

HEALTH HAZARDS OF EXECUTIVES

The term Executive could be assumed to apply to individuals in senior position in line management or similar positions involving decision making and responsibility for the implementation of these decisions. It is thus characteristic of an executive that his work requires mental rather than physical skills. Nevertheless, certain executives for example, works manager, may have a physical role. In these cases, they may also be exposed to the same sort of environmental hazard as the employees on the shop floor.

Health Hazards

Due to the exigencies of his job, an executive obtains insufficient physical exercise. In addition the necessity of business entertaining often leads to a high calorie intake and it is not surprising that many executives are obese. Moreover, because of the stresses of his work, the executive tends to smoke heavily and over-indulge in the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

However, the disadvantage of his way of life are more than counterbalanced by the advantage of his socio-economic status and motivation to work. In the United Kingdom, an average company director has approximately one-third of the sickness absence of the average working man, and similar statistics have been recorded in the U.S.A. In terms of mortality, the advantage is not so good. Studies of the standardised mortality ratio (SMR), which is the number of deaths that occurred in a certain sub-group divided by the number that would have occurred if the sub-group had the same mortality rates as the whole group, have shown

that in the U.S.A., the SMR for managers aged 20-64 years is 99% of the whole population. In the United Kingdom the corresponding figure is nearly 95%.

It has been found that the diseases which are most common among United Kingdom executives are those of over-indulgence such as cirrhosis of the liver related to high alcohol intake or coronary thrombosis, stroke and diabetes related to over-weight, The maniac personality that may lead to great success is also particularly liable to moods of dark despair, which may account for the high suicide rate.

Travelling is a major hazard of executive life and may take its toll in two ways. Firstly, constant exposure to the risk of accident inherent in travel. Secondly, there is the problem of travel fatigue which may be the result of repeated fairly short road journeys, especially where the executive drives himself.

Apart from these major health hazards, many executives suffer from minor illnesses that are often related to the stressful life they lead. Over-work, excessive travelling, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, lack of holidays, problem with finance, labour, raw materials, deliveries, production and sales, all may cause stress and psychosomatic disease. Frustration may arise from slow promotion, lack of opportunities or inadequate job definition. Personal problems may be important. Wives may resent excessive travel or time spent in business entertaining. Many selfmade men, particularly if they marry young, may find that their wives have great difficulty in adjusting to the new social circumstances of their husband's, executive life. All too often, a combination of these factors occurs.

Many symptoms may be related to stress. A study of 343 executives who were considered "stressed" by their examining physician revealed the following prevalence of symptoms : sleep disorders (34% of cases), dyspepsia (23%), fatigue (19%), headache (16%), tenseness irritability (16%), work disturbance (8%), frank psychiatric disease (17%), miscellaneous disorders such as "allergy" diarrhoea, impotence, etc. (22%) Some executives may be good bread earners but poor bed winners. Backache without a detectable local pathology is a common and a noteworthy disease or stress, for the back appears to be the dumping ground of life discontents. Back pain is the price for walking up-right and holding the head high.

Safety Measures

The preventive measures to be taken will be obvious from what has already been said. Executives should also be encouraged to eat and drink only in moderation and some companies in the USA even provide weight - reducing lunches in their staff restaurants. Careful supervision of expense accounts may detect the heavy drinker. Entertainment of clients should be shared round and not always left to one or two people. It is the responsibility of senior management to establish traditions in a company that lead to health and happiness in their employees.

Much of the psychological and physical load on executives should be reduced by more rational planning of the work they are required to do, and this may often require the services of a management consultant to review procedures for reporting and decision taking. In many cases, it will be found that the executive can delegate much of his administrative work and can receive more of his information in digest form so that more time can be devoted to true executive functions.

Travel obligations should be analysed to determine whether the amount of travelling can be better co-ordinated or delegated. Where possible, the use of the self-drive car should be discouraged so that travelling time can be used for work or rest. The amount of overtime worked by the executive should not be allowed to become excessive, and it should be ensured that all executives take at least one substantial holiday per year.

The heavy smoker (20 cigarettes or more a day) has, in terms of life expectancy, cancelled out all the medical advance of the last 30 years as well as having about twice the chance of dying in any one year. The heavy smoker will, on average, suffer twice as much sickness absence as the non-smoker. All possible encouragement should therefore be given, at all levels, to stop people smoking, particularly cigarettes.

Periodical medical examinations are as important for executives as they are for shopfloor workers. Experience in the USA show that people taking part in such a programme have a lower than expected mortality.

The treatment for executive stress, and disease related to it, is not solely the province of the physician. The man himself must have some insight

into the outside situation and his own reaction to it. The company that employs him may help by improving his working conditions, by providing him with an assistant, if necessary, by defining the subject's position and duties more clearly or, in more severe cases, by giving a period of sick leave. A frank discussion between the physician and an interested superior, of course with the patient's consent, may be most helpful.

Stress is a stimulus and provides motivation which encourages us to overcome obstacles. Too much of stress leads to sickness, low level of performance and even premature death. Some people have a high level of tolerance for stress. The time to worry is when you stop worrying. Many executives are notoriously unwilling to admit that they are under stress. Others magnify the pressures they are under. The executive who complians of plurality of symptoms or over-emphatically asserts that "nothing is wrong" should also arouse suspicion.

Diagnosis of executive stress is best handled by a psychiatrically oriented physician with an interest in this field and, preferably, direct knowledge of the work situation concerned. The myth that modern life poses an increased stress and thus there exists a race of executive supermen who are totally immune to stress is a fallacy. Each age provides its own stress. Just as we vary in height, strength, intelligence and complexion, so we differ in our tolerance to stress. In order to reduce psychosomatic illnesses in the industry, more demanding occupations are to be offered to people with a high level of stress tolerance.

Many ambitious businessmen will go to learn in great depth the intricacy of their job and yet fail to study and apply the same on themselves. Excitement may come from embarking on a totally new fresh task but contentment comes from under-taking what we can do well and doing it a little better. Management needs are to be clearly defined and realistic. An executive cannot achieve his life's aim unless he has definite blue print to follow. When Alice asked the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?", the cat quite sensibly replied, 'That depends a good deal on where you want to go'. Executives should clarify their goals and study what causes them stress and recognise the symptoms of stress early. One has to develop a wide range of coping techniques and

to use them as the occasion demands—a sign of true maturity. There is no relation between intelligence and coping ability. Qualities of a leader may be partly inherited but also be painstakingly acquired. Many businessmen suffer and die prematurely because they have failed to apply their business acumen to the task of keeping themselves fit. It is estimated that one in three of Britain directors will not live long enough to collect their pensions.

Many organisations encourage their key executives to keep themselves fit. Physical exercise helps us to cope with stress by reducing the level on anxiety, by building up stamina and provides sociably acceptable form of abreaction. All work and no play makes jack a dull boy. It also makes him rigid, myopic and tense.

Play also helps to bring about a reduction of frustration, tension and stress. It provides opportunities for distraction, diversion, freedom of self-expression and learning. Exercise should be encouraged, particularly in any form that the man enjoys. Many companies have sports grounds, gymnasias or other facilities, and executives should be encouraged to use them by good example. Ideally the relaxed attitude we adopt during moments of play should be allowed to flow into our everyday life.

Laughter is a powerful medicine for people under stress, a safer way of relieving anxiety than taking tranquilizers. The person who belly laughs rarely belly aches. The secret of good health lies in the establishment of proper habits. Diet rich in salt tends to potentiate harmful effects of salt and hence in order to reduce the incidence of high blood pressure it is prudent for executives to limit their salt intake. It is also advisable to take increased quantity of vitamin C. “Variety is the spice of life, too much variety the kiss of death”. For the executives who are fatigued by the monotony of the sameness of the work, a change can be as good as rest. Too much of change could be potentially damaging.

An executive’s job is invariably achievement orientated. He should not, as he frequently does, put up herculean tasks before him, beyond his capacity and tempo, not recognising warning signals and neglecting prudent rules of health and make himself a candidate for the coronary club. An executive should set realistic goals, establish personal targets, and avoid

conflicting goals and whenever possible choose corporate goals (Japanese male has always had lower rate of heart attacks not because of his dietetic habit as believed but because of traditional Japanese way of life which minimises the harmful effects of competition as a group activity rather than lonely personal struggle)

Rigidity should be avoided. Flexible goals are invaluable. One should achieve resting points of contentment in life. Good life exists only when we stop wanting a better one. The desire to enjoy greater prosperity should not prevent us enjoying the prosperity we have already achieved (Cineas, the philosopher once asked Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, What he would do when he had conquered Italy. 'I will conquer Sicily'. 'And after Sicily?' 'Then Africa'. 'And after you have conquered the world?' 'Then I will take my ease and be merry' 'In that case said Cineas, why not take your ease and be merry now').

We should not be deterred by failure. Most of the world's successful people have at one time considered themselves failures. To fail is in itself not a sin. Failure to attempt is the only indictable crime (Donald Norflok)

Hard work is not the killer. Problems generally arise when the work is unsatisfying, frustrating, monotonous and unsuccessful. But undue overwork invariably leads to inefficiency and physical ill health.

Most over-work is selfimposed. Overwork can be avoided by learning to say no, learning to delegate the work and by establishing a system of priority.

Time linked stress can be minimised by refusing to be obsessed with time, working at one's own speed, keeping the schedule flexible providing definite breathing spaces during the day's schedule and cultivating the habit of concentrating.

In today's society it is mainly through work that we can achieve status, identity and personal validation. An executive of modern days is more likely to find his knighthood in the boardroom than on the battlefield. This explains the importance of rat race. Organisation must encourage to establish stable hierarchies. Individuals must strive for a more realistic of

their own abilities and needs. A number of studies have shown that the finest incentive is public praise. Approval raises morale and gains co-operative response. Corporate advertisements should be used not only to plug the firm's products, but also to praise the technical abilities of staff.

Despite several centuries of industrialisation man has still not adapted to the city's crowded clangour. He is far removed from green fields, bird song and natural sunlight, mountains and trees. Occasional return to nature confers a healthy perspective, encourages a spirit of quiet modification, feelings of timelessness and simplifies life. Some people enjoy in going for country walks, others will fish, watch birds, grow orchids or study geology.

We all tend to fear the unknown. Familiarity and experience help to overcome the natural inhibitions. We learn to handle lions, charm snakes, climb steeples or walk on burning coals.

An executive's experimental skills can be developed by pursuing the path of never dodging a crisis or shirking a difficult decision, by reading all about human behaviour, a sense of history and carrying out an honest self assessment.

God made life simple and man has made it complex. Stress, like hunger and thirst is an inescapable part of human life. Wisely handled stress could enrich our life and if it is allowed to run amuck, it will cause endless troubles.

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