Survey in 2018 found that around the world, almost seven out of 10 people still go to work when ill, even though their productivity drops by 21 percent and they delay their chance of recovery. We call this phenomenon presenteeism.

There is, of course, a huge monetary cost. In the UK, for example, a recent report from Green and Black estimated absenteeism costs around \$11.8 billion a year but presenteeism costs nearly double at around \$21.2 billion*.

*"Cigna 360° Global Wellbeing Survey," Cigna, 2019. (<https://wellbeing.cigna.com/>). Survey of 13,200 people across 23 markets: Australia, Benelux, Canada, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, New Zealand, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, UAE, UK and USA.

Stress and presenteeism

A study I conducted in 2017 found that outside of people's country of residence, the leading predictor of presenteeism was stress – which accounted for approximately a quarter of all instances. In comparison, the greatest driver of absenteeism was pain, the cause of nearly half of all absences.

This study illustrated how workers believe that physical symptoms, such as a physical injury or illness, are genuine health concerns that justify taking leave, while mental health concerns, such as stress, do not.

It is important employers understand how presenteeism affects the workforce. Employers should ensure their managers and supervisors are sensitive to their employees' illnesses and personal issues and that they provide health and wellness programmes that optimise individual healthcare, which has the 'by-product' of improving productivity.

In effect, we need employers to create open communication environments that allow people to be honest about their mental welfare and to speak out when they are suffering from chronic stress.



The role of employees



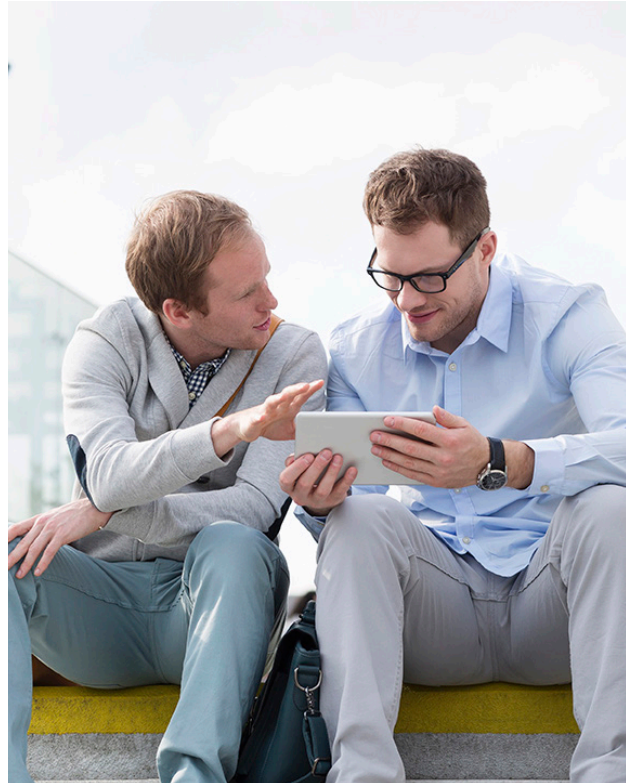
Employees have to play their part as well. The availability of high-quality healthcare has become the norm for most people in developed countries. However, it also means that people increasingly expect medicine to be the cure, rather than using self-identification techniques to understand the issues within themselves. While I would not advocate that people avoid seeking medical advice, people do need to be aware of how their lifestyle affects them.

For example, the rise of the 'always on' culture, with people connected to their work, social contacts and news feeds 24 hours a day, has a significant impact on health. The 2019 edition of Cigna's 360 Wellbeing Survey found that 64 percent of people around the world work in an 'always on' culture which was adversely affecting their physical and mental wellbeing.

Active and engaged

Despite it being well known that physical activity has a positive impact on mental and physical health it is often the area that is neglected the most by people suffering from stress. Yet, one of the best treatments for chronic stress issues is to be more active and engaged. Failing to exercise can lead to heart diseases, diabetes, and other obesity-related illnesses. There is also a tendency for people to instead adopt negative coping mechanisms, such as excess drinking, having poor diets or even drug use to avoid addressing stress in their lives - in turn creating a vicious cycle of negative emotions that can cause long term depressive symptoms.

In addition to exercise, mindfulness activity has been shown to improve health. A growing body of evidence suggests that mindfulness practices, such as meditation, which focuses on fostering greater attention to and awareness of present moment experience, can reduce chronic stress and pain. We know from our clients that many employers are adopting mindfulness as part of their employee wellness programmes



Supporting the medical profession



The third group in the Whole Person Health system is the medical profession. If doctors are unaware of a patient's mental state, it can be hard for them to properly diagnose and deal with physical symptoms. It is important that health system leaders and medical experts have effective training and referral systems to meet the needs of patients with chronic stress.

A significant barrier to the use of non-medicine based interventions is that people are often uncomfortable with admitting they are dealing with the issue. The idea of undertaking therapy based on conversations and exploring thoughts and feelings is, they feel, embarrassing. At the same time, therapy is not universal, with practitioners concentrated in large cities in developed countries.

Powering online health

This is where the growth of telehealth and digital health services presents an opportunity for employers to close this gap for more dispersed populations. Being able to talk directly to a therapist about chronic stress without having to be referred by a general practitioner is a great resource. Even more so if you are working outside your own country and are facing cultural barriers.

We recently conducted a study into the impact of digital health interventions on health-related outcomes. We evaluated the effectiveness of using tools such as online Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) supported by SMS, mobile app and website support. CBT is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. You learn practical and simple techniques to change negative thought patterns – improving your state of mind on a daily basis. We found that almost half of the subjects were successful in changing their negative behaviours, with improvements in lifestyle, such as lowering alcohol consumption, particularly pronounced.



While this study alone is not enough to provide conclusive evidence of how effective online treatment can be, it does indicate the potential that digital tools could provide in identifying and supporting those suffering from chronic stress-related symptoms. Employee wellness programmes and national health systems which are incorporating digital health can provide early intervention which is critical to recovery.

Embedding Whole Person Health into corporate culture



Chronic stress in the workplace is an issue facing many employers and employees today. While the causes and symptoms can be unique to the individual, we know from experience that they can be managed for the betterment of all. Whole Person Health is a crucial business need for any employer and should be embedded in corporate cultures in the same way health and safety policies are today.



Authored by:
Dr. Peter Mills
Medical Director
Cigna Europe

