

Stress in the workplace is a real problem. Let's deal with it

It's Stress Awareness Week, so Maddyness got in touch with Mridula Pore, CEO of Peppy.

Peppy is combatting stress in the workplace by allowing businesses to provide their employees with healthcare and wellbeing support via smartphone.

Mridula Pore shares her insights on preventative care, the stress of being a CEO, and how busting taboos will always make us all healthier and happier.

[Maddyness] What is the scale of the problem of stress in the workplace?

[Mridula] Right now, it's enormous. There's an incredible amount of uncertainty around all kinds of workplaces right now, whether that's schools, universities, restaurants, airlines, construction, manufacturing facilities, professional services firms... Whatever kind of work you do, your organisation is facing huge challenges.

The stress that people are feeling in their personal lives is also affecting the workplace. We know that lockdowns, job insecurity, financial pressures and health pressures are causing a lot of distress to individuals and families. That

will inevitably impact people when they are at work.

How have workplaces become more accommodating of menopause, fertility, pregnancy – all of which can obviously cause stress – in recent years?

The conversation has certainly opened up around these topics, which can be difficult to talk about. People are more willing to speak about the challenges they, or their loved ones, are facing as they go through these life stages and the impact on them at work.

Giving colleagues the ‘permission to talk’ is the first step to being more accommodating as an employer. It needs to be done actively, with senior leaders being present in the conversation – raising the topic in the first place, sharing their personal stories, or simply stating that they are supportive of colleagues. We’re seeing the momentum for this building across all kinds of workplaces.

How can Peppy help here? And what else needs to change beyond Peppy’s remit?

Peppy provides individuals with the information, support and reassurance they need as they go through these big life stages. Everyone’s situation and journey are different, and our expert practitioners support you to get the best care and make the best decisions for you and your family.

But supporting one individual at a time is not enough for an organisation. There are a lot of taboos around the topics of fertility, having a baby or going through the menopause. It can be very difficult for individuals to speak up, and they might be worried about the consequences. The organisation needs to actively foster a culture that allows people to raise these topics with HR and line managers. They then have to be prepared for people to speak up and have resources and tools available for them. Peppy can be one of these, but it can also be things like flexible working arrangements, additional sets of uniforms if someone is struggling with hot flushes, arrangements to take toilet breaks during a shift, or simply providing access to a window.

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Interview: Mridula Pore, CEO of Peppy Health

Would you say Peppy helps to nip potential workplace mental health crises in the bud? It seems very preventative in its approach.

Yes, it is a very preventative approach. Our aim is to avoid things escalating where we can, or helping people get the support they need, in a timely and convenient way. However, it's important to note that we provide mental wellbeing support, but we do not diagnose or provide therapy. It's important to recognise that there will continue to be a portion of people for whom mental illness is a serious clinical disorder and it's important that they get specialist support.

How can we collectively manage stress and mental health issues in the time of COVID-19?

Simply acknowledging that this is an incredibly stressful time for everyone goes a very long way. These are not normal times and it's throwing everyone's lives in disorder. It can be the chaos of a young couple working in a small flat, or worry about a vulnerable loved one who is in quarantine, or disrupted life events like weddings and funerals. If employers and line managers can acknowledge this, and talk about these topics proactively, that will help a lot of people in the workplace.

As individuals, we can reach out to people, find out what's going on with them, and encourage each other to seek help whenever you need it. This could be having a friend or family member to talk to, using a service like Peppy, talking to a counsellor, or something else. The NHS 'Every Mind Matters' campaign has a lot of free resources, and the Samaritans and other charities are doing incredible work right now.

What do you do to deal with the stress of being a CEO? What unique personal challenges does such a role bring?

I have a young family, which has its own demands, but on the whole, it is a great counterbalance to the stresses of being a co-founder and CEO of Peppy. Reading bedtime stories, hearing the latest playground tale, or simply having a tickle and a giggle helps you to put life in perspective. And now we're all working from home, my family certainly tell me when it's time to take a break from my phone and computer!

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