

Bosses told to share burden for workplace stress

The message is becoming louder every day that it is up to employers to provide a better culture for their staff, says **Prue Moodie**.

Not so long ago, if you'd asked commentators on occupational health what could be done about workplace stress, they would have emphasised the responsibility individuals have in managing their own health.

Workplace programs reflected the thinking. Human resources departments introduced yoga and massages, and employees were encouraged to take up gym memberships.

Now there is greater consensus that the workplace itself has to change to stem the tide of stress-related absenteeism — and "presenteeism", the dreaded zombie-worker syndrome.

>> Silvia Damiano, whose Blip Group has been involved in Westpac's organisational change programs over the last few years, says work is like a marriage.

"If something goes wrong, there's probably a fault on both sides," she says.

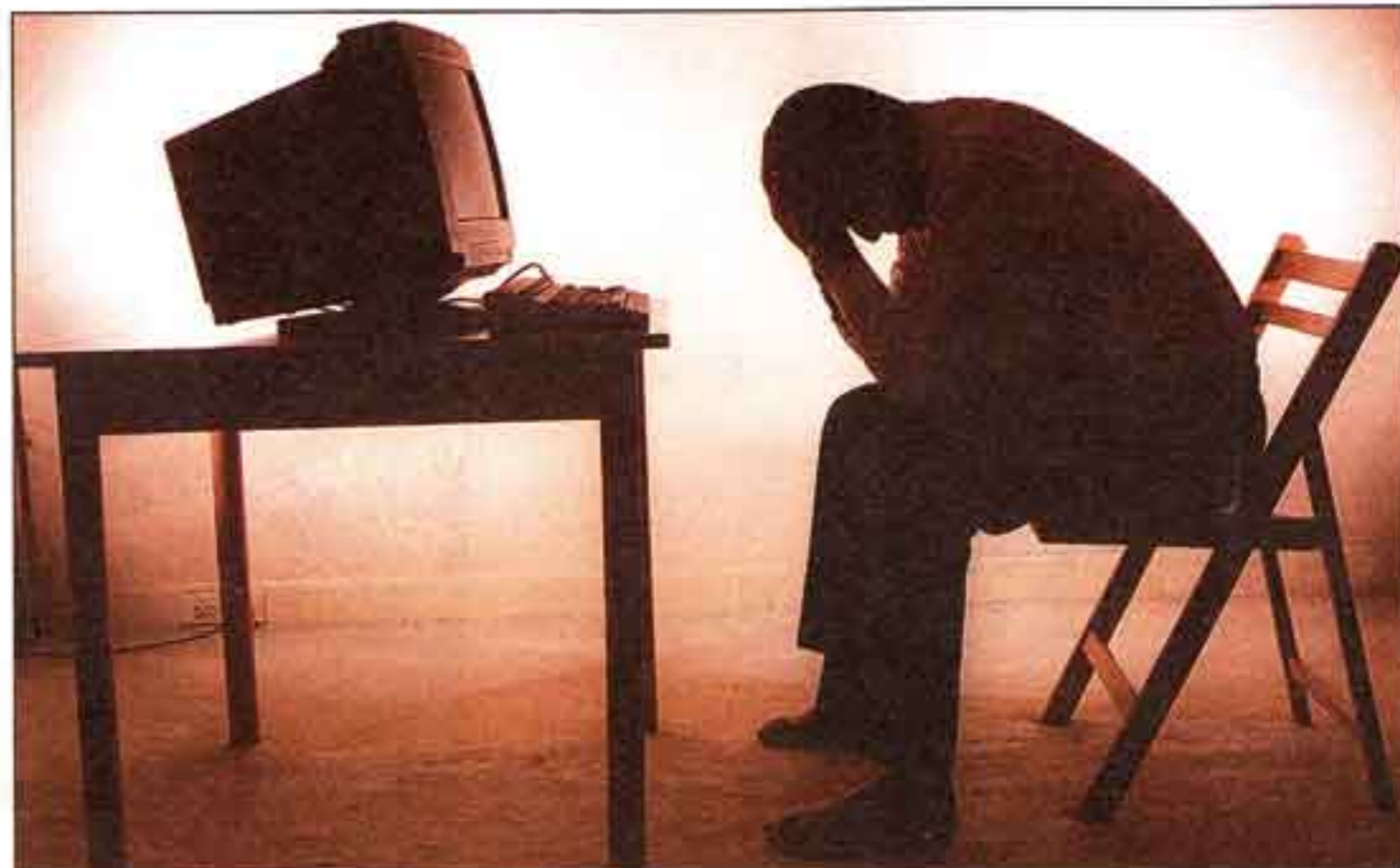
"You can teach people to know themselves better, but on the management side there has to be the

ability to recognise employees' strengths. I think the greatest causes of stress in the white collar workplace are information overload, inability to manage time effectively and a lack of life skills."

Global competition means today's corporations are leaner — and perhaps meaner to the employees that remain. Business coaches say that in the information economy it's the top professionals — notably in law and accountancy firms, because of time billing practices — who are particularly at risk of stress. With no clear working hours, the high earning guns are expected to do whatever they are asked or get out.

According to figures from the Australian Safety and Compensation Council (the former National Occupational Health & Safety Commission), workers' compensation mental stress claims rose 70 per cent from 1997 to 2003, the latest year for which trend data was available. Overall workers' compensation claims dropped 15 per cent over the same period.

Stress costs a lot. The average size



of a mental stress claim in 2003 was \$12,400 compared with the median of all claims of \$5100, partly because the average time lost was 9.4 weeks, compared with the median of four weeks.

This year's Victorian WorkCover Authority report, called *Stressing the Point* says: "Left unchecked the continued growth of stress will hamper VWA's capacity to provide a benefits regime that responds to the changing nature of workers' claims and put upward pressure on premium costs as more money is required to administer the claims in the system."

In 2004, the authority commissioned the University of South Australia to conduct stress management workshops in two Victorian public service workplaces, the departments of Education and Training, and the then Human Services.

At the beginning of the study

'We would coach some of the individuals in each group to effect change.'

about a third of workers in each department reported feeling stressed at work, three times the Australian average.

Workers and local managers formed groups to identify conditions that created stress, and formulated action plans to address the situations. In the education department the plans focused on conflict resolution processes; in human services the issues were lack of back up for when staff were sick, and improving work systems. Implementation of the action plans was supported by management, and workers reported drops in stress levels after the changes.

The findings bear out what Margaret Stolmack, of a Brisbane-based consultancy called The Stolmack Group, also believes is a big part of the solution to workplace stress. "I think encouraging rigorous debate is important," she says.

"I go into an organisation and identify what I call pivotal groups. They're the people who are the most powerful in an organisation. One of the groups is likely to be the sales team. We organise a meeting of each group to think through the problems in the organisation. Then we would coach some of the individuals in each group to effect cultural change."

In fact, sales people often suffer the most from the hard driving cultures they help to create. "I think it's pretty well accepted that extroverts feel more stress," Stolmack says. Introverted people, called "inward locus of control" in counselling industry jargon, may be perfectionists, she says, but they're living up to their own expectations, not other people's.

Companies are inching towards creating more collaborative work cultures, but in the meantime what can today's typical overworked professional do to cope?

James Holden, of consultancy Leadership Revolution, describes the unwritten rules that govern work norms as "the frame" and he encourages graduates from his executive coaching courses to "call the behaviour" in order to modify, for example, workload expectations, or practices such as regularly holding after hours meetings that a parent can't attend.

>> Damiano says individuals need to acquire new skills to do this. "One of those skills is knowing how to describe your emotional reactions to yourself, and having the words to

Just relax

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■ Top professionals such as lawyers and accountants are particularly at risk of stress.

express what you want in a planning meeting," she says. "We also recommend breathing exercises which calm the body down and give the brain time to readjust."

"I think self-observation works really well," Stolmack says. "I encourage people to keep a diary and reflect on how they've behaved. Perhaps I'll never like that person, but how can I put my prejudices aside?"

When it comes to managing your workload, the same sort of approach applies, she says. Ask yourself what you wanted to accomplish, why you didn't accomplish it, what excuses you made to yourself, what the limitations are on you and what actions you'll take.

In perhaps the most practical tip of all, the Gioventu naturopathy clinic says that workers who can leave work early enough to go to bed a few hours before midnight have the best chance of mental resilience. Oh, and oatmeal is a great calmativ, so porridge for breakfast is a very good way to reduce stress levels, Gioventu says.

HIGH ANXIETY

Number of cases of absenteeism due to stress

