



## **Anxiety and Stress in the Workplace... How Serious Is It?**

By: Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA, TRA, ACRA

It was a typical Sunday morning for Philadelphia Eagles Pro Bowl right guard Brandon Brooks. He awoke at 4:00 AM, vomiting uncontrollably. As he had experienced this illness numerous times in the past, Brandon expected that he would improve when he arrived at Lincoln Financial Field a few hours later. However, things were different on the crisp, clear autumn day when the Eagles were to play the Seattle Seahawks in a game with playoff implications.

"It did not go away like it normally does," Brandon told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* after the game. "I woke up and did my routine of morning vomiting. I figured that it would calm down once I got to the stadium. It did, but I felt exhausted. The nausea then came back during the first offensive series, and I had to leave the field. I tried everything that I could to get back in the game for my teammates, but I just was not able to do it. I've had this under control for a couple of years and had a setback today. Make no mistake about it, I am not ashamed or embarrassed by this nor what I go through every day. The only thing that I'm upset about is that when my team needed me, I wasn't able to be out there for them."

The 6' 5", 335-pound Miami University (Ohio) graduate lives each and every day with anxiety. He has missed five games in his NFL career due to his condition. Drafted in the third round by Houston, his illness did not surface until he reached the pro level and intensified when Brandon signed a five-year, \$40 million contract with the Eagles. His perfectionist tendencies seem to

have intensified as he puts in extra effort to justify his lucrative financial contract. After the game, Eagles Coach Doug Peterson said to reporters, "It is something that Brandon deals with each and every day of his life. We are going to continue to support him. We love him."

Like Brandon, are the pressures of your job getting to you? Are you working harder and putting in longer hours to get your job done? If so, this article is for you.

### Stress and Anxiety...defining the difference

Stress was a term coined in the 1930s by Hans Selye, the pioneering Hungarian-Canadian endocrinologist and researcher. His theory -- the General Adaptation Syndrome -- is a three-stage process that describes the physiological changes the body goes through when under stress -- **alarm stage** that provides a burst of energy (fight or flight response); the **resistance stage** in which the body attempts to resist so the body may go back to its normal state, and the **exhaustion stage** whereby the body is no longer equipped to fight the stress. The exhaustion stage is where anxiety and depression come to surface.

Stress is an emotional response to a perceived threat. It generally has an identifiable cause and is a temporary problem caused by external pressures that fade away once the stressor is out of the picture. The main culprits of stress are dealing with difficult people, deadlines, interpersonal relationships, and handling issues/problems that arise. Chronic stress symptoms include headaches, high blood pressure, chest pains, heart palpitations, skin rashes, and loss of sleep.

Anxiety differs from stress as it hangs around after the problem is resolved. It is that awful "on-edge" feeling and nervousness that never seems to go away... a disorienting, overwhelming quality, a sense of being out of control, apprehensive and paralyzed at the same time. Typical symptoms include sweating, trembling, stomach upset, difficulty speaking, intense panic or fear, and constant unwanted thoughts. Having an anxiety disorder is not a sign of weakness. Instead, experts believe that anxiety disorders are caused by a combination of biological and environmental factors.

### The State of Mental Health and Stress in the Workplace

Anxiety has become the number-one mental health issue in America. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIHM), anxiety disorders affect 18.1% of adults and cost a staggering \$42 billion per year, almost one third of the \$148 billion total mental health bill of the United States. Workplace stress has reached epidemic proportions, according to new research conducted by HR.com's HR Research Institute through which 778 human resource professionals were interviewed. Consider the following findings:

- The HR professionals who were surveyed place anxiety disorders, depression, sleep disorders, substance abuse, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as the top five mental health issues most likely to be encountered in their organizations.

- ❑ Only 11% of the respondents stated that their organization were good at helping employees address mental health issues.
- ❑ 82% of HR professionals agree that stress is prevalent in their organization, but just 38% think that their organization is equipped at helping employees address stress.
- ❑ Only 18% of HR professionals agree that their managers are well-trained to recognize employee stress.
- ❑ The HR professionals agree that stress reduces employee engagement, negatively impacts employee performance, and adversely affects their company's brand (39%). The "brand issue" occurs when employees depart an organization due to a poor work experience and tell others.
- ❑ 61% of HR professionals believe that stress levels are high as there is not enough commitment on the part of leadership. However, in defense of corporate leaders, many may not be aware of the magnitude of the issue.
- ❑ Higher-performing organizations are more likely to establish a culture that thinks it's okay for employees to openly discuss stress compared with their lower-performing counterparts.

Today, employees are working harder and putting in longer hours for a variety of reasons including technological connectivity, multitasking, evolving roles and changing skill sets needed to be successful in times of workplace transformation. Over the past 30 years, self-reported levels of stress continue to increase causing a wide array of illnesses, as evidenced by the following:

- ❑ 57% of surveyed employees say that work gets in the way of their health (AHA CEO Round Table Survey)
- ❑ Nearly 75% of workers average less than the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep (The National Sleep Foundation)
- ❑ Close to 50% of employees have gained weight at their current job increasing the risk for poor health and missed workdays (cdc.gov).

### **Tips to Manage Stress and Anxiety in the Workplace**

To effectively manage stress and anxiety in the workplace, it is important to recognize the symptoms and learn coping techniques. If stress and anxiety are interfering with your job performance, something needs to change. While several stressors may be out of your control, below are six tips in designing a personal wellness plan to manage stress and anxiety at work:

**Explore your triggers:** Keep a diary for one week to discover which situations increase your stress levels the most. Record what exactly happened, what thoughts and emotions you had, and how you behaved in the situations. As you explore your triggers, think about how best to deal with them.

**Time Management:** Are you stressed and anxious because you are attempting to do too much? Trying to juggle numerous tasks at once creates stress as it usually takes you longer to complete them. Consider compiling a list of tasks that you need to complete, prioritize them, and then break the big tasks into smaller ones. Wherever possible, complete the unpleasant tasks first so the rest of your day is more relaxing.

**Share with a Trusted Coworker:** Put aside your worry and share your feelings with a trusted colleague. Chances are that they have also experienced workplace stress and can relate. Knowing that a coworker understands and accepts your condition can be comforting, and it may reduce anticipatory anxiety.

**Setting Boundaries:** In today's fast-paced environment, it is easy to fall in the trap of being available 24/7. Also, high achievers like you do not like to say no. That being said, it is imperative that you set boundaries so work is distanced from your personal life. Do not take on additional projects that can be competently handled by other members of your team. And realize that "me time" is a necessary strategy to reduce stress and anxiety.

**Negative thoughts:** When you experience negative thoughts, challenge them with evidence that suggests that those thoughts are inconsistent with your capabilities and competencies. Shift your focus from what your life lacks to the abundance that is already present. Consider a mental gratitude list or a gratitude journal whereby you record things for which you are grateful. Your attitude of gratitude will reduce stress and anxiety. You may also wish to use your support system of family, friends, and colleagues to remind you of your wonderful qualities.

**Nutrition, Sleep, and Exercise:** Research confirms that a healthy diet supported by a good night's sleep and exercise reduces stress and anxiety. There is a link between mental and physical health as evidenced by the release of endorphins that naturally increase mood, thus reducing stress. Healthier habits are often a winning formula in your quest to combat anxiety.

The right level of stress keeps you focused and motivated so your performance stays high. But too much stress can cause you to feel overwhelmed and anxious. You owe it to yourself and those you care about you to recognize and tackle stress and anxiety!

#### About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA, TRA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.