

MANAGING STRESS IN THE WORKPLACE

2006

A research report by OPP®



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Introduction

Stress in the workplace has been widely recognised as a significant business concern. Existing research has highlighted the negative impact it can have on the economy through symptoms such as increased employee absence and attrition rates and poorer individual and organisational performance.

OPP® recognises that the key to preventing such results is to manage stress effectively and, where possible, to prevent it occurring in the first place. This research was therefore conducted to determine how stress is currently being managed and what level of support exists within organisations for work-related stress. It was conducted entirely with line managers to find out about their experiences as a manager. They were asked about the tools and approaches they use and how well equipped they feel to manage stress among their direct reports. The research also asked about the level of support provided by organisations.

For this research OPP used the HSE definition of stress as “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them”.

Key findings

The results were positive. Although stress is still recognised as a significant issue, many respondents feel it is less so than a year ago. However, the key learning point was in relation to how equipped line managers feel to manage the stress of their direct reports. Line managers are more likely than HR to hold this responsibility, but the majority said that they would like more training and development in this area to do so effectively. They pointed to understanding the individual differences in how employees become stressed and deal with that stress as the main area they would like to improve in.

OPP Research Panel

OPP is committed to carrying out research into important HR issues and how these relate to personality. OPP Research Panel members have the opportunity to contribute to research and receive regular updates on research findings. They also provide details of their Myers-Briggs Type Indicator® (MBTI®) type and, where known, their other personality profiles, which are then analysed against the results.

Members of the Research Panel took part in the stress research and a selection of the results is included here.

To find out more about the OPP Research Panel or to become a member, please visit the OPP website at www.opp.eu.com and follow the Research Panel link from the homepage.

Methodology

This research was conducted on behalf of OPP by Explorandum, an independent market research company. 1,165 line managers completed an online questionnaire.

Respondents came from a variety of industry sectors, with 192 from the financial services sector. They represented all sizes of organisation and were based throughout the UK.

The results

Scale of the problem

- The findings show that stress in the workplace is still a significant issue: 25% of respondents say they often feel stressed at work and a further 51% of respondents say that they are sometimes stressed.

MBTI Finding *People with a Feeling preference tend to feel stressed at work more often than those with a preference for Thinking and those with an NF preference are significantly more stressed than those with ST or NT preferences*

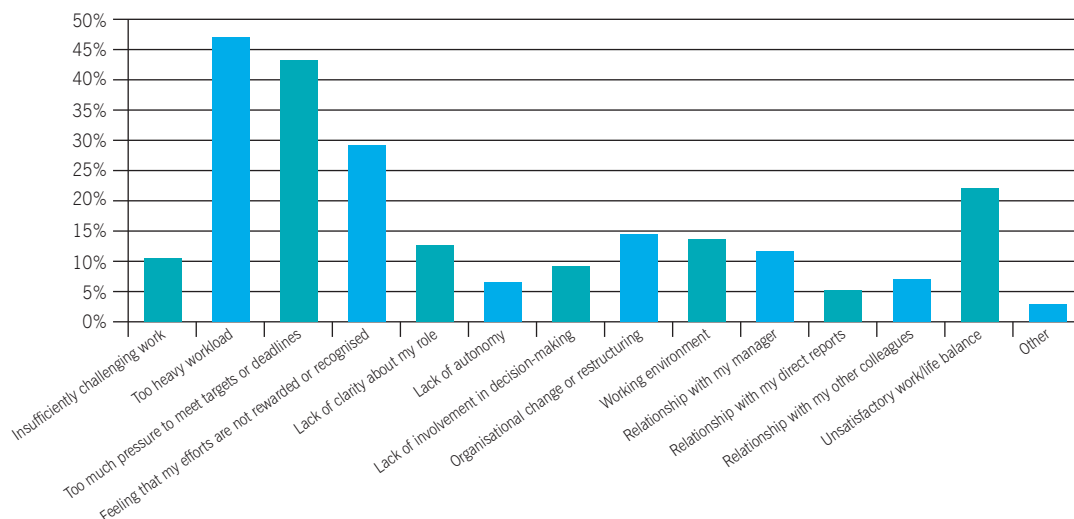
16PF Finding *People who feel stressed at work more often are more Abstracted, Anxious and Private, and less Emotionally Stable or Perfectionist*

- 33% of respondents say that they are more stressed than they were a year ago
 - This rises to 40% in the public sector

Causes of stress

- The key causes of stress are cited as:
 - An overly heavy workload (47%)
 - Too much pressure to meet targets or deadlines (43%)
 - People appear to be able to manage this better as time goes on – only 26% of people who have been with their company for more than a year cite this as a cause of stress
- Other significant causes of stress are:
 - Feeling that efforts are not recognised (29%)
 - Having an unsatisfactory work-life balance (22%)
- Each of these is also cited by 50% of the managers as being amongst the most common causes of stress for their direct reports
- These same trends are reflected in the finance sector, but to a greater extent
 - The amount of people stressed by an overly heavy workload rises to 57% and 50% are stressed by pressure to meet targets and deadlines

What do you find most stressful at work?



**MBTI
Finding**

People with a Thinking preference are more likely than people with a Feeling preference to cite their causes of stress as an insufficiently challenging workload or a lack of autonomy/involvement in decision making

**16PF
Finding**

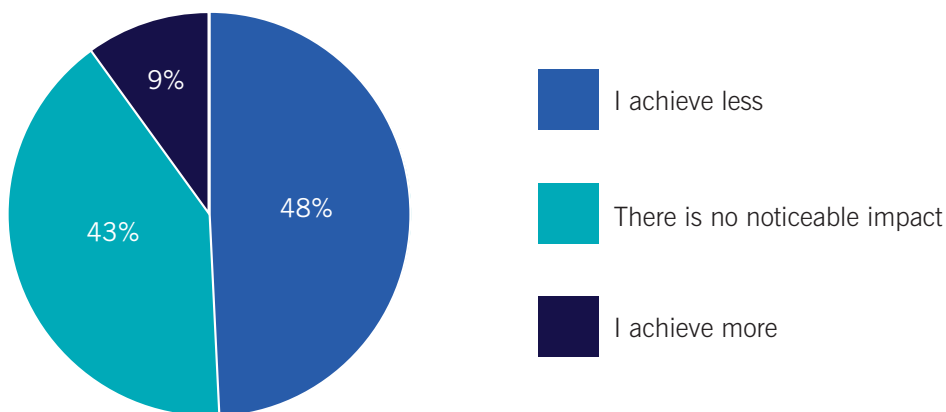
People who found pressure to meet targets or deadlines most stressful tend to be high scorers on Extraversion

Impact of stress

Respondents were asked whether they achieve more, less, or the same at work when they are stressed. Their answers highlight the need to prioritise managing stress in the workplace:

- 47% of respondents say that they achieve less
 - This increases to 55% for people working in organisations with more than 5000 employees and to 56% for the finance sector
- However, 9% of respondents say that they achieve more. This suggests that, if managed well, stress can be a motivator
 - Younger respondents are more likely to respond in this way – 16% of 16-24 year old respondents said they achieve more when stressed
- Female respondents appear to be slightly better at managing stress than their male counterparts
 - Whereas 50% of males achieve less when stressed, this decreases to 42% for females
- The impact also appears to relate to the amount of time people have been with an organisation
 - Achieving less when stressed increases from 35% for people who have been with the organisation for less than a year to 53% for those who have been there for six to ten years and 48% for those who have been there for ten years or more

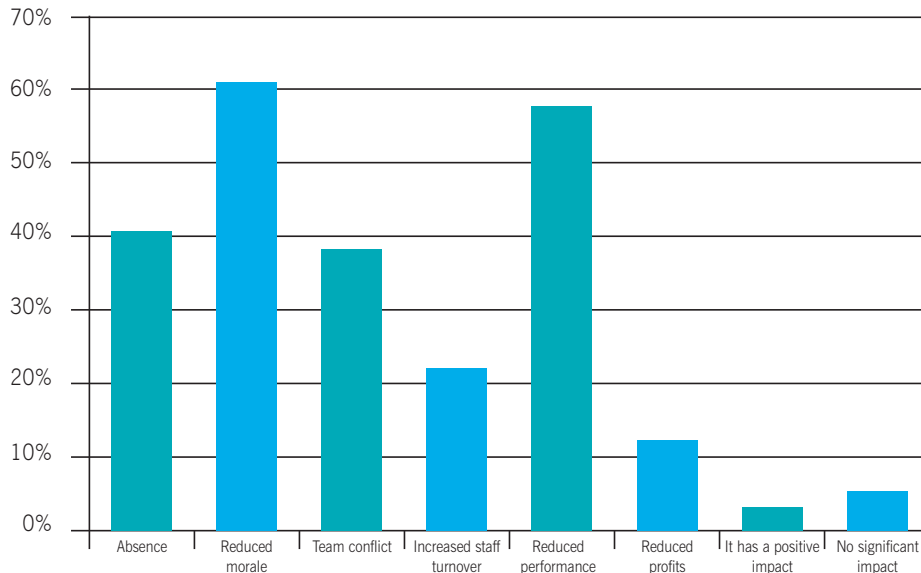
What is the impact of stress on your work performance?



- The managers report that the most significant impacts of stress for their direct reports are:
 - Reduced morale (61%)
 - Reduced performance (58%)
- Other impacts are:
 - Absence (40%)
 - Team conflict (38%)
 - Increased employee turnover (22%)

- 88% of the managers believe that the performance of their direct reports suffers when they are stressed, and 33% believe this strongly.

What are the most significant impacts of stress among your direct reports?



Coping with stress

- Almost half the respondents (42%) feel unable to prevent repeated stress from the same cause
- This suggests that much of the stress that occurs could be prevented if organisations become more effective at stress management
- People in sales & marketing and finance roles feel more able to prevent this repeated stress (61% and 62% respectively)

MBTI Finding *People with a Judging preference are more likely than those with a Perceiving preference to feel able to prevent this repeated stress*

- People are taking a proactive approach to managing their stress, aiming to think through what has caused the stress and find potential solutions. They prioritise discussing the stress followed by planning solutions and delegating
- Encouragingly, people are unlikely to use avoidance techniques to manage their stress
 - Avoiding tasks, taking time off sick or taking holiday are the least used stress management methods
- There are some gender differences
 - Males are twice as likely as females to ignore stress and avoid tasks
 - Females are more likely to discuss their stress and to spend time planning
- The older the line manager, the more likely they are to develop solutions with their colleagues

How do you manage your own stress at work?	
I think through possible solutions	55%
I spend more time planning tasks, projects and activities	36%
I take time out to myself	30%
I discuss the stressful situation with my friends or family	29%
I delegate more	28%
I discuss the stressful situation with my colleagues	22%
I discuss the stressful situation with my manager	21%
I develop solutions with my colleagues	19%
I throw myself into leisure activities to take my mind off the stress at work	18%
I develop solutions with my manager	16%
I ignore it	15%
I develop solutions with my friends or family	13%
I avoid tasks	9%
I take more holiday time	6%
I take more time off sick	5%

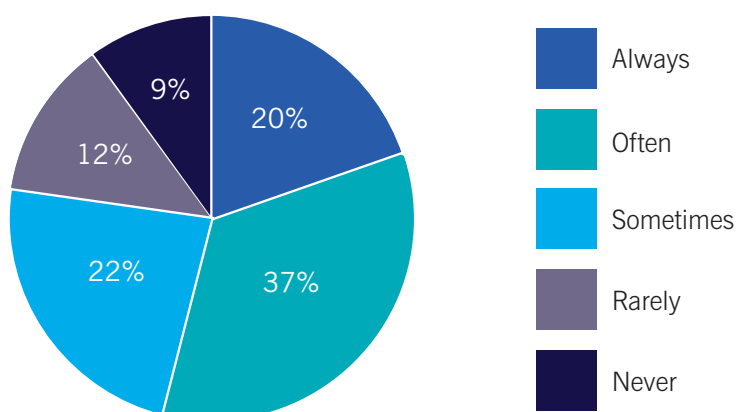
MBTI Finding *People with a preference for Introversion are more likely than those with a preference for Extraversion to manage their stress by ignoring it*

16PF Finding *People managing stress by avoidance tend to have higher scores on Liveliness than those who don't use that technique*

Organisational support

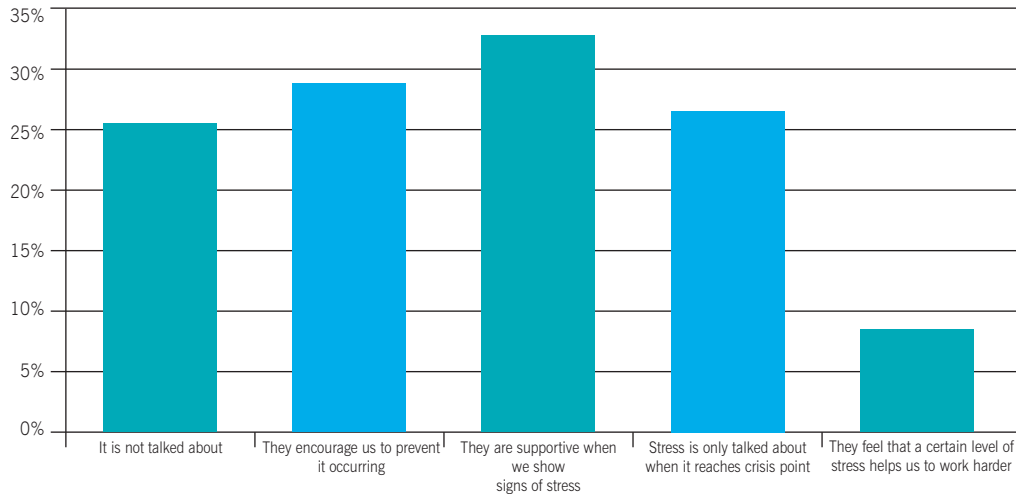
- Responses showed that organisations could do more to help employees feel supported
 - Only 20% of respondents say that they are often given support when they are stressed and only 9% feel this is always the case
 - A third of respondents feel that the support they receive from their organisation is rarely or never adequate

Do you feel the support you receive from your organisation is adequate?



- In the public sector, only 5% of respondents feel that they always receive adequate support and 41% feel that they rarely or never do
- A quarter of respondents say that their company ignores stress
- 27% say that stress has to reach crisis point before it is acknowledged
- 29% of respondents say that their organisations try to prevent stress occurring
 - This rises to 36% in the financial services sector
- A third of respondents' organisations are supportive when stress does occur

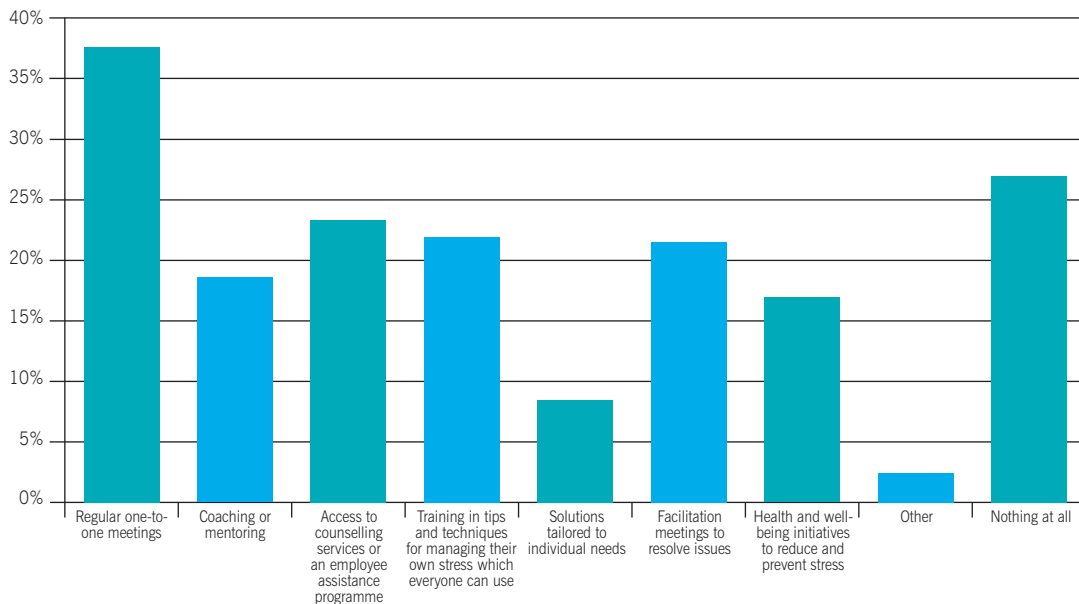
What is your organisation's general attitude to stress?



Stress management methods

- 27% say that their organisation does not provide any form of stress management support
- The larger the organisation, the more likely it is to provide support
- The most common form of stress management provided by organisations is regular one-to-one meetings with managers - 38% of respondents say their organisation offers these
- The least common method is stress management solutions tailored to individual needs – only 9% of respondents say that these are provided by their organisation

What types of stress management support does your organisation provide?

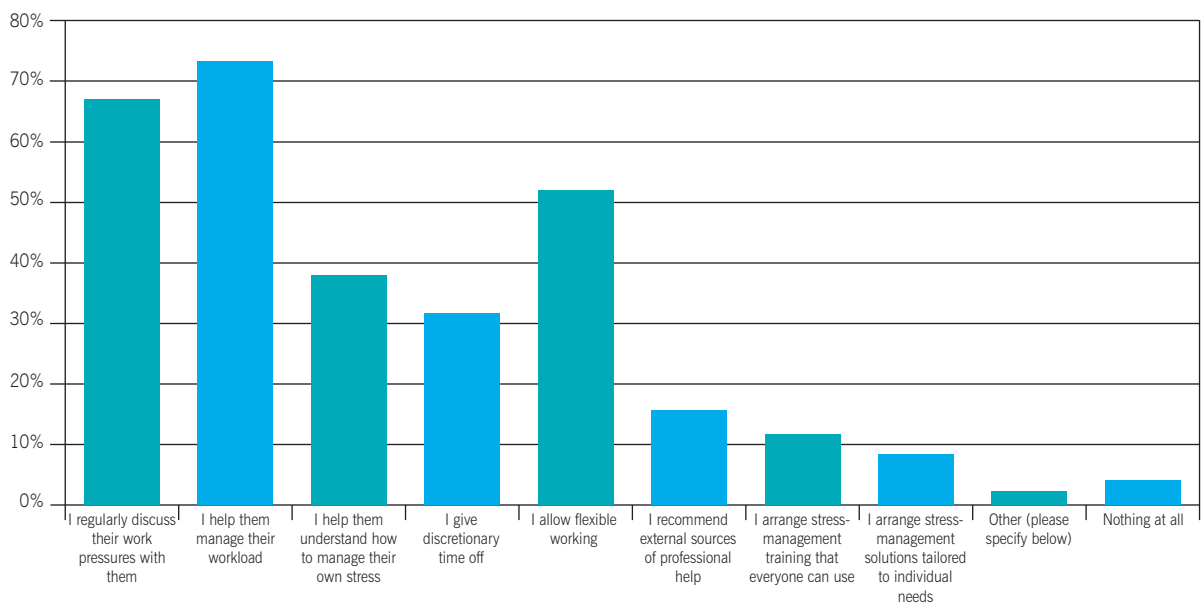


- The results are more encouraging in relation to the methods used by respondents to manage the stress of their direct reports
- The most commonly used methods are those aimed at managing workload (73% use these) and discussing work pressures (used by 67% of respondents)
- Bearing in mind that the most common causes of stress are deadline-related pressure and lack of autonomy, these techniques provide a good match

Managing others' stress

- Managers are actively trying to prevent stress in their direct reports
 - 20% of respondents spend more time doing this than managing it once it has occurred
 - 43% spend equivalent amounts of time on preventing and managing stress
 - However, stress is still occurring and 28% spend more time managing stress than preventing it
- The majority of managers (89%) think they can recognise the signs of stress in their direct reports
- 76% say they talk to their employees about issues that are likely to lead to stress
 - This rises to 88% in the finance sector

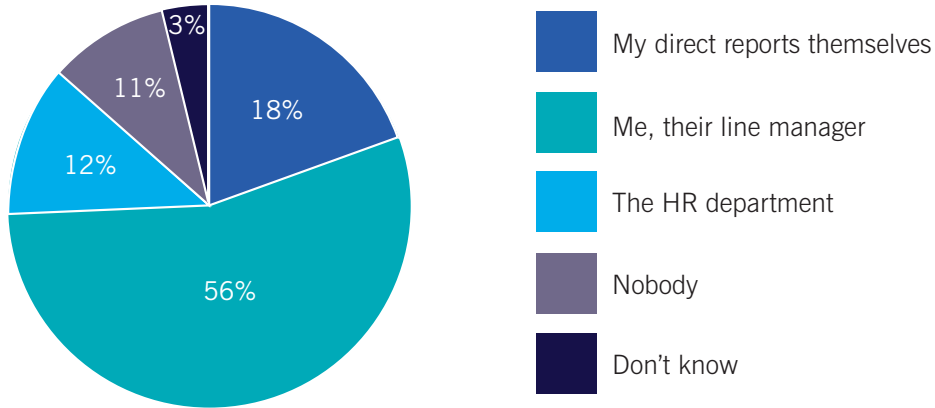
What do you currently do to help your direct reports manage stress?



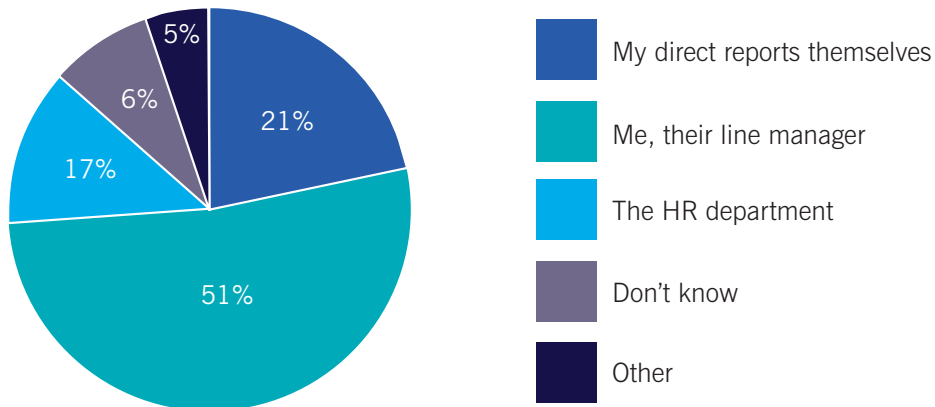
- 88% believe that the performance of their direct reports suffers when they are stressed and 33% strongly believe this
- People are more likely to approach female managers about stress issues
 - 69% of female managers say that their direct reports tell them when they are stressed compared to 57% of male managers
- Line managers are taking responsibility for managing stress among their direct reports
 - 55% say they manage it themselves whereas 12% say it is the responsibility of HR and 18% say the responsibility rests with employees
 - 51% believe that they should be responsible whereas 16% feel it is the responsibility of HR and 21% think employees should be responsible

- Organisations should therefore ensure that they are training their managers to recognise the signs of and manage stress in their direct reports

Who is responsible for managing stress among your direct reports?

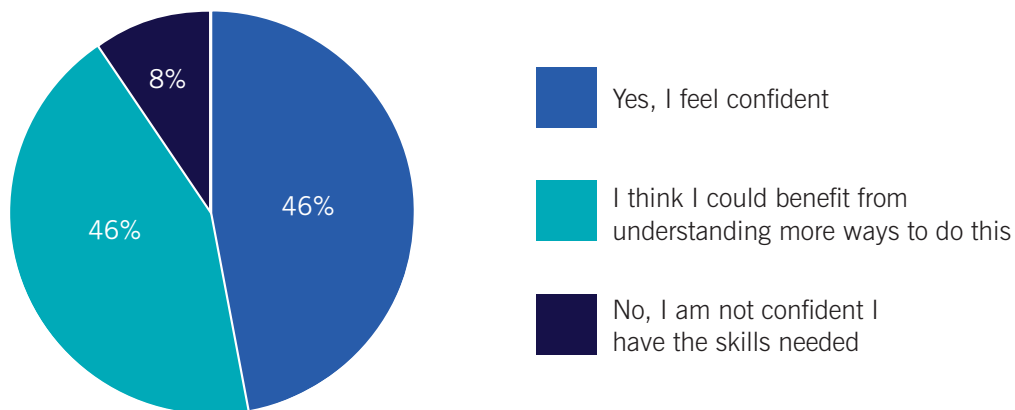


Who do you think should be responsible?



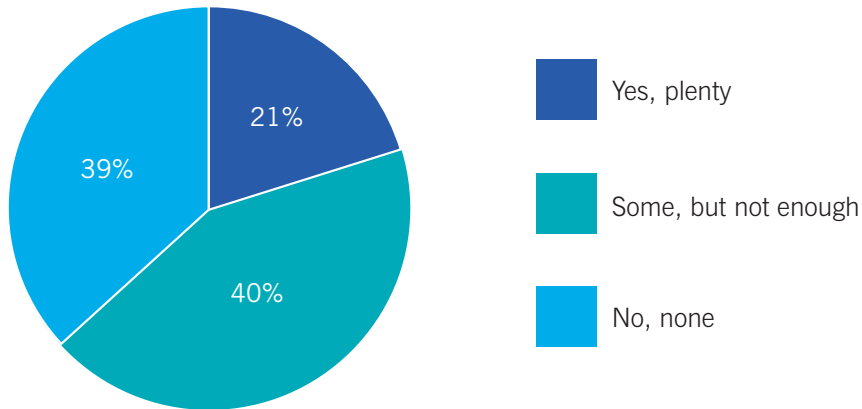
- Almost half the respondents (46%) feel that they would benefit from understanding more ways to help their direct reports manage stress

Do you feel confident you have the right skills to help your direct reports manage their stress?



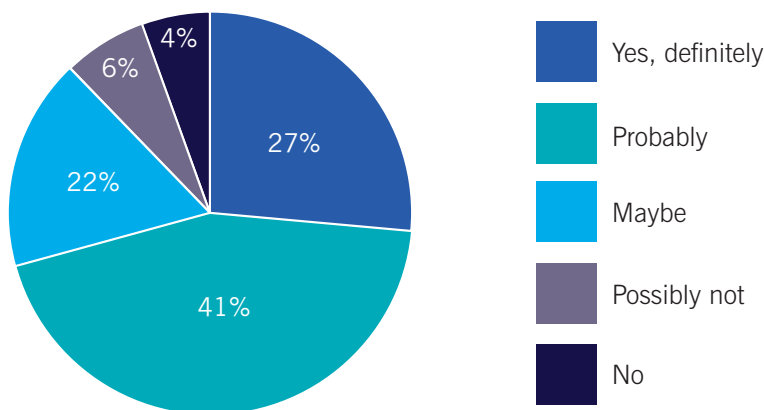
- 39% have never received any guidance in this area and a further 40% feel they haven't received enough
- In fact, only 21% of managers are happy with the amount of guidance they have received

Have you received any guidance on how to manage stress among your direct reports?



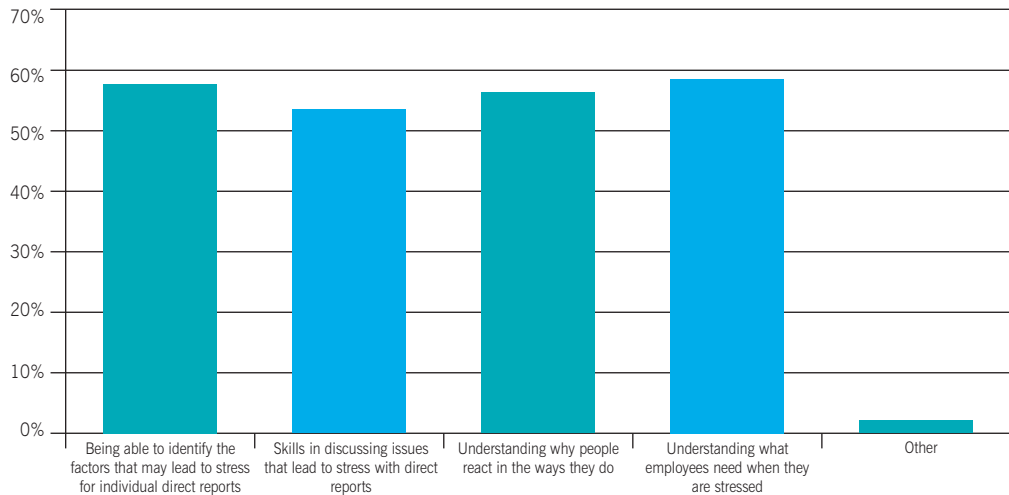
- 68% say they would definitely or probably benefit from training and development in how to manage their direct reports' stress
 - This increases to 76% for people working in the finance sector
 - Only 10% of people said they would possibly or definitely not benefit from this
- The size of team that the managers are responsible before has an impact on how they answered this question
 - The number of people who say they would definitely or probably benefit from help increases from 55% for those in teams of one, to 60% for those in teams of two or three, to 75% for those in teams of six or more

Would you benefit from training or development to help you manage stress among your direct reports?



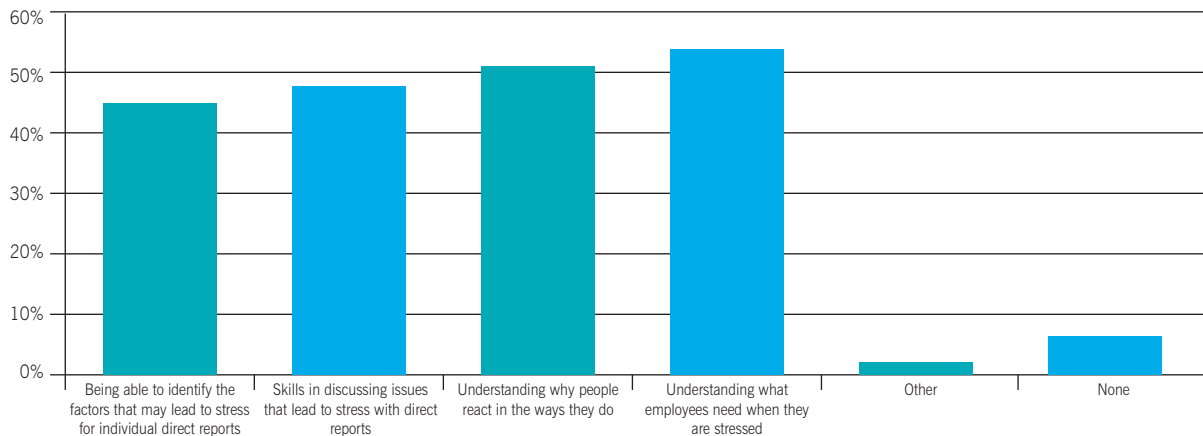
- The managers have identified clear areas that they believe would help them to manage their direct reports' stress:
 - Understanding what employees need when they are stressed (59%)
 - Identifying individual employee's stress triggers (58%)
 - Understanding why people react in the ways they do (56%)
 - Developing skills to discuss issues that lead to stress (54%)

Which skills are or would be most helpful to you in dealing with stress among your direct reports?



- Of these they identified which areas they feel they need to improve in:
 - Understanding what employees need when they are stressed (53%)
 - Understanding why people react in the ways they do (51%)
 - Developing skills to discuss issues that lead to stress (48%)
 - Identifying individual stress triggers (44%)
- Only 6% of managers believe that they already have all the skills they need

Of these, which would you like to improve?



Managing individual differences

- 88% of respondents agree that some of their direct reports are more prone to stress than others, with 36% strongly agreeing
- 85% believe the causes of stress are different for different employees
- 87% say that their direct reports all show their stress in different ways
- This shows the importance of understanding how employees differ and how they are each likely to react to different situations
- Managers agree with this: 90% believe that understanding more about the stress triggers of individual employees would help them to manage their stress better
- These results are more pronounced in the finance industry
 - 96% of these respondents believe that some direct reports are more prone to stress than others
 - 96% believe that the causes of stress are different for different employees
- Relationships with colleagues can have a significant impact on stress in the workplace
 - 84% believe that relationships with others can contribute to stress (33% believe this strongly)

MBTI Finding

People with a Judging preference are more likely to feel this than those with a Perceiving preference

- 90% believe that relationships with others can help manage stress (37% believe this strongly)

Conclusion

This research sends a clear message that organisations need to better equip line managers to manage their teams' stress in order to reduce negative consequences. Although managers are predominantly responsible for managing stress within their teams, the majority feel that they do not have all the skills they need to do so effectively and almost half the respondents have never received any guidance.

Managers are clear about what they want to improve on. The overwhelming majority believe that the causes of stress are different for different employees and that understanding more about individual stress triggers would help them manage stress more effectively. Despite this, stress management methods tailored to individual needs are reported as the least used stress management method. The most reported stress management method is one-to-one meetings with managers. Managers are also discussing with their teams the potential sources of stress and helping them to manage their workload.

Dr Penny Moyle, Head of Research & Product Development at OPP comments: "If managers can understand more about the causes of and reactions to stress for individual employees, they can use their one-to-one meetings to discuss these and how best to provide support. One person's stress is another person's challenge and managers need to understand more about the individual causes of and responses to work stressors so that they can better support team members. With the right support, the negative impact of stress can be significantly buffered."

If line managers have moved from technical management to people management, they may never have received the opportunity to develop these skills. As the findings from the OPP research panel demonstrate, personality assessment is an effective way of achieving this. Tools such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and FIRO-B® personality questionnaires can be used both at an individual and team level to explore working style, possible causes of stress and how team members can work together effectively and support each other. This is crucial as respondents cited relationships with colleagues both as a potential cause of stress and a potential aid to managing stress.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument can be used either alongside these instruments or by itself to identify potential sources of conflict within the team and ways to prevent it occurring. The 16PF® personality questionnaire can be used at the selection stage to match people to roles by mapping personality traits against the key competencies required. Any of these tools can be used as part of wider programmes such as teambuilding or leadership development.

Top tips for preventing stress in the workplace

- Carefully assess different job roles to identify the skills and competencies required
- Use personality assessment as a part of your recruitment strategy to ensure a good match between people and job roles
- Remember that people respond in different ways under pressure
- Give people control over their workload and a high level of autonomy to buffer the negative effects of stress
- Understand your employees' individual needs and responses in times of stress
- Manage your own stress levels
- Use teambuilding to create a supportive work environment that will help people manage the effects of stress.

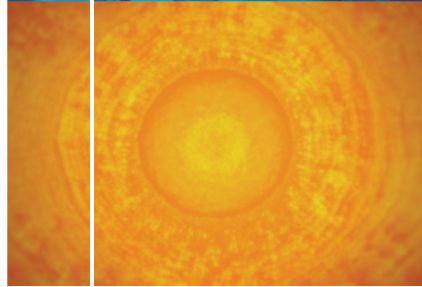
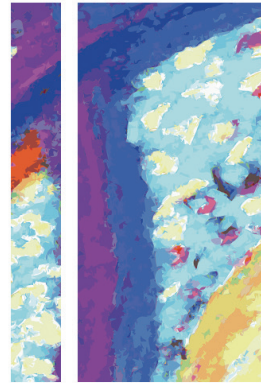
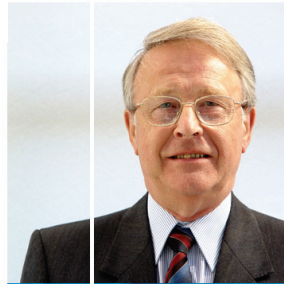
If you would like to discuss further how psychological approaches can be used to prevent or manage stress and to understand how behaviour affects performance, please contact OPP on 01865 404636 or by email at: consult@opp.eu.com. For further information, visit the OPP website at www.opp.eu.com.

About OPP

OPP is one of Europe's largest business psychology consultancies and psychometric test publishers, with over 20 years' experience in using proven and trusted psychological techniques to improve business performance. We help clients to realise their investment in people by improving the effectiveness of their selection, assessment and development processes.

OPP works with clients at individual, team and leadership levels, providing services including qualifying training in our instruments and the design and implementation of bespoke programmes.

OPP's clients include multinational organisations and highly respected business schools throughout Europe. We transfer learning to give clients the skills and confidence to select, develop and retain the right people for their businesses.



www.opp.eu.com

UK Headquarters

Elsfield Hall
15-17 Elsfield Way
Oxford
OX2 8EP
United Kingdom
T: +44 (0)1865 404500
F: +44 (0)1865 310368
E: enquiry@opp.eu.com

OPP Belgium
Pegasuslaan 5
1831 Diegem
Belgium
T: +32 (0)2 709 2919
F: +32 (0)2 709 2222
E: brussels@opp.eu.com

OPP Denmark ApS
Gl. Køge Landevej 22,
byg. F1081, st. tv.
2500 Valby
Danmark
T: +45 3644 1040
F: +45 3644 1043
E: denmark@opp.eu.com

OPP France
34, Boulevard Haussmann
75009 Paris
France
T: +33 (0)1 7271 2522
F: +33 (0)1 7271 2523
E: france@opp.eu.com

OPP Ireland
The National Management
Centre, Clonard
Sandyford Road
Dublin 16, Ireland
T: +353 1 295 6443
M: +353 87 2230 188
E: dublin@opp.eu.com

OPP Nederland
Naritaweg 229
1043 CB Amsterdam
The Netherlands
T: +31 (0)20 586 33 00
F: +31 (0)20 586 33 06
E: amsterdam@opp.eu.com

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