

Preventing stress absence in the workplace - Stresserve®

The scale of the problem

Stress is now the biggest cause of sickness absence in the UK, resulting in 13.4million lost working days each year. The cost of this to employers is huge — in the region of €400 million a year. Furthermore, employees are holding employers accountable for stress-related illnesses in employment tribunals. In fact, there are over 6,400 TUC backed work-related stress cases currently lodged with lawyers. Also, the Health and Safety Executive require employers to demonstrate the measures they are taking to prevent employees from stress-related illness.

Prevention is better than cure

Employers are acutely aware that managing staff back to work following stress-related absence is enormously costly and time consuming. It makes economic sense, therefore, to take steps to help prevent employees from developing stress-related illness. Employers already consider preventative measures to assess whether an employee is at risk from a developing a physical condition, so to extend this strategy to reduce the risk of stress-related absence would be hugely beneficial - both to the employer and employee.

Medical research

Cardiologists know that the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) monitors the health of the body, and encourages internal balance and harmony, as we face the pressures of everyday life (homeodynamics). This System has two main components — one responding to challenge which increases heart rate, the other managing recovery and slowing it down. It is the ability of this System to effectively coordinate these two activities and keep the body in balance, which ultimately determines the individual's state of health. The effectiveness of the Autonomic Nervous System can be analysed through the scientifically proven method of Heart Rate Variability (HRV) measurement. It is therefore possible to assess how well an individual is coping with stress and the risk to their general state of health and wellbeing.



Introducing

Chartis Medical & Rehabilitation Ltd is working in partnership with Harley Street Stress Services to introduce Stresserve®.

Stresserve® is the world's first non-invasive, physiological stress reporting service. Stresserve® assesses how effectively the Autonomic Nervous System is functioning by measuring heart rate variability using a wireless ECG monitor. The result shows how well an individual is coping with stress, providing early warning on issues of wellbeing and guidance on improving lifestyle. It also provides companies with an objective method of motivating staff to improve health and work performance.

With repeat assessments, lifestyle factors, heart rate variability and stress resilience are scored, tracked and charted, so that individuals can see where health improvements are being made and furthermore what needs to be done to achieve excellent levels of personal health.

Does Stresserve® merely reflect an individual's condition at the time of the assessment?

No. Quite simply, the result indicates how the body has been coping with stress for the last 6-8 weeks and how your body will continue to cope for the next 6-8 weeks if current levels of pressure are maintained. Therefore, it is important to remember that any changes in lifestyle or medical intervention received are likely to take a short period of time before improvements are seen.

How was Stresserve® developed?

The science of heart rate variability and its analysis has been the subject of intense research and scientific study for decades. The idea of utilising this knowledge and creating a friendly package for employers is largely down to five years of research and development by Harley Street Group, together with an international team of consulting cardiologists, clinicians, mathematicians, programmers and technology experts. Harley Street Group has conducted observations in Moscow, Prague, Dresden, Sofia, Sydney, Singapore, New York and London. The service has been released in the USA, Asia, Australian and European markets.

What does the assessment involve?

The consultation is extremely simple. An individual's heart rhythm is monitored for a period of two minutes, by a device that is linked to a computer and the Stresserve® assessment system. At the end of the assessment the individual receives an instant on-screen result which indicates how well they have been dealing with pressure, the body's state of balance and the risk of stress-related illness.

A web-based report is then sent to the individual, which expands on the on-screen results. This report is accessed by a PIN so no-one else can view it. Only the person who took the assessment and whoever conducts the assessment will see the results. These results can be used as an early warning signal to let the individual know if the body is not coping well with pressure, or whether their body is physically impaired due to excesses on their part. The web-based report provides a set of recommendations to help individuals improve their lifestyle.

How can Stresserve® assist employers to manage stress in the workplace?

In addition to conducting confidential personal assessments for employees, a report can be provided to employers to form an Illness and Absenteeism Risk Assessment. Data from individual assessments are made anonymous to illustrate a group analysis, for a particular department or location. This provides employers with

valuable information about employee health and a reliable indicator regarding how the employer may need to consider its strategy for managing stress in the workplace. Further assessments can track progress and improvements to employee health, which contribute to the company's ongoing management of stress in the workplace. Organisations that may be considering an Employee Assistance Programme or writing a stress management policy will find this service invaluable.

What clinical and operational standards does the Stresserve® service adhere to?

Stresserve® has been designed to follow the recommendations as laid out in the 1996 report on heart rate variability of the joint task force of European Society of Cardiology and North American Society of Pacing and Electrophysiology. UK doctors and qualified medical professionals who are advisors to the Stresserve® development team are registered with and regulated by the General Medical Council.

In operational terms, Stresserve is operated under the requirements, as stated in law, of the Data Protection Act 2003 and subsequent amendments. Only the person who takes the Stresserve® assessment and the Chartis MR or Harley Street Stress Services staff who conduct the assessment will see the results.

How can Stresserve® be considered a reliable measurement of stress?

Over the last five years, Harley Street Group has conducted over 12, 000 observations relating to the activity of the Autonomic Nervous System, which provides an accurate indicator of how well an individual is coping with stress. Data was collected from a large group of people from five continents but predominantly from the UK.

For information on Chartis Medical & Rehabilitation Ltd services visit www.chartismr.co.uk