

work as a result of fearing that doing so will make them more vulnerable to redundancy. Indeed, research commissioned this August by HSA found that 76 per cent of HR professionals are anticipating this being a problem.

Richard Halley, head of sales at HSA, says "Employees who are ill should not be coming to work, because they could make wrong decisions or spread germs to colleagues. So employers must be very clear what they want them to do. If, for example, they have a bad cold they should be told to take 24 to 48 hours off and perhaps to do some light work from home."

A further vicious circle is created where employees who are stressed about their finances cut back on eating healthy food and on taking exercise. Research commissioned this August by Friends Provident, for example, finds that 56 per cent of people are buying cheaper food, 15 per cent are cutting spending on fresh fruit and vegetables and 21 per cent have cut back on visiting the gym.

Tal Gilbert, head of research and development at PruHealth, says "People who are saying they are living an unhealthy lifestyle are twice as likely to report feeling stressed, and this is consistent with academic research showing exercise is a very good way of building resilience to stress. Our claims statistics show that if you exercise twice a week or more you are 35 per cent less likely to claim for a psychiatric condition and half as likely to feel stressed."

IFAs should ensure that employers with existing private medical insurance (PMI) and group risk schemes are aware of any facilities available providing wellness advice and tools to assess stress levels. They must also make sure that income protection clients are aware of the importance of notifying insurers as soon as possible about employee health problems.

Legal & General reports that employers that notify it during the fourth to sixth week of an illness or injury can reduce their absence rates by 21 per cent. Similarly, a recent

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sample examined by Aegon UK found that cases tracked after four weeks returned 71 per cent of people back to work within the income protection scheme's deferred period – typically of six months – but when the company received notification later than four weeks this dropped to 41 per cent.

In cases where clients do actually have funds available to invest in combating stress, IFAs can offer debt counselling services for employees, arrange stress audits and stress training for line managers and ensure that PMI includes psychiatric cover. Perhaps most importantly of all, they should ensure that employers have an EAP to provide stress counselling – but even EAPs don't have to involve a direct cost because they are sometimes add-ons to other products.

Colin Micklewright, head of business development for income protection at Canada Life, says: "An EAP is certainly a good start for combating stress. Industry research suggests that it can provide a return on investment of between four and 19 times the spend and that those who have benefited from an EAP intervention can achieve an improvement in their performance at work of around 50 per cent."

Employers with money to spend may also be interested in taking a more proactive approach to combating stress. [EnergiseYou](#), which provides onsite chair massages, workplace assessments and yoga sessions, reports a huge surge of interest from companies with between 20 and 200 employees. 57 per cent of employees who have regularly had its onsite chair massage say it has improved productivity, 71 per cent say it has increased motivation levels and 72 per cent say it has reduced stress levels.

With the economic environment likely to get worse before it gets better, stress will clearly be an increasing problem for the foreseeable future and IFAs should realise that they don't need a degree in psychology to make a positive contribution towards combating it. They should also be aware that being unable to advise on the basics of stress management could create a few sleepless nights of their own if clients decide to switch to advisers who can. ■

ADVISER VIEW

Stress solutions need not cost the earth



Stephen Hackett,
Health & risk benefits
director,
PIFC Consulting

National employee benefit consultancy PIFC Consulting has addressed stress issues with at least a third of its clients during the last two years, with most demand coming from companies with between 250 and 2,500 staff.

It handles everything from risk assessments, staff interviews and health education to the provision of head massages and alcohol and smoking cessation programmes. Nevertheless, many of its key messages about combating stress do not require clients to make any investment.

For example, the five HR consultants in PIFC Consulting's team place great importance on the need for employers to tighten up absence management reporting and to conduct consistent return to work interviews and exit interviews. They also highlight that it is good practice for companies to make their policy on stress transparent and to communicate it on the intranet, in staff handbooks and in induction packs.

Stephen Hackett, health and risk benefits director of PIFC Consulting, says "Don't forget that there are a lot of free facilities out there attached to the group risk products themselves. As well as offering EAPs and online wellness facilities, when a significant number of online forms are completed the main providers will typically give a free report about employee attitudes towards the company's culture. This can identify the stress hotspots and the initiatives necessary to address them."