

Curbing stress and depression

Studies suggest that workplace stress can lead to burnout and depression. This increases the risk of suicide, especially among senior employees, writes Eugene Yiga

Russian author Leo Tolstoy once wrote: 'It is as if I had been going downhill while I imagined I was going up. And that is really what it was. I was going up in public opinion, but to the same extent, life was ebbing away from me. And now it is all done and there is only death.'

This extract from his 19th-century novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* could just as easily have come from the suicide note of a corporate executive in the modern world.

'Stress can lead to burnout and psychiatric illness, including depression, anxiety, insomnia and substance abuse,' says Dr Frans Korb, a Johannesburg-based psychiatrist specialising in the management of mood disorders.

Stress can also lead to suicide, as was the case when at least 19 people took their lives at France Telecom amidst heavy job cuts in 2008 and 2009. While most of Korb's recent studies considered workplace depression as a whole, he believes that those in high-level positions can attract higher levels of stress. 'Depression can lead to suicide if not managed adequately,' he says.

'An awareness of stress, burnout and depression in the workplace is therefore essential, together with training in stress-management tools and techniques.'

NOT ALL STRESS IS EQUAL

Sometimes the pressure to perform can inspire greater results. But when ongoing stress leaves us feeling that the demands outweigh the practical or emotional resources we have available, the result is psychological or emotional strain.

'Stressful events on their own do not necessarily lead to one attempting suicide,' says counselling psychologist Tamara Zanella. 'However, they can be a contributing factor in negative thinking, low mood, burnout and depression.'

'If left untreated, there is a risk that the individual could suffer from depression, which comes with an increased risk of suicide,' Zanella says.

FEELINGS OF HELPLESSNESS

There are several reasons why someone might consider suicide. Many who have survived an attempt will say that they did not necessarily want to die but felt that there was no hope of anything ever being different. They see taking their own life as the only way to end their suffering and pain.

'Thoughts of suicide can be best understood as a means of transmitting a "message" or as a need for escape,' says clinical psychologist Dr Colinda Linde. She explains that burnout and depression tend to develop over time, which can make their symptoms hard to detect until they are acute. Burnout often slides into depression, which shrinks a person's world. This is when the thought of a

permanent escape becomes real.

'Paradoxically, the person who is seriously planning suicide is often not likely to talk about it or outwardly threaten to take their life,' Dr Linde says. 'In fact, when

Regular catch-ups at the office can help provide hope to team members who feel a little stuck

a depressed person has made a decision to end their pain, they often appear to be quite upbeat. Their thinking is so impaired that they can only focus on how their plan will end their unhappiness, but not on what it will mean for those left behind. Cognitive distortions can make them believe it is for the greater good.'

WHEN IMPULSE TURNS FATAL

If you suspect someone is severely burnt out or depressed, pay attention to any signs of suicidal thinking and planning. For example, if someone withdraws socially, gives away their special possessions, or is clearly in a low or agitated mood for two to four weeks or more, it's important to be watchful. Educating organisations on the signs of depression and burnout is the best first step. HR managers and CEOs cannot be aware of everyone's feelings but

colleagues will be familiar with each other's behaviour and are more likely to notice if there is a sudden change.

'When people work in silos, it's easier for burnout and depression to creep

in unnoticed, or for a crisis to cause implosion due to lack of real or perceived support,' Dr Linde says. 'So regular catch ups are helpful, even during high pressure and it seems like a waste to have a two-minute chat. This provides a sense of hope that there is a person who hears you, and could help when you feel stuck.' 

