Stress and Happiness in the UAE

By: Shaima AlMarzooqi

Workplace stress can quite literally be a killer. The risk of premature death can actually be 43 per cent higher for those who perceive their life to be significantly stressful, according to Health Psychology. While this may seem startling, the statistic explains why my country, the United Arab Emirates, is passionate about happiness. Rather than allow its citizens and residents to feel pressured due to the stressors of life and work, the UAE endeavours to understand and put in place the conditions that best accomplish individual peace and contentment. Avoiding workplace stress entirely is impossible, but we can control the strategies and tactics used to manage stress and improve daily life.

We often perceive happiness as the sensory feeling we get from experiences such as eating good food or receiving a compliment. This is the definition of pleasure. Happiness, while not permanent, is more consistent than pleasure. According to the Cigna 360º Well-Being Survey of 2019, close to 22 per cent of residents in the UAE reported facing unmanageable levels of work-related stress. Research has shown that the main causes of work-related stress are financial concerns, job security, and being over-worked.

According to the same survey, 77 per cent of employees reported feeling their stress as always present, and defined their work culture as "always-on". In other words, they feel they are constantly working because of the never-ending barrage of work-related activities via their phones. This causes employees to work extra hours, creating additional stress from balancing professional and personal life aspects.

A recent World Economic Forum study showed that the UAE is ranked number one globally for the average number of extra hours worked each month – approximately 24 extra hours per month. In order to address this, it is important to understand what drives these numbers, and what can be done to manage the issue. We need to identify the drivers that we can manage, and those that we cannot, otherwise we are simply dealing with the symptoms and not the causes. The issues that we cannot manage concern us the most, as they have the potential to become ingrained in all aspects of our work culture. The long-term impact is clear – without the proper awareness and the appropriate tools to deal with stress, workers could burn out before ever realising they needed to slow down.

Stress is a physical response to any type of demand or challenge and impedes efficiency. An important indicator of an individual's health and well-being is cultivating and ultimately possessing inner peace, as well as feeling satisfied with themselves personally and professionally. When employees carry their work stress beyond the confines of the workplace, they negatively affect their overall quality of life and interpersonal relationships, such as those with family members and loved ones. Rather than spending quality time with those they cherish, they become fixated on work, as they try to assuage real or imagined fears: losing their job, missing out on a raise, not being chosen for a new project. Eventually, work stress causes conflict and exacerbates stress at home, leading to a continuous loop of professional and personal struggle.

At BEACON RED, we conducted our own survey of 511 job-seeking Emirati candidates in early 2020. Our analysis indicated that higher levels of stress were likely to affect one's ability to feel competent and grounded when making emotional decisions. Not only does stress make it difficult to understand our actions, it also hampers the connection with others, and prevents us from living wholesome, healthy, and happy lives. Similarly, high levels of stress inhibit the willingness to consistently improve ourselves and engage in personally relevant and meaningful pursuits. Doing so has been

found to shape a positive attitude and outlook in the workplace – empowering employees with hope and resilience when facing occasional setbacks that may seem unsurmountable and enhance their overall productivity. According to our analysis, people with high stress tolerance are nine times happier than those who are less able to handle stress effectively.

So, how can we best reduce workplace stress to combat the possibility of a disconnected, regressive life?

Stress management, decision making, and self-actualisation skills, which psychologists define as 'your ability to reach your full potential', are not qualities that people are born with. They are not exclusively known, but are rather a learned pattern of feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that can be taught and developed through practice and training.

While many resources exist online that provide tips on coping with workplace stress, there is no magic solution that fits all. Finding solutions for stress and anxiety are part of an individual's journey that require guidance and practice. Nevertheless, there are some industry best practice ideas that may help when we feel bogged down by workplace stress.

First, remember that stress affects everyone. It is important to not take a stressful situation personally, nor blame ourselves for things that are out of our control. Second, stressful events are generally part of everyday life, therefore, when we are stressed at work, it is important to find interludes in life that bring peace or happiness. Keep in mind that negative effects, while sometimes seemingly never-ending, are only temporary – they will end. Setting small, realistic goals is one of the ways to successfully manage stressful events, while accepting that certain circumstances cannot be changed. We can simply alter and mitigate those circumstances that trigger unnecessary stress through identifying and understanding them.

Unhappy employees lead to a demoralised workforce that lacks the emotional strategising and tactical competency to advance the organisation to the next level. Happy employees, however, are more likely to be productive, creative, collaborative, and become better leaders and contributors to an organisation's overall strategic goals and objectives.

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BEACON RED focuses on enhancing national security preparedness throughout the Middle East. Part of the Electronic Warfare & Intelligence cluster within EDGE, an advanced technology group for defence and beyond, its team comprises four distinguished psychologists, including Tamer Kanawati, Luke Musgrove, Melanie Cooper, and Hadil Faqih. As for its People Analytics department, it consists of behavioural profiling experts that provide decision makers with the insights needed to identify, motivate, and influence performance at all levels of an organisation, as well as provide psychological support.