

Stress and Wellbeing in Human Service Organizations.

A Discussion Paper - February 2014

Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of some of the issues relating to stress of workers in human services organizations.

Costs of Stress

Stress is a key issue for many staff within Human Service organizations leading to

- Personal cost to physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing
- Reduced work performance including efficiency and effectiveness.
- It uses up time and resources
- Can lead to, and feed, individual and organizational negativity
- Increase in staff turnover and sick days
- Staff burnout
- Unrealized individual, team and organizational potential
- Reduced resilience and tolerance
- Reduced ability to proactively work through issues
- Decrease in morale
- Staff mental health issues
- Increased disharmony and fragmentation in teams

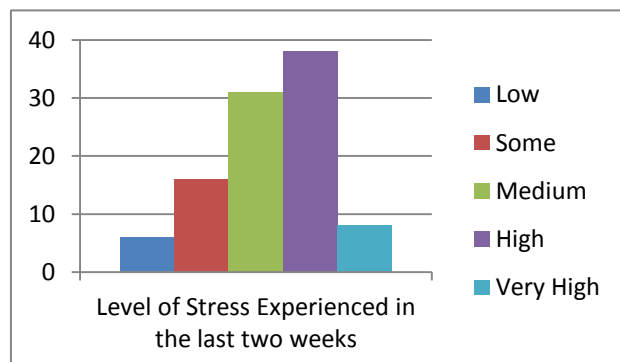
Stress in the Human Services

Stress is often a significant issue for people in the Human Services sector.

In my survey of Human Service workers the **Levels of Stress over the last 2 weeks** were (Sample size - 83 responses)

77% reported medium or higher levels of stress.

47% reported significant or very significant levels of stress.



66% of participants reported experiencing a 'Significant', or Very 'Significant' symptom of stress in the last two weeks.

A list of different forms of stress researched can be found in appendix 1. The top 3 for people in the welfare sector were

1. Tiredness/ worn down/drained
2. Worry and anxiety
3. Overwhelmed.

'Tiredness and worn down', and 'Overwhelmed' suggests accumulated stress from a number of sources and/or sustained over a period of time. Worry and anxiety could be from a single event or accumulated stress.

Sustained Stress

Stress sustained over a long period of time is a significant risk factor to more substantial costs. In my research there was a high level of ongoing stress reported.

Over the last 6 months respondents reported. (65 respondents)

86% reported Medium or higher levels of stress over the last 6 months.

47% reported being 'Highly' or 'Extremely' stressed over the last 6 months.



Some Contributors to Workplace Stress

Exposure to Emotionally charged situations

Clients can be in a highly emotional or stressed state. This can be emotionally tiring for workers.

Furthermore because humans emotionally attune to each other, when a client or a staff member is in a stressed or depleted state, it activates a similar response in the worker, sometimes without

them being consciously aware of it. Regularly being activated in this way can be the stressful and draining.

Clients can be asking for something emotionally from workers, workers can be emotionally giving a lot to situations. The level of openness and engagement can be high, leading to a drain on a worker's resources.

Clients can direct emotions towards workers, eg anger, feeling let down, wanting a worker to solve a situation and relieve their distress. This can be stressful.

There can be dependency, triggering, transference and counter transference which can add to the emotional load.

Consequences and responsibility

The consequences of worker actions and decisions on people's lives can be high. Workers can feel a high degree of responsibility.

Inability to Help

Workers may not be able to help or change the situation. They may not be able to do enough to solve the extent of the problem, a problem that the worker cares about. This can be because

- it is not the role of the worker to assist with the problem
- The internal or external resources aren't available
- Situation factors – the problem may be unsolvable
- Client factors
- Structural factors
- Worker's skill and ability

It is difficult to be directly exposed to the suffering of another person, and for whatever reason, not be able to assist.

Difficult Situations

Situations may be complex and unclear, and unresolved without a clear way forward, which is taxing on a worker.

Workload and pressure

Workload and the administrative tasks can be high. Things can fall through the gaps. The consequences of not doing things can be high, eg a child could be at further risk.

Team Disharmony/worker conflict/workplace issues

Often has a high impact as the workplace is 'home base' and if this is unsettled it means that a worker does not have a solid and secure environment in which to do their work. Perceiving a threat from your work environment is often very destabilizing.

Organizational Change

Even when handled well, organizational change is stressful.

Where the change has a potential or an actual negative impact, when there is mistrust, lack of control, and perception of not being heard or supported, the stress is exacerbated. A feeling of powerlessness can be common in these situations.

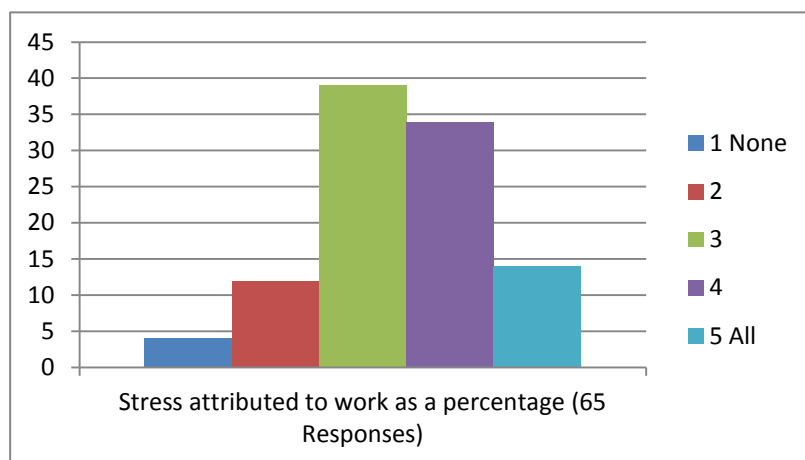
The stress load from outside the work environment

Just as stress at work will affect life outside work, stress outside work will affect work. Usually it is a combination of both that contributes to the stress load.

In my survey

39% attributed half of their stress as coming from work.

45% of participants attributed more than half of their stress as coming from work.



Factors contributing to stress levels

Individual

This includes the awareness, skills, knowledge, and ability of an individual to respond to stressful situations. It includes the personal support system they have around them.

Organizational

Includes the organization's ability to provide a safe, supportive and positive environment. In my experience there is a real need for adequate support to be provided to staff to help build resilience and be able to process and respond to things before they become a problem.

Wellbeing

Work as a source of Wellbeing

Working in the Human Service can bring a great deal of satisfaction and sense of achievement. You can feel like you are making a difference and can be especially satisfying when you are doing something that you love. Clients and those you work with can be inspiring, and it can be an honour and privilege to do the work you do.

Working in a team and with others that are positive and share a passion can be a source of wellbeing and lead to enhancing the level of work achieved.

We talk and think a lot about the stress, and in doing so we tend to undervalue the positive experiences.

In my research the areas of wellbeing where people scored the lowest were

1. Being able to replenish and 'just be'
2. Peace and inner stillness.

The Role of Wellbeing and positive experiences

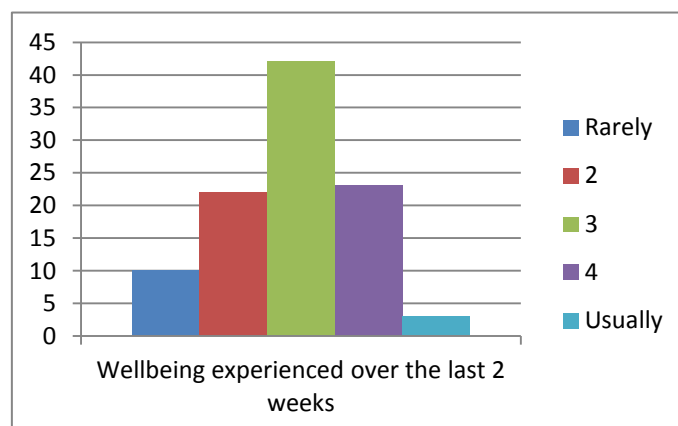
Building wellbeing and positivity is critical to respond to stress and in building a positive and high functioning culture in an organization.

Research indicates that the **level of wellbeing and positivity** is more influential on an individual's welfare and performance than the amount of negativity and stress they hold.

It is wellbeing and positivity that repairs, resources and maintains your psychological and emotional wellbeing. It is then that you have the wherewithal to respond to difficulties.

The research shows that when people have high wellbeing and positivity they do their best work, work together well, get the best outcomes, and provide a positive influence on others.

From my survey most people experienced an average level of wellbeing. Research indicates that experiences of stress can outweigh experiences of wellbeing, as stress is a threat to our wellbeing and functioning .



The Way forward

1. Stress management on its own is an insufficient response to reduce negativity and the costs of stress. Knowing how wellbeing and positivity is created in the workplace is essential.
2. The nature of the work, individual factors, and organizational factors, all need to be considered in a response.
3. The first step is to recognize the need. For example - What are the issues your organization is facing? How do people view the situation? Do certain parts of the organization have greater needs than others?
4. Take action. It is often good to start with something and move from there. Rather than developing a comprehensive plan to begin with, look at an immediate need and trial something small, a first step. It gives flexibility as the most effective ways to enable positive growth become apparent.
5. Follow up is important. Wellbeing and positivity in organizations is something that is developed. On off actions have limited success. Follow up can take the form of written information, video, or follow up sessions, or a consistent message and behaviour from an individual.
6. Relevancy – the steps need to meet the needs of staff and management, and they need to develop an understanding of why the steps are being taken.
7. There is a real need for the availability of support at the level needed by staff to process the personal aspects of being a worker.
8. Support from management and from key people who understand the value of wellbeing contributes significantly to the success of any actions taken.

Conclusion

Improving team culture, efficiency and quality of work is about growing and building individuals, as well as tackling organization issues to mitigate against the factors that contribute to the high levels of stress, negativity and emotional depletion experienced in organizations. To do this requires an understanding of both stress and wellbeing. This is essential in helping organizations move from struggling to ok, ok to good, and good to great.

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Note 1: Sample sizes in research results differ as a quick survey and a more extensive survey were conducted.

Appendix 1

Type of stress you have experienced in the past 2 weeks

	Not at all –	A little –	Medium –	Significant –	Very Significant –	Total –	Average Rating –
Worry/Fear/Anxiety	9.52% 6	19.05% 12	36.51% 23	30.16% 19	4.76% 3	63	3.02
Self Doubt/Vulnerable in Yourself	9.68% 6	37.10% 23	25.81% 16	24.19% 15	3.23% 2	62	2.74
Negativity	14.52% 9	40.32% 25	22.58% 14	20.97% 13	1.61% 1	62	2.55
Discouraged/Despondent	14.52% 9	30.65% 19	38.71% 24	14.52% 9	1.61% 1	62	2.58
Lack of Enthusiasm	20.63% 13	33.33% 21	25.40% 16	19.05% 12	1.59% 1	63	2.48
Loss of Enjoyment of Life	40.98% 25	26.23% 16	19.67% 12	9.84% 6	3.28% 2	61	2.08
Overwhelmed	12.70% 8	28.57% 18	22.22% 14	28.57% 18	7.94% 5	63	2.90
'Heartsore'	41.94% 26	25.81% 16	20.97% 13	9.68% 6	1.61% 1	62	2.03
Feel like you are Carrying an Emotional Burden	24.19% 15	38.71% 24	16.13% 10	20.97% 13	0% 0	62	2.34
Feeling Down/Depressed	27.42% 17	38.71% 24	14.52% 9	17.74% 11	1.61% 1	62	2.27
Feeling Stuck or Trapped	30.65% 19	32.26% 20	17.74% 11	16.13% 10	3.23% 2	62	2.29
Aloneness/Emotionally Isolated	49.18% 30	24.59% 15	14.75% 9	11.48% 7	0% 0	61	1.89
Tiredness/Worn Down/drained	9.52% 6	15.87% 10	31.75% 20	22.22% 14	20.63% 13	63	3.29
Can't Sleep	19.05% 12	41.27% 26	20.63% 13	14.29% 9	4.76% 3	63	2.44
Cant Switch Off Mentally or emotionally	15.87% 10	38.10% 24	22.22% 14	17.46% 11	6.35% 4	63	2.60
Uptight/Tense	17.46% 11	33.33% 21	19.05% 12	22.22% 14	7.94% 5	63	2.70
Headaches/Physical Symptoms	23.81% 15	28.57% 18	19.05% 12	23.81% 15	4.76% 3	63	2.57
Irritable/Cranky	17.46% 11	33.33% 21	23.81% 15	17.46% 11	7.94% 5	63	2.65
Vicarious Stress/Trauma	40.32% 25	32.26% 20	17.74% 11	9.68% 6	0% 0	62	1.97