

NHS FORTH VALLEY OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

OHSSIG Funded Stress/Mental Wellbeing Projects Report

Introduction

In 2003, NHS Forth Valley had success with two of the bids it had made for funding for initiatives to improve the mental well-being of staff in the workplace and to reduce stress. These bids were:

- to undertake a Stress Audit to identify the sources of stress within the organisation and to provide solutions
- to deliver and evaluate a programme of stress awareness and coping skills events

Both initiatives were undertaken successfully and have provided useful information and support to the management and staff of NHS Forth Valley. This report details what was achieved with the funding.

Stress Audit

A bid of £25,995 was made and 50% of this was funded by OHSSIG with NHS Forth Valley providing the additional funding. All funds were fully utilised.

Aim of this project

The aim of this project was to provide a high quality process for managing the risk of stress for employees of NHS Forth Valley by identifying the sources of stress in the workplace. A complete risk management service was provided by the independent company Entec, which included consultation with employees, risk identification and assessment, and development of solutions for risk reduction.

Methods

The project consisted of four phases, based on the *Work Positive* - stress risk management approach:

- Establishing a Steering Group and advising on consultation;
- Carrying out a risk assessment based on questionnaire survey utilising a target population of 50% of the workforce, which involved categorising the workforce, tailoring and distributing the risk assessment questionnaire, and analysing the completed questionnaires;
- Facilitating focus groups of employees to generate recommendations for risk reduction for the main sources of pressure identified via the questionnaire analysis;
- Developing an action plan, including recommendations for risk reduction based on the outcomes of the questionnaire analysis and focus group recommendations.

Findings and conclusions

This risk assessment process has highlighted a number of issues. Firstly, that there were a number of positive responses to a range of issues. At least 80% of people reported that:

- They have good relationships with colleagues;

- Their work is not usually mundane or boring;
- They do not regularly work more than 48 hours per week;
- They have clear roles and responsibilities;
- They are mostly or always able to do what is expected;
- They are generally clear about how they contribute to the service;
- They have a good working relationship with their immediate manager;
- There are very few ongoing conflicts;
- They generally feel they are treated fairly.

However, there were a number of negative responses. The main areas of concern are centred round the following issues:

- Staffing levels and cover;
- Equipment and workplace design, particularly where this has a significant impact on service provision and that which has a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of employees (such as manual handling and display screen equipment);
- Bullying and harassment;
- Lack of positive culture / positive feedback on performance;
- Lack of understanding of roles / challenges faced by staff among senior management.

There was no one staff group that stood out as experiencing very high levels of pressure for all the types of stressors identified on the questionnaire; rather there are some hazards that apply to all groups and others that are associated with particular staff groups.

The main sources of pressure had been broadly identified via analysis of the risk assessment questionnaires. However, it was necessary to discuss these issues further with a representative group of employees in order to tease out the detail of the issues and identify methods of risk reduction. Eight priority areas were identified in consultation with the Steering Group, and were followed up. The topics were as follows:

- Staff involvement in decision-making (policy and organisation wide decisions);
- Staff involvement in decision-making at team level;
- Feedback / supportive culture;
- Equipment / workplace design;
- Staffing and cover (general);
- Staffing and cover (Nursing & Midwifery);
- Bullying and harassment;
- Role clarity and understanding.

Recommendations were presented in the form of an action plan for implementation. These were then discussed at a meeting held in partnership with staff representatives and senior manager to discuss and agree and prioritise the way forward. These action were included as part of NHS Forth Valley's Staff Governance Action Plan

A clear system for reporting high demands is required in order to ensure that people can seek corrective action before these result in stress-related ill-health. There was an inconsistency in peoples' perceptions of the existing support provided for those suffering from workplace stress. These issues were including in the organisation's Stress Policy, which was developed around the same time.

Stress Awareness and Coping Skills Training

A bid of £17,832 was made and was fully funded. All funds were utilised in undertaking this project.

Aims of Training

The aims of the training event were to:

- To de-stigmatise the issue of stress within the organisation by providing a programme of training as part of the ongoing training and development events provided by the Trusts.
- To improve the knowledge levels of staff in relation to stress and other related mental health problems
- To provide coping skills and guidance on how to deal with stress at a personal level
- To increase the understanding of the role of the manager in relation to the stress
- To promote the role and function of a modern Occupational Health Service in relation to the support which staff require when working in the modern healthcare environment.

Training Event

Ten Training sessions were provided over a period of six months at Falkirk, Stirling and Larbert. The training was provided by Talking life and consisted of a full day which concentrated on Stress in Healthcare. The training places were available to all NHS Forth Valley staff and members of the wider NHS family who were encouraged to nominate themselves to attend the event.

Method of Invitation

To try to encourage as many people to attend as possible, notification was given through email, staff payslips and through specially designed posters.

Sample Population

A total of 227 people attended the training events. Sadly this did not represent even 50% take up of the spaces available. However of the 227 attendees, 185 (81%) respondents returned their pre course evaluation and 171 (75%) their post course evaluation. This is a high response rate and as such the data returned from the training will give a good indication of effects on whole population.

Method of Evaluation

In order to ascertain what influence the training had on the knowledge and perceptions of the attendees, an intervention study was undertaken. This involved data collection pre and post course, by means of two questionnaires. These were developed and analysis with the assistance of the Clinical Effective Support Team.

Results

The full report and analysis is appended to this document however in summary the main findings were:

Pre Course Key Findings

- 73% of respondents had no or few opportunities to learn about stress prior to going on the training
- 78% of respondents were aware that stress could negatively effect physical well being
- 97% of respondents were aware that stress could negatively effect mental well being
- 86% of respondents felt that they had confidence in identifying stress in themselves.
- 71% of respondents stated they had confidence in identifying stress in others.
- 0% of respondents stated they felt very confident in being able to initiate action to reduce stress, 41% express some confidence or confidence in doing so.
- 34% expressed confidence in knowing how to access support
- 34% of the sample were managers, this group expressed some awareness of their roles in managing workplace stressors. The main issue identified being workload (50%)

Post Course Key Findings

- 100% of the respondents had found the course informative to some extent
- 90% of respondents had become more aware of the effects of stress on physical wellbeing
- 95% of respondents had become more aware of the effects of stress on mental wellbeing
- 86% of respondents expressed greater confidence in identifying stress in themselves
- 63% of respondents expressed greater confidence in initiating action to manage workplace stress
- 58% respondents report being more confident in accessing appropriate support in relation to work related stress
- 81% of respondents were more aware of the role they themselves play in relation to workplace stress
- 61% of respondents had a greater awareness of the role Occupational Health
- The managers within the sample all reported greater confidence in their role. In particular, communication issues (90%), environment (85%) and workload (73%).

Discussion

The excellent response rate, (81% pre course and 75% post course) can provide an assurance that the results from the sample are indicative of the whole study population. The study has highlighted that all respondents found the event informative to some degree. Seventy percent found it to be very informative, 27% informative and the remaining 3% quite informative. There was a zero response given to not informative. This supports the results from the other questions, which appear to show a comprehensive improvement in understanding, awareness and confidence levels

Although the majority of the respondents (73%) had indicated that they had received little or no learning opportunities in relation to stress, there was an understanding that it could cause negative effects in both physical and mental wellbeing. This understanding was stronger with regards to the effect on mental well being (97% as opposed to 78% sometimes, often or always). No respondents were of the opinion that stress never effects physical or mental wellbeing. After the training event this picture has improved, with 95% of respondents indicating that they had increased their level of awareness of the negative effects of stress on both physical and mental health. Although, around 4% had indicated that they were no more aware, this needs to be considered against a background picture of 19% and 25% of the pre event sample indicating a level of knowledge that stress would always negatively effect

wellbeing. Even allowing for the slight decline in post event questionnaire returns (171 post as opposed to 185 pre) the results indicate that the vast majority of staff were able to increase their awareness of the negative effects of stress.

Pre event data indicates that whilst staff appear confident in identifying stress in themselves (only a total of 14% were not very confident or unsure). This confidence reduces when identifying stress in others (total of 29% not very confident or unsure), initiating action to manage work related stress (total of 57% not very confident or unsure), or accessing appropriate support in relation to work related stress (total of 64% not very confident or unsure).

Post course data suggest that the training event has improved this confidence. A total of 91% (much more confident, more confident, and slightly more confident) for identifying stress in themselves, 97% for identifying it in others, 93% for initiating action to manage work related stress and 84% for accessing appropriate support.

Awareness of the roles in relation to managing stress at work has also altered post event. Over 60% of respondents stated they were with much more, or more aware of the roles of the Trust/Manager, Occupational Health and workplace colleagues and 81% of respondents had an increase in awareness of what they should do themselves. This a huge improvement and one which suggests the training event has been successful in meeting the majority of its aims.

From the total group a cohort of around 35% were identified by themselves as being managers. The group reported greater confidence in their managerial role post course. The confidence expressed was particularly high for areas such as communication, environment and workload.

Sadly the uptake of the course could have been better, although ten separate training sessions were provided, over the three sites of Larbert, Falkirk and Stirling only 45% of the available spaces were filled. Anecdotal reasons given for not attending were mainly workload. A wide range of staff attended but very few of them were ancillary staff or senior managers.

The presenter of the course was very charismatic, warm and friendly. Having previously worked in the NHS, he was able to display a breadth of understanding of the culture and demands, which are evident in the organisation. The training sessions were participative and good fun. This played an important part in the success of the courses.

Conclusion

This programme of training was provided to meet certain aims, these were:

- To de-stigmatise the issue of stress within the organisation by providing a programme of training as part of the ongoing training and development events provided by the Trusts.
- To improve the knowledge levels of staff in relation to stress and other related mental health problems
- To provide coping skills and guidance on how to deal with stress at a personal level
- To increase the understanding of the role of the manager in relation to the stress
- To promote the role and function of a modern Occupational Health Service in relation to the support which staff require when working in the modern healthcare environment.

The response to this training event has been very favourable. There was a high rate of response to both the pre and post course questionnaires and given this high rate of return, we can conclude that the views provided were valid for these training sessions.

Some progress has been made with the de-stigmatisation of stress within the workplace. It is hoped that the organisation and staff now view the need to provide stress awareness as part of the ongoing training and development of staff and not as an added extra.

The training course has clearly demonstrated that it has increased the knowledge levels of staff in relation to stress and provided guidance on how to deal with it at a personal level. Managers have also demonstrated a greater understanding of their role. A greater understanding of the role Occupational Health plays has also been demonstrated. We can therefore conclude that the aims of the training event were reached.

Whilst there will always be some possibility that the questionnaires may not have captured all the information, it is clear that the vast majority of staff found these training events to be extremely positive and useful to them. NHS Forth Valley has since recently undertaken a Stress Audit of Staff and launched a Stress at Work Policy. The stress audit highlighted areas such as workload, working environment and health and safety issues as some of the major stressors for our staff. These are areas where the staff, who attended the course, reported a greater understanding of the issues.

The Training Programme, as delivered, certainly appears to have met the needs of the individuals who attended and in hindsight included issues, which have since been flagged up through the Stress Audit, as areas of concern for our staff. As such, it could also be considered that the training courses also mirror the needs of the organisation. The response to these training events was extremely positive and a need exists for the organisation to continue to provide ongoing access to such events. Ongoing monitoring will be conducted through the staff survey in order to compare and contrast the influence the stress training has had.

Outcome

The findings of this study have been reported to the organisation and it is hoped that the necessary funding will be provided to continue to provide this important aspect of staff training and development, which ties into the needs identified in the Stress Audit.