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**Stress and burnout:
development of preventive measures and
their integration into the Federal Foreign Office's
occupational health management**

2nd International
Wellbeing at Work Conference
2012 Manchester



Organization and Structure of the Counselling Service

- Federal Foreign Office (FO)
 - Directorate-General for Management (DG 1)
 - Medical Service (Div. 106 + regional medical officers)
 - Counselling Service (Div. 106-9)
 - 2 psychiatrists
 - 1.5 clinical psychologists and 0.5 industrial psychologist
 - 3 social workers
 - 1 receptionist



Responsibilities

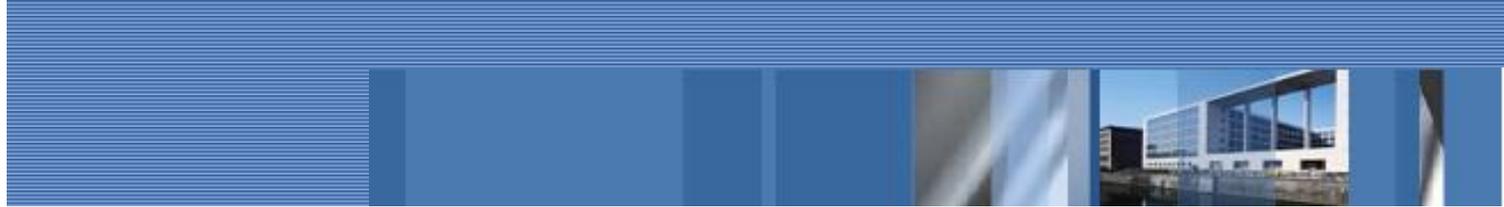
Confidential **counselling** at the request of staff members and/or their families (partners, children)

Coaching (supervisors, teams) and **training** (staff members)

Occupational health tasks: Psycho-social and/or psychiatric evaluation at the Medical Service's request of any staff member showing signs of psychological strain or mental health problems

Short-term **crisis interventions**

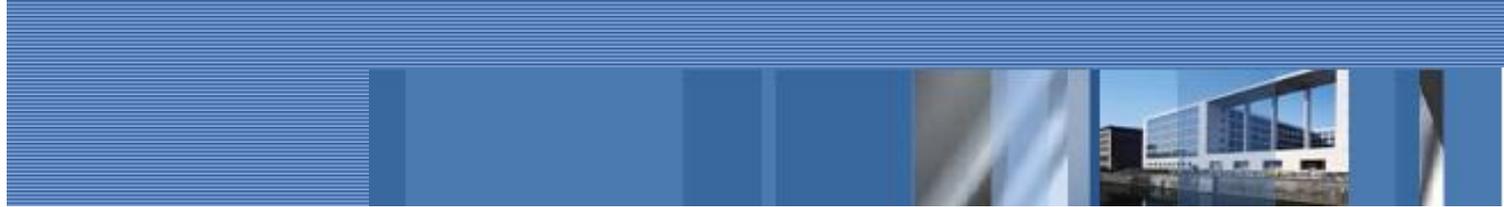
Preventive health care (workshops) and occupational health management, including evaluation of working conditions



2009 qualitative study: Work-Related Stress

We interviewed 70 employees from all age-groups, FO branches and levels with together more than 1300 years of FO experience, including over 780 years abroad.

- “What are the main stress factors in your daily work?”
- “If your job is so stressful, why don’t you resign? What keeps you going, what do you value about your job?”
- “What would help make your job less stressful?”



2009 qualitative study: Work-Related Stress – Results

- “What are the main stress factors in your daily work?”

In Germany:

Time pressures

Extra workload due to holiday/illness, multi-tasking, too tight deadlines

Information deficits

Permanent feeling of being underprepared for job (rotation system!), no effective institutional memory

Management deficits

Lack of appreciation, lack of recognition for staff member's work

Tensions in work environment – work culture – communication within team

Tension between desire for harmony and desire to stand out from colleagues, lack of appreciation by colleagues



2009 qualitative study: Work-Related Stress – Results

- “What are the main stress factors in your daily work?”

Abroad:

- Underpreparedness for posting:** not enough time to get to grips with language – culture – issues to be covered, simultaneous rotation of several colleagues means loss of expertise
- Family situation:** lack of satisfying work for partners, expectations of partners and children
- Shortcomings of supervisor:** management deficits, head office failure to exert effective control over head of mission
- Posting-related specifics:** mismatch between head office expectations (Germany) and scope for realizing them in host country
- No real separation between job and private life:** private life in compound is lived in full public view, “on duty round-the-clock”



2009 qualitative study: Work-Related Stress – Results

“If your job is so stressful, why don’t you resign? What keeps you going, what do you value about your job?”

FO culture: high level of professionalism, feeling of being a select band, own work meaningful and important, “official with James Bond flair”

FO capacity for change: adapts to new trends in society, variety of working time models

Postings abroad: working on international challenges, wide spectrum of issues, expatriation allowance: “It may be tough, but it’s not for ever”

Good management and communication: positive feedback

FO atmosphere and environment: collective humour in face of hardship, team-building rituals, stronger bond/greater mutual help and solidarity among colleagues abroad, sense of belonging to “FO family”, links with colleagues fostered by rotation, interesting international contacts

Job security: good salary, adventure with full risk cover



New ideas implemented 2009 – 2012

1. Pilot project "exercise breaks"/multiplier training
2. Larger choice of in-house health and fitness courses
3. FO sports promotion/participation in corporate running event
4. Stress drop-in consultation hour at 106-9
5. Stress management seminars at 1-AK, esp. "healthy management"
6. FO bicycles
7. Health days





Example

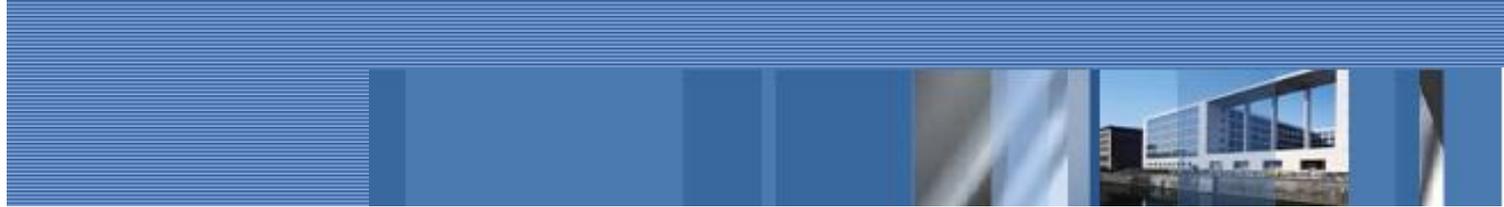
Exercise Breaks Project: Basic data

- > **Participants:** 89 staff members in 5 courses
- > **Requirement:** All participants had to ask permission from supervisor to take part during office hours (proof of motivation)

Course design (three 90-minute sessions)

- ✓ **Week 1:** Introduction – first exercises without equipment, standing or sitting on office chair
- ✓ **Week 2:** Consolidation and multiplier training – additional exercises (with resistance bands etc.), guidance on teaching exercises to interested colleagues
- ✓ **Week 6:** Review and exchange of experience: “What worked well? What made it hard to put what you’ve learned into practice? What can be done about this?”





Design: study on transfer of exercise breaks at workplace

- **Design:** before-after comparison
- **Data collection:** semi-structured telephone interviews some 3 months after final training session
- **Return rate:** 71 of 89 participants interviewed to date
- **Aim of study:**
 - show interest in transfer of course content
 - stimulate (further) transfer
 - analyse reasons for lack of transfer (based on transfer reinforcement model)
 - find out what could be done to encourage across-the-board transfer



Main results of study on transfer

- > Nearly all participants try to put into practice some of what they have learned, but have had little success in passing this on to colleagues
 - approx. 90% take 3-5 minute exercise breaks at least 1x week
 - exercise break frequency varies from “not at all” to 15x week, equivalent to 3 exercise breaks per working day
 - only some 17% occasionally pass on what they have learned
 - participants are more likely to think about taking an exercise break than actually take one. Around 1/3 think about and then take an exercise break.
- > **No perceived change** = 39 interviewees (**55%**)
- > **Positive effects perceived** by 32 interviewees (**45%**)
 - “Less muscle strain and back pain, greater suppleness”
 - “More aware of my limits and when it’s time to take a break”
 - “Have more energy”



Reasons given by participants for lack of transfer

"It's very quiet and relaxed where I work, the only thing that stopped me was that I didn't have any tension or pain reminding me to take an exercise break."

"My laziness, I'm not the sort of person who enjoys taking exercise; and the way things are organized in the office, I can't just take a break."

"I do know I ought to do more sports, but it's good you've called, it's made me do that circling feet exercise for a start."

"The pressure at work and lack of time. I'm really under pressure. My workload gets bigger and bigger and I just don't manage to fit it in."

"Doing the exercises means effort and finding the energy isn't easy. Of course it's good no one makes fun of me now when I do them in the office. I'd have been too embarrassed before."



Project conclusions

- ☑ Participants are conscious that exercise breaks enhance their sense of wellbeing – but seem less conscious of the benefits to their work.
- ☑ A start has been made – first signs of transfer are evident but supervisors are required to promote the benefits for work more clearly.
- ☑ Further efforts are needed to encourage participants to apply what they have learned and act as role models – this requires a higher level of motivation than the initial motivation to participate in the project.
- ☑ External motivation is necessary for continuous exercise
→ newsletter was implemented to provide participants with new exercises and appreciation



Thank you for your attention!

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