Building Resilience and Improving Performance Through Wellness
Executive summary

The modern workforce needs to be flexible, dynamic and able to cope with the demands placed on them – they need to be resilient if they are expected to thrive.

Employees are often unprepared to deal with the pressures and demands placed upon them and are shown to experience poor levels of stress resistance and high levels of anxiety.

Supporting your workforce to become physically healthier has been shown to dramatically improve employee resilience and productivity as well as overall wellbeing.

- Research finds low resilience in difficult and rapidly changing environments causes poor performance and a greater possibility of long-term absence
- According to multiple studies, high resilience levels are proven to support performance, innovation and productivity
- Programmes which focus on modifiable health behaviours can deliver improved emotional and physical wellbeing – key indicators of resilience
- More physical activity and improved nutrition are the behaviours most likely to positively improve resilience levels and performance
What is resilience?

Why do some people remain calm in the face of adversity, while others seem to fall apart?

People that are able to keep their cool when everything around them is going wrong have what psychologists call ‘resilience’, or an ability to cope with problems and set backs.

Resilient people are able to use their skills and strengths effectively to cope and recover from problems and challenges, whereas those who lack this resilience may instead become overwhelmed by the same experiences.

Resilience is present in individuals who score highly in the following five core resilience indicators as defined by the “resilience scale”.

- A sense of purpose
- Balanced and optimistic view
- Perseverance
- Self-reliance
- Self acceptance

In an extensive study carried out by Gail Wagnild and Heather Young (founders of the “resilience scale”) individuals showing above average resilience were found to have three lifestyle behaviours in common.

- Regular exercise
- Proper nutrition
- Balance of rest and recreation

Whilst it is possible to have strong resilience without the support provided by exercise, nutrition and proper rest – it is extremely difficult.
Building a resilient workforce

Over the next twenty years employees will need to be more adaptable to change, more open to learning new skills and more able to innovate than ever before. They need to be resilient.

An unstable economy paired with ever changing and increasing productivity demands are challenging people both physically and mentally and workers are increasingly found to be suffering with stress and anxiety. A 2013 study by CIPD reported that 42% of employers have seen an increase in stress related absence.

Increasingly, research has found that the best performing companies in the world are going to be those who have the most resilient workforce and ones that are most adaptable to change.

A UK study of 2,224 employees published in the journal of Environmental Health found that workers in the lowest 25 per cent of health in the workforce were on average 23.5 per cent less productive (as measured by the World Health Organisation Health and Work Productivity framework) than those in the top quartile. The 25 per cent who were the least healthy were four times less likely than people in the medium/high health quartiles to meet minimum productivity standards.

If employers want to obtain more from their employees, on a lower budget and in a shorter timeframe – they need a less stressed, more productive and more resilient workforce - and the way to achieve this is to create a healthier workforce.
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Case study: US Air force

The United States Air Force has higher and more urgent requirements for resilience than most – they define resilience as “the ability to withstand, recover and/or grow in the face of stressors and changing demands”.

According to the United States Air Force, physical fitness is the key indicator of resilience levels. When an individual is physically fit they are able to tackle challenges and shake off set backs – the same challenges and set backs that could lead to anxiety, stress and even depression.

The US Air Force understands that by supporting and facilitating people to undertake specific behaviours that create emotional and physical wellbeing, they can ensure they have the energy, confidence and emotional stability to perform in and cope with challenging environments.

Intervening to modify behaviour, thereby encouraging appropriate levels of nutrition and physical activity, has become best practice for increasing resilience.

Why health is important for a resilient workforce

Nutrition and exercise impact on our productivity and capacity to cope because they increase energy levels and our ability to cope with stress. When we exercise and eat well we also experience a heightened sense of confidence, esteem and self worth – all key indicators of strong resilience.

Crucially, exercise and nutrition are measurable, modifiable behaviours with accompanying measurable outcomes and benefits.

So why does regular exercise and good nutrition have such a profound impact upon our capacity to cope with stress and thrive?
Nutrition

A study of 15,000 people in the US and the UK showed that employees with poor nutritional balance reported 21 per cent more stress related absence and 11 per cent less productivity than healthier colleagues.

Why diet and stress are closely related

When our body detects blood sugar, it releases a hormone from the pancreas called insulin. This increased level of insulin in the bloodstream enables energy from glucose to become available to the muscle and liver cells as energy. Insulin being the key which unlocks the cells to allow the glucose in.

If a person eats high glycemic food like refined carbs, they will experience a massive oversupply of this hormone.

Muscles and the liver only need enough glucose to replenish the stores, but an over production of insulin makes all the glucose instantly available.

When glucose is readily available and the liver and muscles have consumed everything they need, fat cells become the unwelcome recipients of the remainder.

With blood glucose expended, your energy and concentration levels fall and you become hungry again. From this we can witness a pattern of short, medium and long problems in relation to resilience, performance and stress.

In the short term, low blood sugar levels can be directly associated with low energy levels and poor concentration which impact upon your immediate capacity to cope, innovate and perform. In the medium term this problem compounds and as fat cells increasingly utilise the excess energy from a poor diet, fat and weight gain ensue. Poor confidence and low self-esteem may follow.

In the long term, chronic low energy levels coupled with blood sugar battles cause overproduction of the hormone adrenaline - this will place significant and unsustainable pressure on the adrenal glands. (cortisol and adrenaline production).

When combined, these factors can result in adrenal exhaustion, chronic stress and even a nervous breakdown.

Unfortunately, more coffee can’t solve these problems but good nutrition can.
Exercise

Physical activity should be at the centre of any wellbeing intervention if your aim is to maximise the resilience of your workforce.

An evolutionary hangover

If you were unfortunate enough to be confronted by a crocodile, you would be grateful to discover your senses sharpen, the blood flow to your muscles increase and your sensitivity to physical pain reduce.

Most of us have heard ‘fight or flight’ – when faced with a physical threat, adrenaline and cortisol are vital hormones that enable us to cope with the stressful environment.

Our ancestors’ response to clear and present danger was a physiological one.

Fast forward to the 21st century and the set of “stressful” circumstances we face are very different: financial worries, excessive workloads, stock market volatility, difficult relationships and accelerating technology.

However, our stress response remains the same – we produce a physiological response to a psychological stressor.

When our ancestors released cortisol and adrenaline in the face of a dangerous predator – they ran, they threw things, they fought and they survived. When we’re faced with a stressful scenario the best we can do is send an email!

Exercise helps us respond better to stressful situations

The more exercise you do, the better your body will become at dealing with physical stresses, decreasing the need to release cortisol.

And here is the rub: this effect is not limited to physical stresses. People who are regularly active show a significantly decreased cortisol response to an emotional crisis when compared to sedentary controls.
Conclusion

The profound impact diet and exercise have on the endocrine system (regulator of hormones) should not be underestimated.

Physical fitness, higher energy levels and an improved cortisol, adrenaline and insulin response enable a higher tolerance of stress and a lower propensity to anxiety.

To increase the resilience, productivity and potential of your workforce - educate, facilitate and motivate healthy behaviours within a measurable framework.

For wellness to become a board room issue, it must not be seen as a soft or fluffy initiative – it must demonstrably impact on the performance, resilience and productivity of every individual you invest in.
References

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