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University of Brighton Branch Newsletter

***May 2018, Supporting Mental Health Awareness Week
(14th-20th May)***

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Mental Health Awareness Week 2018

This year's focus for mental health week is 'stress', rather apt as our branch has been talking about workplace stress for quite some time now. In our last newsletter, branch secretary Ivan Bonsell wrote:

'As many people will know, we asked, as the trade union half of the Safety and Wellbeing Committee, for the University to conduct a stress survey. As far back as the meeting in May 2017, the Committee agreed that we would conduct such a survey, the minutes stating :

770 Stress Survey

ACTION Director of Health & Safety, Chair and a representative from HR to investigate and plan a stress survey of staff, before consulting with Trade Union representatives on a proposal to take forward.

Over the course of a year, the planned stress survey was scaled down to become part of a planned staff engagement survey and then the staff engagement survey had a handful of questions which alluded to stress, but did not by any recognised standards aim to properly identify it. We were happy to talk about how we could include stress-related questions in the staff survey, but we don't feel as if the original intention to identify, recognise and deal with work-stress has been completed or is likely to be addressed as a result of the staff-engagement survey in its final format.

So, at the Safety and Wellbeing Committee on 15th May, we will be stating our case, again, in favour of the University conducting a stress survey which is designed to at least assess how staff feel about their work and whether they are suffering from, or at risk of suffering from, stress-related health issues.

This is not a case of arguing over the details.

This is a case of the University avoiding the issue of stress by organising a survey which does very little to address it.'

We feel that there certainly are areas at the university where stress levels are high, and the law is clear; employers have a duty to ensure the psychological and physical health and safety at work of their staff, as well as to assess risks to health and safety, including stress-related illness, and implement avoidance and control measures. We will continue to push for proper recognition of workplace stress here at the university.

The university does currently have a [Stress Management Policy](#) and [Stress Management Guidelines](#), we would advise all members to familiarise yourselves with the documents so that you know what you are entitled to.

What is stress?

So what actually is this thing we call stress? In evolutionary terms stress has been of great benefit to humankind, the onset of stress prepares the body for the 'fight or flight' response which helped our cave dwelling ancestors survive predation. Both stress and the 'fight or flight' response are physiological responses to real world stimuli. The body releases hormones such as cortisol, noradrenaline and adrenaline which have a variety of effects, including diverting blood flow from less essential areas, such as the gut, to areas like muscles for running away or fighting. So there we have it, stress is a normal bodily function, so what's the big deal?



Well things have changed a lot since humans used to be hunted by big animals, and the things that trigger a stress response are very different. When you're working hard on meeting a deadline, fighting or fleeing aren't really going to help you. In fact the 'fight or flight' response can hinder you, the diversion of blood flow restricts brain function and can make it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. Stress has side effects too, if you are often in a state of stress your cortisol levels will be higher, which can result in increased blood sugar levels as well as high blood pressure.

What can we do about it?

There are many things we can do to reduce our day to day stress and thankfully, a lot of them are relatively easy.

Maintain a healthy diet - a healthy diet is key to both mental and physical health. Stress can often lead to unhealthy stress eating, if you find yourself doing this then try to swap out unhealthy foods. For example, if you are like me and constantly crave sweet chocolate, make a switch to dark chocolate which can reduce blood pressure and has much less sugar content.

Use breathing exercises - focusing in on your breathing is a brilliant way to let go of any pesky thoughts running through your mind. A steady breathing rate will also calm the body which can reduce the effects of the stress response.

Prioritise good sleep - getting a good night's sleep can work wonders for your mood. If you find yourself struggling to get to sleep at night then try removing any digital screens from your bedroom and make sure lighting is warm rather than blue. You could also try some breathing exercises.

Stay hydrated - dehydration causes tiredness and headaches among other symptoms, both of which make you more prone to stress. The human body consists of 70% water, keep it topped up!

Exercise - This can be as much or as little as you like, exercise causes the release of endorphins which are chemicals in your body which give a positive feeling. Even just a walk around the block can have a positive effect.





A Personal Story

This week is mental health awareness week, something that is becoming more and more important in our society. Last year for mental health awareness week the University signed the '[Time to Change](#)' pledge, pledging to '[change the way we think and act about mental health at work](#)'. Despite being present at the signing of the pledge, and knowing there is support available here, I still felt unable to talk about my own mental health with my colleagues until very recently. The stigma around mental health issues is very real, and can make you feel isolated. I have been fortunate enough to have been in spaces where people have spoken honestly about their experiences of mental health, which was incredibly validating for me and has given me the courage to share my own experience.

For about 10 years I have struggled with depression and anxiety, but it wasn't until 6 years ago I recognised it for what it was, got a diagnosis and started treatment. My treatment consisted of a mixture of counselling and medication and I am still on medication to this day. Personally this is something I have battled with, I never liked the idea of being on medication for my mental health, I thought I should be stronger and not need it. As a result I tried, unsuccessfully, to come off my medication. I felt like I needed to do this because of the message I was getting from society, 'people should be strong and resilient, not weak and reliant on medication'.

It took a while but I have finally come to accept that I need my medication to stabilise my mood, not because I am weak, but because I have a limited amount of serotonin. Thankfully, now that I am taking my medication regularly, I have been pretty stable for the past couple of years.

I have always been very careful who I told about my mental health, I didn't want people to judge me or think of me differently. This fear wasn't unfounded, during my final year at university (in 2014) my supervisor and their colleagues would often express disappointment in how 'weak' today's students are. 4 years on from that I do believe things are changing, and I have enough confidence to share my experiences with you all. But there is still a long way to go to end stigma around mental health, I still believe there are many people out there that will think of me differently after reading this.

I really hope that opening up about my experience will be helpful to some of you, and will go a way towards ending the stigma around mental health here at the university.

Emily Brooks
Branch Equality Rep and Co-ordinator

Resources

If you are in need of any support the University has a free, confidential, 24 hour helpline - 0117 934 2121. For more information click [here](#).

If you are a Unison member you have access to the Unison wellbeing charity [There For You](#).

Other resources:

[Mind: mental health at work](#)

[Time to Change: employee support](#)

[Stress Management Society](#)

[Help for suicidal thoughts](#)



The green ribbon is the international symbol for mental health awareness. By wearing a green ribbon pin badge, you'll be joining the growing movement for good mental health for all.

UNISON Stewards and Branch Officers have a limited supply of green ribbon pin badges, which are free to members while stocks last.

Whilst wearing a green ribbon, UNISON health and safety reps will be demanding that the University takes seriously our demand for an appropriate stress survey, to identify and address the causes of stress, rather than just trying to deal with the effects of it.