

Emotional management at the heart of tackling stress

Emotional management training is critical to dealing with the pressures of everyday working life, according to a specialist in personal and organisational development.

The average length of stress leave in Australia is more than 16 weeks and Diana Killen from Macquarie Institute Pty Ltd (HeartMath Australia) told *Occupational Health and Safety Bulletin* the stress claims were just the tip of the iceberg.

“We’re a very stressed society and most of the stress is under the radar, so people are not conscious of the fact their bodies and their minds are being pressured.

“The stress comes from factors like deadlines, continually hurrying or people who trigger an emotional response,” Ms Killen said.

“We’re a very brain-based culture and we think the brain is the master computer that sends signals to the rest of our body.

Emotional response

“Modern science, neurocardiology in particular, shows there are more signals sent from the heart to the brain than the other way round.

“The heart immediately responds to our emotional state and our emotional response doesn’t always go the long route through the thinking part of the brain.

“Often, it’s a very instinctive, knee-jerk response. Our heart

rhythm or heart rate variability becomes quite chaotic and that sends signals to various centres in the brain affecting our nervous system, our emotional system and our perception of what’s happening in the world.

“And importantly for business, the response affects the higher perceptual centres of the brain, so we don’t think as clearly. That’s why really smart people sometimes do uncharacteristic things.”

Ms Killen said dealing with stress involved more than taking a break because many employees suffered high doses of stress.

A US study showed the immune system could take up to six hours to return to normal after a five-minute burst of anger.

“Until recently, it was thought that it was okay to put up with ‘normal stress’ as long as you got some rest when you needed it and took a holiday once in a while.

“The problem is though, when under stress, we don’t make good decisions and may not be able to tell we need a break.”

Ms Killen said many people believed technology would solve all our problems in the workplace, but she emphasised the next frontier was the development of the individual’s potential.

“Only the individual can

control his or her emotional response. When we learn the skills to be able to shift our emotional response, we shift our heart rhythm and we shift our whole physiology, including the way our minds think.

Business sense

“So from a business strategy, teaching employees these skills makes a lot of sense because it improves their quality of life and

their working ability.”

Ms Killen said employees could learn emotional management techniques through a program called HeartMath – a program that had 13 years of research behind it. Modulation of heart rhythms was central to the program.

Ms Killen said overcoming stress was a two-way street.

“The organisation’s culture has a big impact on how employees work, on their fulfilment and their performance.

“Constructive, effective cultures where people are taken care of, appreciated and given good working conditions will be more effective than cultures that treat employees simply as human resources to be chewed up and replaced when necessary.”

For details on the HeartMath program visit

www.macquarieinstitute.com.au.



Diana Killen of the Macquarie Institute.