

Using Office Design to Reduce Stress in the Workplace

According to the British Safety Council, there were around 600,000 cases of depression, stress, and anxiety between the period of 2017/2018. When we consider all work-related ill health across the UK, this contributed 44% of all cases. Furthermore, in the same period, stress and depression caused businesses to lose 15.4 million working days. Not only are the cases growing, the average time lost due to these health conditions is up to an average of nearly 26 days per person.

Considering employees spend nearly as much time at work as they do at home, we believe that employers should be doing more to make the office a better environment for all. Fortunately, we've got some brilliant advice for you today!

Why Does Stress Exist?

Before we launch into the tips, what causes stress in the first place? In truth, conditions like stress and depression are unique to the individual. While one person can feel comforted by the monotonous nature of a role, others can become stressed by it. However, there are some common causes including;

- Workload
- Lack of control
- Lack of support
- Financial concerns
- Workplace bullying
- No clear path of progression
- Lack of job security
- Poor communication

Of course, office design isn't going to be the magical solution that removes all of these problems. This being said, there are things you can do with office design to create a positive and open environment. Without further ado, let's look at some ideas that have been proven to work!

Office Design Tips

Lighting and Air Quality

Although you might not think it important, a number of studies in the Harvard Library show the impact of a 'green' office environment on workers. With an improvement in air quality, the health and wellbeing of employees improves.

As well as air quality, lighting also plays an important role. Who wants to work in a dark and dingy office? Especially in the winter, when workers are already arriving in the dark and walking back out into the dark. If the office is dark and hasn't got clean air, your team will feel cooped up and this is likely to lead to stress problems.

What do we mean by lighting? While you could add all sorts of lamps and strip lighting, we recommend getting as much natural light into the building as possible...and this is where office design is useful. Whether you choose floor-to-ceiling windows or glass walls inside the office, take advantage of the sun (you can even reduce the amount you pay in energy bills!). During the winter, even the snowiest of days will have natural light to utilise.

Before even renting an office, consider the office orientation carefully because windows will need to meet certain radiation absorption and thermal ratings. Furthermore, why not introduce a fresh aroma to your office? For example, studies suggest that your staff are more likely to be alert when citrus and peppermint scents are used. Whichever delicious smell you choose, both morale and productivity can improve when the nostrils are filled with pleasant aromas.

Plants

Known as biophilic design, it's becoming more and more common for businesses to integrate plants and other greenery into the office space. Why look through the windows to see nature when it can be brought inside the office? This is the idea behind biophilic design, and it has been known to reduce stress in all employees.

If you have a spare few minutes after finishing this guide, we highly recommend looking at design ideas on Google or Pinterest. While some choose to introduce a few pots around the office, others cover walls in fake grass or have particular plants hanging from the ceiling. If you're lucky enough to have a rooftop space, this is a great way to introduce greenery and allow your team the environment they need to thrive.

As well as improving the office aesthetically, plants also bring a breath of fresh air into a space. As we've already seen, air quality is important and has been linked with brain function. Suddenly, walking to the break room will be like walking through a meadow and a relaxed atmosphere will be harnessed.

Communal Space

Do you currently have employees eating lunch at their desks? If so, you aren't allowing them the break they need from their work. Not only are they eating alone and not talking with others, they're seeing new emails pop up and dreading the afternoon - some will continue to reply to emails, and they don't actually get the break they deserve.

In our experience, people NEED a space to unwind after a rough morning. In fact, it can even be a space to calm down after a stressful meeting or a particularly tough hour. Although you will have heard stories of Google where they provide foosball tables, TVs, table tennis equipment, and more, you can start simple. Don't put the company into debt, start with a few bean bags or comfy seating, some books on a table, a Bluetooth speaker to play music, and a coffee machine/water cooler.

As well as enjoying their lunch breaks in this space and taking a breather, your team will come together. Now, team members are talking problems through and they might get an opinion or a perspective they hadn't seen before. In other cases, a simple lunch break could lead to collaboration or an idea that propels the company forward. For the more relaxed meetings, they could even take place in this communal space.

Another reason we like the idea of a separate breakout space is because you can close it off completely from the rest of the office (if possible!). When a break room has poor acoustics and lots of distractions from the main office, it's hard to relax. If you can't quite separate the office, use soft furniture to absorb the sound and consider playing music too. With music in the background, it provides a talking point for employees and it has also been proven to boost concentration and brain activity.

If your employees can take an hour, forty minutes, or even just five minutes away from the pressure and stress, this can have a huge difference. Over time, your workforce will be happier and healthier.

Open Layout and Collaboration Spaces

Do we really still need emails to communicate and generate ideas with other team members? If you can reduce the physical barriers that prevent colleagues from communicating, the rest will follow. According to GlaxoSmithKline, they moved their employees to an open space with benching and various collaboration spaces. Once the old high-panelled cubicles had been removed, they said that email traffic was immediately cut in half.

Rather than holding back on ideas because they don't want to keep typing, employees can interact face to face. How does this impact stress? Because the American Psychological Association has noted that higher stress and anxiety levels are found in those who rely more on digital tools to communicate with others.

Just because digital communication is easy, this doesn't mean it's right. With an open layout and collaboration spaces, we can reduce stress in the workplace and allow colleagues to connect once more. Even if it's a simple conversation about family, work is suddenly human again and engagement increases.

Artwork

As we know, the modern office has no limits. Therefore, the goal is simply to inspire creativity and motivate a team as much as possible. For us, artwork has two main functions;

- It inspires creativity
- It adds colour to a room

If you want to go one step further, you could even support a local artist and showcase their talent on your walls. By selling these to whoever wants them - staff, employees, cleaners, and whoever else visits - you make money for a local artist and the artwork is always changing and evolving...like the business itself. Even if an employee is doing the same job every single day, the changing environment around them can make it easier to handle.

In addition to artwork, you might also want to consider sculptures or some form of art that your employees create. If you go out on an arts evening as a team and each paint a canvas, these can be installed in the office and they'll forever be reminded of that evening. When offering your team certain outings, it's good to keep a memento from them. Then, when things are getting heated or stressful, they'll see the memento and remember the better times.

Eco-Friendly Materials

Since healthy employees will be happy and productive, we also suggest researching eco-friendly design materials wherever possible. For example, you can now find water-based paint and products that contain no VOC solvents. As long as your building allows, you could even consider bamboo flooring.

If you're renting and can't make any major changes to the office, there's no reason why you can't invest in recycled furniture and other non-toxic products. As well as employees, your customers will also appreciate recycled furniture and it sends a message as to the type of company they've entered.

Rather than sitting all day, we're also learning how beneficial standing can be while working. Therefore, why not consider sit-stand desks? Every so often, they can stand for an hour and this creates a healthier workforce. Not only that, they won't mind walking to talk to a colleague since they're already standing. With improved health and collaboration, stress reduces.

Finally, your kitchen and bathroom can also welcome energy-efficient solutions. With the fixtures and water-saving plumbing in these rooms, you're making a conscious effort to save the planet and your team will appreciate this.

Don't Forget Function

As our final piece of advice, we urge you to remember the function of your business at all times. For example, a consultancy business will need a quiet space to talk with clients and a call centre will still need some form of partitioning. This doesn't mean call centres should give up entirely, they just need to remember their function while introducing changes.

Ultimately, the aim should be to reduce the stress levels of staff by understanding each department's function and how communication/collaboration can be improved. Put yourself in their shoes; would you want to work in a tiny space or an open plan layout where you can communicate with colleagues and feel like a human again?

Communication is Key

With these tips, you have opportunities to show your appreciation for your employees and provide them with the right environment to succeed and stay as stress-free as possible. If you want the transition to be a success, we urge you to communicate. Often, your team will have brilliant suggestions and you'll be able to introduce the changes they REALLY want by understand what causes the most stress in their role!