

It's good to talk:
caring about
mental health



Venson fleet management solutions

Company vehicles are an important asset for supporting core business operations and that's why our contract hire and fleet management solutions are created in response to our clients' needs and are based on our commitment to long term partnership and exceptional customer service.

Testimony to this is our client retention rate of over 95%. Along with exceptional service we ensure our clients receive great value from their fleet by delivering solutions that are based on impartial advice whilst providing tangible financial return. We can do this because we've only ever specialised in managing fleets, so our knowledge and in-depth understanding of the market is the best in this sector and relevant to public, private, not for profit and emergency service organisations.

We also believe in true partnership, working with fleet operators and their drivers to ensure they always receive the most appropriate solution to support their operational and financial needs.

venson

Introduction

State of mind is a critical element to driving safely. But instead of being calm, relaxed and alert many company car and van drivers are stressed – and that can manifest itself in road crashes.

Stress can develop into a mental health problem, which is why the Mental Health Foundation says that “good mental health at work and good management go hand in hand and there is strong evidence that workplaces with high levels of mental wellbeing are more productive”.

But all too often that is not the case with mental health problems the leading cause of absence from work in the UK – around 70 million work days lost annually – at a cost of £35 billion.

The pressure of an increasingly demanding work culture in the UK is one of the biggest contributors to stress among the general population. But other situations that cause stress involve: financial well-being, relationships with partners, children or other family members, moving house, bereavement and the risk of unemployment. Sometimes it might be a series of minor irritations such as feeling undervalued at work or arguing with a family member, according to the Mental Health Foundation.

What is clear, says John Sunderland-Wright, former training director at Performance on Demand, part of the NFE Group, which includes driver risk management business Automotional, employees suffering from stress are 50% more likely to drive dangerously and thus be involved in crashes.

Driving is the most dangerous work activity that most people undertake – more dangerous than working in the construction industry and on a par with mining – according to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), the risk management partner of Venson Automotive Solutions.

What's more, driving contributes to more work-related accidental deaths and serious injuries than all other work activities.

As the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) highlights in its 'Driving at Work: Managing Work-Related Road Safety' guide (INDG382), which is established as the 'how to' authority on the subject: “Effective management of work-related road safety helps reduce risk.” It also highlights that it can result in, not only fewer injuries to drivers but:

- Reduced risk of work-related ill-health
- Reduced stress and improved morale.

The HSE estimates that “more than a quarter of all road traffic crashes may involve somebody who is driving as part of their work”.

Furthermore, police data highlights that annually more than 500 people are killed accounting for almost a third of road deaths, 5,000 seriously injured and almost 40,000 slightly injured in crashes involving employees driving for work.

Employers have a legal duty under health and safety law and road traffic law to manage on-the-road work activities. In the event of a crash involving an employee driving on business, individual directors/managers and the company could be prosecuted for serious management failures and breaching their responsibilities.

This white paper does not outline what they are or the 'how to' practical steps required to ensure compliance – Venson Automotive Solutions' experts can advise on that and there is already a wealth of information and advice in the public domain.

However, as the HSE says in its guide, managing the driver, vehicle and journey are the main areas and obtaining drivers' views in risk assessing work-related driving is important.

Additionally, a key question the HSE asks of employees in compiling a 'safe driver' policy is: “**Are your drivers sufficiently fit and healthy to drive safely and not put themselves and others at risk?**”

FACT:

Employees suffering from stress are 50% more likely to drive dangerously and thus be involved in crashes.

FACT:

Mental health problems are the leading cause of absence from work in the UK – around 70 million work days lost annually – at a cost of £35 billion.

What is stress

and how can it trigger mental health problems?

Stress is a feeling of being under abnormal pressure, which can be caused by a range of daily life factors including job security concerns, increased workload, a family argument and financial worries.

The body creates a ‘stress response’ and that can cause a variety of physical symptoms, change behaviour, and lead a person to experience more intense emotions.

The human costs of unmanaged work-related stress is extensive, according to the Mental Health Foundation. It says: **“Increased levels of stress can, if not addressed early enough, lead to burn-out or more severe mental health problems.”**

Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, are thought to be the leading cause of work absences, accounting for up to 40% of sickness leave.

As a result, mental ill health now accounts for a significant proportion of long-term sickness and early retirement and is cited as the leading cause of illness for 20% of NHS employees.

Traditionally stress has been linked more to ill-health effects rather than safety concerns in the workplace. However, whether originating within the workplace or outside, high levels of stress are likely to be associated with a rise in the frequency of errors that in turn can increase road crash risks among drivers.

Everyone, from time to time, feels down, stressed or frightened. Most of the time those feelings pass, but sometimes they develop into a mental health problem like anxiety or depression, which can impact on daily lives. For some people, mental health problems become complex, and require support and treatment for life.



Sadly, says the Mental Health Foundation, about 6,000 people a year commit suicide in the UK, and having a long-term mental health problem may reduce life expectancy by as many as 21 years due to associated physical health problems.

If struggling to cope with stress, whether work-related, behind the wheel or in everyday life, employees should talk to their employer and it may be a good idea to organise a GP visit for help. Employers should also have a duty of care policy to ensure work does not harm an individual's physical or mental health.

Work is a major part of most people's lives and having a fulfilling job can be good for employees' mental health and wellbeing. But, life can sometimes get on top of individuals due to issues at work – travel and deadlines, for example – and away from the job.

However, the Mental Health Foundation calculates that the value added to the economy by people who are at work and have or have had mental health problems is as high as £225 billion per year, which represents 12.1% of the UK's total GDP.

The organisation says:

“

It's vital that we protect that value by addressing mental health at work for those with existing issues, for those at risk, and for the workforce as a whole.

A toxic work environment can be corrosive to our mental health. We believe in workplaces where everyone can thrive. We also believe in the role of employers, employees and businesses in creating thriving communities.

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FACT:

Increased levels of stress can, if not addressed early enough, lead to burn-out or more severe mental health problems.

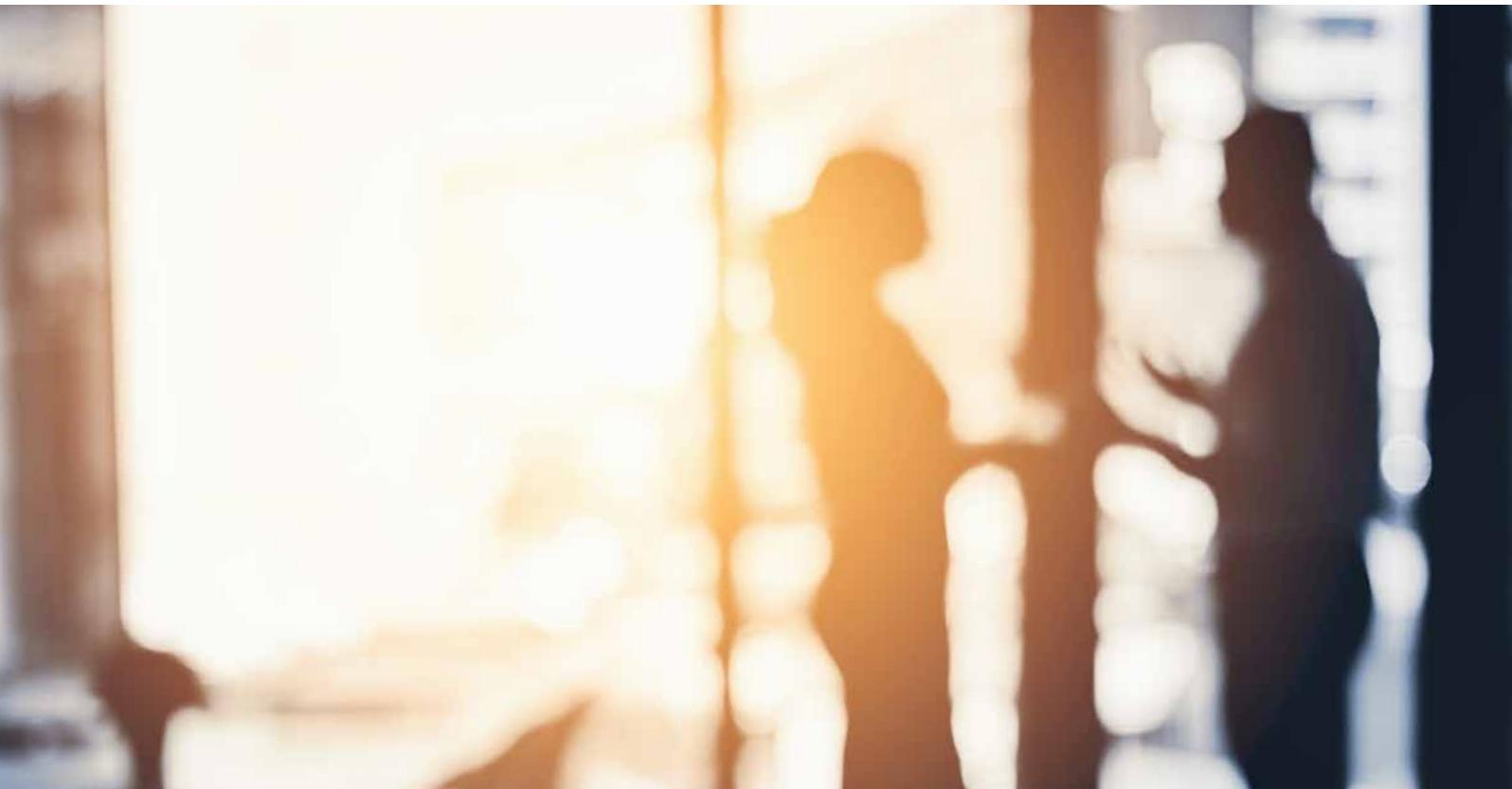
FACT:

Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, are thought to be the leading cause of work absences, accounting for up to 40% of sickness leave.

IT'S GOOD TO TALK:

mental health stigma

unites the fleet
industry and royals



Mental health is a subject that unites company car and van drivers and Princes William and Harry.

The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and The Duke of Sussex, Prince Harry, are spearheading the Heads Together mental health initiative. It combines a campaign to tackle stigma and change the conversation on mental health.

What's more, the charity says that conversations about mental health can make **"a real difference"** and highlights that surveys suggest that when people have talked about their mental health they have found it helpful.

But, despite a number of high-profile, hard-hitting campaigns, more than half (56%) of van drivers and owners say there is a stigma attached to discussing mental health at work, rising to 63% in the manufacturing sector, according to a survey by Mercedes-Benz Vans UK.

More than 2,000 van drivers and owners are surveyed quarterly on key industry issues for its 'Business Barometer' and in the build up to Mental Health Awareness Week 2018, which tackled stress. They were asked to give their views and experiences of mental health issues in the workplace.

The top reason cited for the perceived stigma was because they were working in a 'male-dominated industry'. It was a key factor for 50% of those who felt there was still a stigma, with a further 46% highlighting fears over job security and career progression that made talking about mental health a taboo at work.

Only 28% of managers said an employee had spoken to them about mental health concerns, although female managers were more likely to have experienced an employee talking about mental health concerns than male managers (32% versus 26%).

Yet, nearly three out of five (57%) of those who said a colleague or employee had spoken to them about a mental health issue felt 'glad they could confide in me', but one in four admitted they felt uninformed, 21% said they felt embarrassed and a further 17% did not feel equipped to know what to do or say.

The prevailing taboo affects not just businesses – mental health conditions such as work-related stress, depression or anxiety has a profound impact on people's lives.

Latest data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reveals that a man between 20 and 49 years of age is more likely to die from suicide than cancer, a road crash or heart disease and suicide rates in men aged between 45 and 59 years of age have also now begun to rise, increasing to their highest levels since 1981.

Steve Bridge, managing director, Mercedes-Benz Vans UK, said: **"A key component of these tragic statistics is that men are much less likely to talk about their feelings than women – something that is compounded within a 'macho' industry or role."**

Hearing on the radio in late 2017 those statistics around suicide was a "eureka" moment for Mark Cartwright, head of vans at the Freight Transport Association (FTA), who pointed out that the majority of van drivers in the UK were probably under 50.

The result is that the FTA is now working with the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM), an award-winning charity dedicated to preventing male suicide, to put together a bespoke version of its CALM Companies Programme for the sector.

Designed to encourage employers to look after the wellbeing of staff and an openness among employees to talk about their emotions and not 'bottle stuff up', the initiative is expected to be launched in late 2018.

Using CALM's brand to boost engagement, the programme will provide practical support with advice, materials and content to help employers build a more progressive corporate wellbeing culture, along with training for on-site mental health first aid, access to a priority corporate helpline, and an ongoing employee wellbeing survey.

What's more men are three times more likely to commit suicide than women. In 2015, 75% of all UK suicides were male and a man takes his own life in the UK every two hours.

Mr Cartwright said:

"Hearing the figures on suicide among men hit a nerve with me. I started to talk to van operators and it was clear that we were pushing at an open door. They know what to do

if an employee has a physical issue, but it was different with stress. Additionally, drivers are 'tough men with stiff upper lips' often working in isolation."

The FTA's Van Excellence scheme is designed by some of the best van operators in the UK and facilitated to recognise excellence and improve operational standards.

Annually, Van Excellence holds 'operational briefings' and, picking up on the ONS data, the 2018 events tackled the impact of drivers' health and wellbeing on safety, highlighted the benefits of good driver management and the possible risks of ignoring the human element of running a van fleet.

Mr Cartwright said: **"Safety is central to the Van Excellence programme and it has always placed real importance on the value of caring for the health and wellbeing of van drivers."**

"Driving can be stressful and tiring and spending many hours behind the wheel isolates drivers from their friends and family. Long days and tight deadlines can also leave little time for exercise. No wonder many drivers suffer from physical and mental health problems."

CALM director of corporate partnerships Andrew Brown spoke at the ‘operational briefings’ and Mr Cartwright, who views mental health as a potential “hotbed” among van drivers, said he was aware that two people in the audience at one of the events had subsequently called the organisation’s telephone helpline.

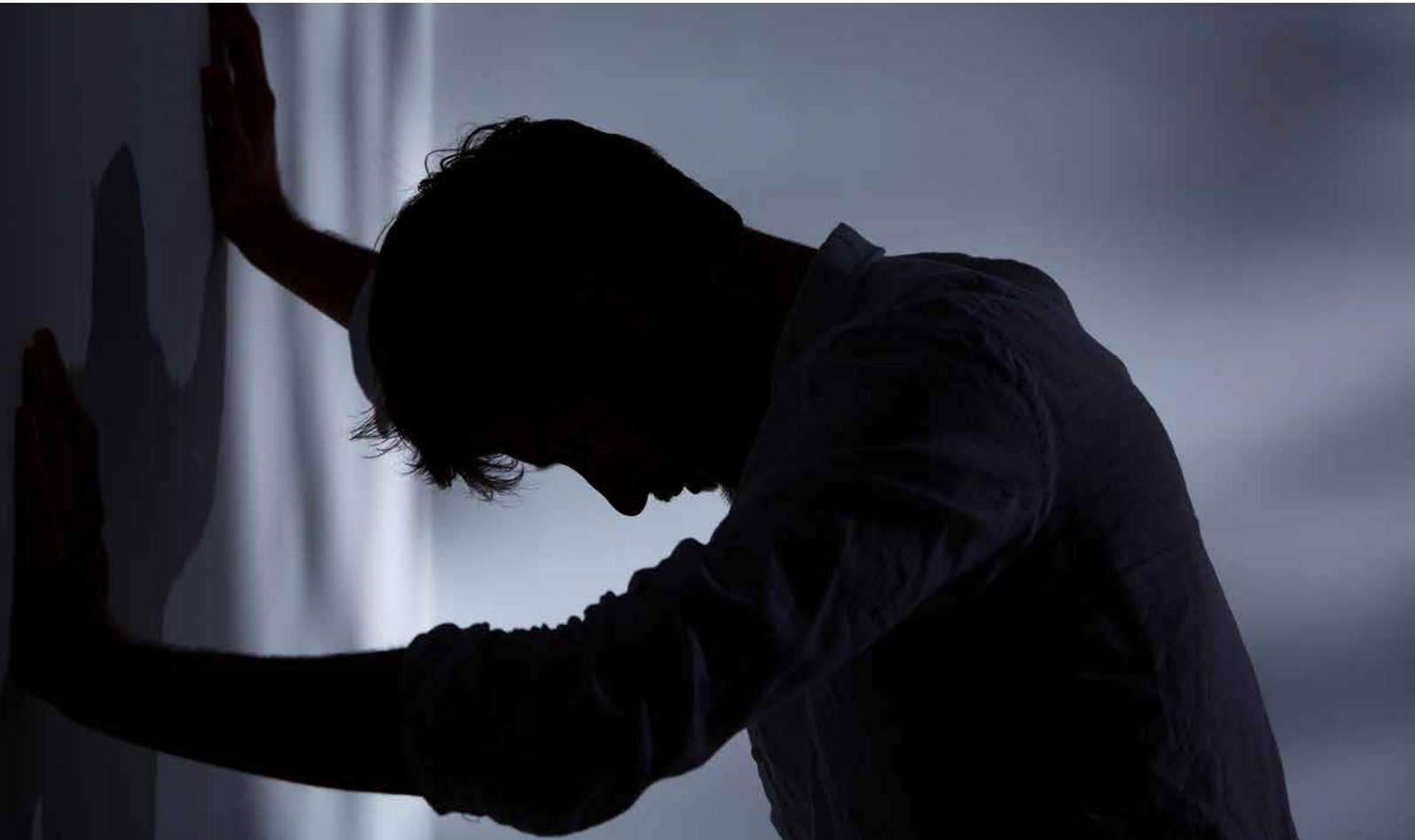
According to the 2016 Masculinity Audit:

- **77% of men feel that a job is important to self-esteem**
- **61% think that men are stereotyped in the media**
- **59% of those feeling pressure to be the breadwinner were men**
- **40% of men feel they lack the qualities and abilities partners want**
- **40% of men feel that women have unrealistic expectations of men.**

In addition, said Mr Brown at the ‘operational briefings’:

“Men are more likely to show risk-taking behaviour. But, they are less likely to seek formal support, to perceive their condition as a medical problem, are more likely to self-medicate and, crucially, more than 40% of men under 45 have considered taking their own life, but under half told anyone how they felt.

“Men don’t want to make a fuss, don’t want to make others worry and don’t know how to talk about what they are feeling.”



Traditional stereotypes, particularly of men, combined with expectations in today's world can create pressure and vulnerability, according to Mr Brown.

He said: **"It is important that men recognise that it is OK to talk about their emotions and seek help when needed and we can all be a better friend and colleague."**

"A workplace should be somewhere an individual feels supported and can draw strength, rather than a place which grinds you down."

"A CALM company mirrors the ideal CALM society in the workplace, with a combination of positive culture and practical support for all staff – men and women."

CALM is working in partnership with Heads Together, and Mr Brown continued:



We want to make it easier for companies to improve mental health and wellbeing in the workplace because they find it difficult to provide support and get employees engaged."

"Mental health issues are more complex in the at-work driving sector, which is male dominated and can be a solitary life. It is something that needs to be sorted."



In mid-2018 the FTA launched a pre-use vehicle defect check app. A phase two development of the tool could see drivers initially being asked 'how they feel today' and requested to give a one to five verdict. Mr Cartwright said: **"If the driver is not feeling good, that, we would hope, gives a van operator a heads up and maybe prompts a telephone call or a chat."**

Mr Cartwright continued: **"On entering locations identification of first aiders and fire marshals is possible, but who would a driver talk to about mental health?"**

"It is important to raise awareness of stress and mental health so that drivers feel able to talk. We would like to be able to provide resources to businesses that enables them to manage mental health among their driving community."

"Since raising the mental health issue at the 'operational briefings' we have sparked a lot of interest among van operators. It is an important topic and we want to drag down barriers that prevent people talking."

Mercedes-Benz said it was the first van manufacturer to investigate attitudes towards mental health in the sector in 2017 and the company wants to "break this potentially deadly taboo and encourage van owners and operators to talk to loved ones, colleagues and managers if they are encountering mental health problems".

Mr Bridge said: **"There isn't a quick fix or an easy answer to the issue of mental health in the workplace, but by talking about our feelings and taking a wellbeing complaint as seriously as a physical ailment, we can all work together to eradicate the perceived stigma around mental health."**

Chris O'Sullivan, head of workplace at the Mental Health Foundation, said: **"By tackling stress we can go a long way to tackle mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. But in order to confront these issues we need to eradicate the stigma, something that the Mercedes-Benz Vans research shows is still widespread."**

"It's very important that male-dominated workplaces do more to challenge the stigma surrounding mental health issues and encourage open and honest conversations about mental wellbeing. We know from our own research that men are much less likely to seek support for a mental health problem than women."

He continued: **"There are also added pressures that many van drivers face, namely insecure and unpredictable working conditions, particularly if they are part of today's 'gig economy', combined with the challenge of getting to more places with less time in more traffic. All the while keeping concentration."**

Mind, the mental health charity, says that for employees suffering stress, building a 'support network' that might include family and friends and work colleagues was important highlighting that line managers, a company's HR department, union representatives, or employee assistance schemes may all be a sounding board. It has published a guide 'How to Manage Stress' available at: https://www.mind.org.uk/media/1993364/how-to-manage-stress_2015.pdf

The organisation said employees should: **"Try not to worry that talking to a manager or colleagues about stress will be seen as a sign of weakness – wellbeing is important and responsible employers will take it seriously."**

FACT:

A man between 20 and 49 years of age is more likely to die from suicide than cancer, road crashes or heart disease.

FACT FILE:

- **38% of all workers say a colleague has talked about mental health**
- **28% of managers say an employee has spoken to them about mental health**
- **57% say a colleague or employee has spoken to them about a mental health issue**
- **30% of respondents felt responsible for helping them find treatment**
- **32% of respondents felt 'proud' that they worked in an environment where such issues could be discussed.**

The mental health problem *among drivers*



Driving is a stressful function, but unrealistic work schedules putting time pressure on drivers is amongst the major causes of stress that can trigger mental health problems.

Other causes include:

- **Increased workload/the demands of the job**
- **Poor work organisation and job/role uncertainty**
- **Traffic congestion and the behaviour of other drivers**
- **Poor work/life balance**
- **Domestic/personal issues.**

Drivers' health and well-being is critical to their behaviour on the road with the heart and the brain the two key areas of the body **"massively effected"** by stress, according to Mr Sunderland-Wright, who tackled the issue at the Fleet Industry Advisory Group (FIAG) 2017 autumn seminar.

"Stress can inhibit personal performance," according to Mr Sunderland-Wright. **"High levels of stress causes the brain to do far too much and that causes problems, which for drivers manifests itself in road crashes."**

Sleep is essential to good mental health and without a good sleep, people's mental health suffers and their concentration is impacted: a quarter of all road crashes that cause death or serious injury are sleep-related, according to research by Loughborough University's Sleep Research Centre, with the FTA suggesting that about 40% of those incidents involved commercial vehicles.

The FTA says that **"with a demanding work schedule and busy family life, many of us are not getting adequate rest. It's not healthy and it's also extremely dangerous"**

The organisation highlights that winter driving is particularly hazardous saying: **"With longer nights, all drivers should be aware that driving in the dark and in poor weather conditions is tiring and they may need to take more and longer breaks."**

The FTA's advice on getting good quality sleep says:

"It's wise to limit caffeine intake in the hours before bedtime; make sure the bedroom is properly ventilated and go to bed earlier before an early start. Using devices such as tablets and mobile phones before sleeping can disrupt deep sleep, again preventing drivers from resting properly."

If a driver develops any form of medical condition which seriously affects their sleeping patterns, such as sleep apnoea, then they must inform the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency: <https://www.gov.uk/health-conditions-and-driving>. A failure to do so risks a fine of up to £1,000 and if involved in a crash, a criminal prosecution could result.

Employee surveys frequently highlight that stress is an issue for them and, according to RoSPA's 'Driving for Work: Fitness to Drive' guide: **"Stress can impair sleep quality, which in turn can heighten feelings of stress, and driver behaviour."**

In 2017, the Mercedes-Benz Vans UK commissioned research suggested that almost one in five van drivers described their current mental health as ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’, with three-quarters commenting that a contributory factor was work.

More than half of the van drivers with ‘poor’ mental health said that increased time pressures (52%) and increased workload (50%) were factors affecting their mental health, with one in three believing that job uncertainty was contributing to their ‘poor’ mental health. Additionally, 17% of delivery drivers said that road congestion was impacting on their state of mind.

But, despite those findings, only one in three van drivers who believed their mental health to be suffering had spoken to their manager about their concerns, with more than one in 10 (12%) admitting to not speaking to anyone about their mental health.

Mr Bridge said: **“With a continued surge in online shopping, an increasing reliance on same-day deliveries and spiralling traffic volumes across the UK, the real-world pressures on van drivers are changing.**

“Our research findings act as a clear call to van drivers to talk about their mental health concerns and work pressures with their employers and for employers to actively listen to the real concerns of their workforce.”

Mr Cartwright recalled an incident of a van driver being stopped for a routine vehicle check at the gates of the company yard where he was employed. With the vehicle door open he ran off, was not seen again by the company and several months later committed suicide.

Mr Cartwright said:

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Company bosses and managers were distraught. They had no idea that their colleague was suffering. With hindsight there were signs that the driver was stressed, but it was too late for the company to help.

“Businesses assume that drivers’ performance is at an optimum level, but that is not always the case. If 20% of vans are behaving erratically perhaps due to a brake problem, operators know immediately what action to take. If 20% of drivers’ performance is below par due to mental health issues they do not know what action to take.”

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RoSPA says that employers “should include” driving for work within the scope of their stress risk assessments and the Mental Health Foundation says that with van drivers experiencing an increased rate of poor mental health: **“We need to create a culture in which anyone experiencing problems can ask for help in the knowledge that they will be supported.”**

With driver stress being a significant contributory factor to road crashes, Michael Appleby, health, safety and environmental lawyer at London law



firm Fisher Scoggins Waters, reminded delegates at the FIAG seminar that it was a major focus for the HSE in improving work-related road safety.

He said: **“Are drivers so stressed that they cannot do their job properly? Employers must look at their work-related road safety policies and ensure that employees that drive on businesses have the opportunity to have their views on such issues heard.”**

The FIAG workshop debate on the health and well-being of drivers concluded that it was **“a hot topic”** and it was important that **“a massive knowledge gap”** across employers was filled.

Delegates suggested that many employers were “reactive” and not “proactive” in managing employees and only reacted with new policies and procedures following an “incident”.

As a result, Geoffrey Bray, chairman of FIAG, which was launched to enable fleet decision-makers to share fleet industry best practice and knowledge, said: **“It is vital that employees that drive on business are given advice and information on how to relieve stress and be less tired. Information should not just be written into a company car policy, but there should be conversations and drivers should be empowered to speak up. Drivers are part of the solution and not simply the problem.”**

FACT:

High levels of stress causes the brain to do far too much and that causes problems, which for drivers manifests itself in road crashes.

Five reasons cited for why it is believed that mental health is still a stigma in the van industry:

- **Male dominated industry/ has a macho image – 50%**
- **Fears over job security/career progression – 46%**
- **Managers don't know what to say or do – 40%**
- **No right time to talk about it – 31%**
- **No right place to talk about it – 21%**

Source: Mercedes-Benz Business Barometer May 2018.

A man is shown from the chest up, driving a car at night. He is looking out the driver's side window with a focused and somewhat stressed expression. The background is a blurred city street at night, with warm yellow and white lights from buildings and streetlights. The car's interior, including the dashboard and steering wheel, is visible in the foreground, partially in shadow.

STRESS

driving behaviour

Driving is a complex task, requiring full concentration and a calm attitude, but heightened emotions such as stress, anger or upset are a form of cognitive distraction that can significantly impede drivers' ability to spot and respond to hazards.

That is the view of road safety charity Brake, which says drivers who suffer from work-related stress are more likely to speed and take other risks while driving and more likely to be involved in serious crashes.

Stress when driving, says RoSPA, can arise from a person's inability to relax and if stressed, other negative states of mind and attitudes are accentuated. De-stressing tips include using self-assessment to analyse driving performance and how actions when behind the wheel impact on other road users.

What's more, industry research suggests that almost one in five British drivers experience stress because of driving.

Symptomatic of stress is that men are more likely to show risk-taking behaviour than women, according to CALM, and high job stress is **"one of the best predictors"** of road crashes, suggests research for the HSE.

Furthermore, crash-involved drivers experienced more stressful work environments than crash-free drivers, according to the research collated by the HSE. Additionally, it highlighted that financial stress increased the likelihood of involvement in more serious crashes.

Stress, feeling rushed and a lower life satisfaction all contributed to increased rates of crashes, according to the studies.

Much of the research focused on male drivers. However, women's driving is also affected by stress, with young drivers (18-23-years-old), according to the HSE's compendium of study findings, taking stress-induced risks and women in middle age displaying poor driving behaviour due to feeling rushed, working longer hours and working shifts.

The FTA's Mr Cartwright points out that excessive speed was often a major factor in road traffic collisions.

He said:

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Speeding due to the pressure of work causes driving stress and this can lead to employees being off work, either through illness or because of a road crash, let alone because of damaged vehicles.”

In a warning to employers, he said: **“Effective driver management is important. Prior planning of routes and delivery patterns can go a long way to ensuring that speed can be controlled – don't make excessive demands of staff.”**

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Andy Neale, managing director of Performance on Demand, said:

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Drivers crash when they make a bad decision which can often be affected by their state of mind.

Stress covers a wide range of issues and comes in many guises however, whether the causes are internal pressures, external pressures, perceived or otherwise the physiological effects are the same, with the human flight or fight mechanism creating an imbalance in the chemicals being produced internally.

“Cortisol for example is produced when experiencing a high heart rate and a person suffers from an incoherent heart signal, which results in frustration. Additionally, when in the ‘frustrated state’ people suffer from ‘cortical inhibition’ meaning they cannot access the smart brain to be able to make a good decision hence stupid ones are made!

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As a result, says Mr Neale, **“drivers need to understand their bodies and how that impacts on their ability to drive”.**

He said: **“A simple example is that when just 2% dehydrated it can affect the ability to concentrate by up to 20%. Additionally, simple breathing techniques coupled**

with positive thoughts help to reverse the production of unwanted cortisol, help production of the hormone dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) and importantly, give access to the smart brain.”

A survey by Brake in conjunction with insurer Direct Line suggested that 71% of drivers had lost concentration at the wheel in a 12-month period because of stress or emotions/annoyance caused by **“inconsiderate road users, worries about work or tension at home”.**

However, by far the most common cause of stress were other road users (60%), as highlighted by the survey followed by that induced by personal issues (44%) and work (39%). Additionally, emotionally involved telephone conversations can lead to driver error and ‘visual tunnelling’.

Brake says: **“Distress negatively affects driver performance. Heightened emotions such as stress, anger or upset are a form of cognitive distraction that significantly impedes drivers’ ability to spot hazards. The level of distraction depends on the level of distress felt.**

“What is clear is driving while distracted is endemic, sometimes due to stress and other emotions caused by life pressures.

“When we drive we are subconsciously using many skills that are essential to control the vehicle, being aware



of others and knowing how to get to our destination. When we are distracted suddenly we are not in control of the vehicle and it only takes seconds for a collision to happen.”

The charity says: **“Drivers need to plan their journey to reduce their stress, switch off their phones so they are not tempted to touch them and most importantly focus on the job at hand, which is to get to their destination safely.”**

All drivers are exposed to stressful driving situations from time to time – traffic jams, tailgating and inconsiderate behaviour from other drivers – even if they do not generally suffer from stress in everyday life.

But it is how drivers react to those situations that is key to safe driving with some reacting angrily – a symptom now known as ‘road rage’ – which could, said Brake, be **“incredibly dangerous”**.

Consequently, angry drivers are more likely to take risks such as speeding, rapidly switching lanes, tailgating and jumping red lights.

What’s more, driving aggressively can in turn increase an individual’s stress levels, and thus become a vicious circle.

As a result, combatting stress when behind the wheel is essential to safe driving.

FACT:

High job stress is “one of the best predictors” of road crashes.

Stress when driving can arise out of:

- **Lack of confidence in driving ability**
- **Heavy traffic in town or on the motorways**
- **Being late for an appointment or work**
- **Being afraid of having a crash**
- **Problem passengers in the vehicle – children, having an argument for example**
- **Unsure of journey route**
- **Fatigue**
- **Distractions – mobile phones, eating, drinking, road crashes etc**
- **Problems at home or at work.**

Source: RoSPA.

Tips to avoid stress when driving:

- Before commencing a journey ensure mindset is right and fitness to drive
- Make sure the vehicle is fit for a journey: check fuel, oil level, coolant, tyres, lights, a clean windscreen, washers and wipers
- Allow plenty of time for a journey and know route to destination
- Check traffic conditions before setting off
- Avoid driving at peak times and in congested areas if possible as that can cause the most stress
- Ensure the driver’s seat, head restraint and steering column are correctly adjusted: aches and pains due to poor posture will not improve mood
- Control a situation by setting an example and giving way at busy junctions or allowing traffic to merge into lane when necessary
- Anticipate other people’s actions and mistakes on the road by looking further ahead
- Give drivers space on the road to resolve an error – courtesy costs nothing
- Keep away from aggressive drivers – don’t react by accelerating, braking or swerving suddenly, as that will reduce car control
- Driving aggressively, speeding and overtaking are unlikely to hasten journey time by much, but could increase tenseness
- Switch off the phone while driving – check for messages and emails or make calls when taking a break
- For every two hours of driving take a 15-minute break – it can reduce tension and aids alertness
- Consider an overnight stop on long journeys
- Calm, controlled breathing helps to release muscular tension and relieve stress
- Is driving necessary or is there an alternative?

Sources: Brake/Confused.com/Green Flag/ IAM RoadSmart/RoSPA

HOW TO COMBAT STRESS:

What businesses should do

Employees must feel confident that they can report health issues and their ability to drive to their employer without it impacting on their job security or career prospects, according to RoSPA.

The organisation's 'Driving for Work: Fitness to Drive' guide says: **"Staff need reassurance that health problems will be treated sympathetically and that appropriate occupational health advice will be available, otherwise, they will simply avoid reporting problems.**

"Stress management is an essential part of health and safety policy. Staff should feel empowered to express any concerns they might have relating to stress, whether due to their work or domestic life, that could undermine their fitness to drive."

The HSE library of research concluded: **"Stress has been shown to increase risky driving behaviour and is associated with increased involvement in minor accidents. Increased stress has also been associated with fatigue states when driving, which in turn has been associated with increased accident involvement."**

As a result, the research suggested that organisations should monitor any stress caused by work through questionnaires and audits, discussions with staff, as part of the annual review/performance management procedure, and through supportive management.

Mr Cartwright said:

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Caring for the physical and mental health of staff isn't just about being a considerate employer. Drivers who get behind the wheel when they're unwell, exhausted or distracted by personal

issues are less effective and more likely to have an accident. Evidence shows that staff who are happy take fewer sick days and are more likely to stay in their jobs.

"Van drivers work hard to provide a wide variety of services, which all of us need. And those operating the vans need to pay close attention to drivers' wellbeing, as it is central to maintaining a great safety record, reducing staff absenteeism and improving compliance. Caring for drivers is one of the best ways for employers to improve their safety record.

”

"Organisations which don't have efficient systems for monitoring and intervening to deal with poor driver health and behaviour can, in the worst cases, face prosecutions, fines or even imprisonment.

RoSPA says that employers should ensure that working regimes and tasks do not **"exert undue pressure on staff that is likely to cause or magnify stress"** and adds that stress may also be caused by private life events affecting their ability to work.

It continues: **"Driving schedules in particular should be planned so that they do not require staff to drive too far, too long or too fast, and without adequate rest breaks."**

Furthermore, says RoSPA, stress can be caused by requiring employees to undertake duties for which they do not feel competent and adds: **"This may include driving generally, driving particular vehicles or particular types of journey. Driver assessment and training can help to identify and address such concerns."**

The light commercial vehicle sector, unlike the HGV sector, is unregulated, which means that employees driving commercial vehicles under 3.5 tonnes do not have their working hours regulated.



However, the FTA Van Excellence code highlights the importance of implementing and maintaining proper driver hours and safety records for vehicles and fleets of all sizes.

It's vital, says the organisation, that operators monitor every driver's fitness to drive, log their working hours and keep a record of all crashes and incidents, however minor. The FTA points out that the legislation that governs drivers of larger vehicles can provide useful guidance about what's safe and what isn't. Information is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/drivers-hours/gb-domestic-rules>.

The FTA says:

“The absence of a formal legal framework doesn't absolve drivers or operators of taking driver rest seriously. If a driver is prosecuted for careless or dangerous driving, being tired or falling asleep can be considered an aggravating factor which may increase the seriousness of an offence and the potential penalty.”

The FTA runs a one-day course entitled 'Your Health Matters'. Aimed at professional drivers, it is designed to promote driver health and wellbeing via interactive workshop sessions that focus on a typical driver's daily routine.

The course includes advice and guidance to reduce work-related road risk and motivate behaviour changes in relation to general health and wellbeing.

Subjects tackled include: The symptoms of stress, fatigue and sleep apnoea, how to make informed choices about lifestyle, diet and wellbeing, the promotion of positive lifestyle attitude through reflection, critique and company

policy to improve general health and wellbeing and an awareness of mental health.

Performance on Demand has developed online Well Being Profiles (WBP), which employees receive monthly and enables them to self-monitor and compare to previous months' results. They also receive bespoke and relevant tips after each completion.

Managers receive group results showing those in 'high', 'medium' and 'low' risk groups and from the information targeted training programmes are developed.

The WBP comprises 58 questions and Performance on Demand has data from a group of 64 employees who signed up to a 12-month study of their 'resilience score'. The WBP 'tests' users in 11 areas: Tiredness, anxiety, anger, relaxed, positive engagement, employee engagement, mental clarity and decisiveness, self-management, control, self-esteem and lifestyle.

Mr Neale said: **“Not all of those who signed up completed the study, but overall the improvement in resilience as a group was 19.72%. However, the key part of the study was that those who engaged most improved by a staggering 30.54% proving conclusively that attitude and the willingness to learn is all important.”**

There are many online risk profilers available for drivers to complete that give employers an indication of employees' road risk, which for 'high' risk drivers could result in one-to-one driver training. Other drivers could be asked to complete classroom-based training or specific online modules to reduce their behind the wheel risk.

Technology can also play a big part with many fleets fitting speed limiters to vans and in-vehicle telematics used to monitor and manage a driver's performance.



Employer knowledge and training is critical to reducing stress among drivers, according to Mr Neale. A study of 409 drivers trained by driver training company Automotional, like Performance on Demand a member of the NFE Group, in the first five months of 2018 showed that on average they saved 11.3% in fuel as a result of the half day's training (see case study). What's more, by driving in a smoother style and through improved observation and forward planning drivers, also completed the test route 3.6% quicker, which on a 40-hour week works out as drivers 'getting back' 90 minutes.

He added:

“ Driver training face to face with instructors who can engage with drivers so that they want to learn and improve is vital. Knowledge is power and the bottom line is that none of it is hard but still too few are doing it. ”

Sickness absence figures may also reflect the levels of stress in an organisation and analysis of the reasons why can assist in identifying whether or not stress is a cause.

Additionally, as stress may be caused by factors outside of work, a supportive management style and culture within an organisation can assist in reducing the impact on performance at work.

In addition, 'major life events' have been associated with road traffic violations and driving while under the influence of drink/drugs. Therefore, support may be required to reduce the impact of 'life events', including flexible work arrangements and a well-planned and managed return to work.

While mental health organisations say that awareness of the issue is increasing, many people with mental health problems face discrimination, and can face challenges getting the help they need. Typically, they try to keep their feelings hidden because they are afraid of other people's responses. Fear of discrimination and feelings of shame are among the top reasons people give for not telling their colleagues about their mental health problems.

But, says the Mental Health Foundation: **“When we create workplace cultures where people can be themselves, it is easier for people to speak about mental health concerns without fear, and easier for them to reach out for help when they need it. It is vital that workplaces become environments where people feel safe to be themselves.”**

A component of a company's occupational road risk management strategy should be that managers are trained to manage work-related road safety as part of their health and safety responsibilities and understand how health can affect safe driving and how driving can impact on health.

RoSPA says that managers should be trained to recognise signs of health changes, including sudden mood or behaviour changes, unusual irritability or aggression, worsening relationships with colleagues and others, impaired job performance or an increase in poor timekeeping and short-term sickness absence. These signs do not necessarily mean a health problem, but maybe an indication that help is needed.

Mr O'Sullivan, of the Mental Health Foundation, said: **“Healthy workplaces recognise the contribution of employees living with mental health problems, and support open disclosure. A culture that must be led from the very top, and driven forward through line management and engagement of staff at all levels.”**

FACT:

Stress management is an essential part of health and safety policy. Staff should feel empowered to express any concerns they might have relating to stress, whether due to their work or domestic life, that could undermine their fitness to drive.

FACT:

Healthy workplaces recognise the contribution of employees living with mental health problems, and support open disclosure.

The Mental Health Foundation's checklist for employers includes:

- **Training opportunities for line managers on how to support staff with mental health problems as well as stress management across the board**
- **Reasonable adjustments to an employee's work pattern to remove barriers and allow them to stay in work**
- **Mental health embedded in company policies which recognise the mental health needs and wellbeing of staff**
- **Senior leaders responsible for leading mental health activities, such as mental health awareness sessions, with all managers engaged in the activity**
- **Regular employee surveys to build data about staff mental health, using findings to plan and deliver action and inform workplace policies**
- **Encourage staff to report discrimination or harassment they face and to blow the whistle on discrimination they witness.**



CASE STUDY:

A total of 409 drivers from a range of companies were trained, in cars, light commercials and trucks with the data submitted to the Energy Saving Trust as part of its fuel saving training programme.

The headline benefits included:

- **A fuel saving of 11.3% across all drivers**
- **A reduction in journey time of 3.6%**
- **Annual financial savings per vehicle of £4,843 or £93 per week based on 30,000 miles, a vehicle returning 35mpg, fuel costing £1.10 (ex-VAT) per litre and a 40-hour week, which Automotional described as “a pretty standard white van and man”**
- **A carbon dioxide (CO₂) saving of 9,752 tonnes per vehicle per year.**

Mr Neale said: “Drivers agreed that the ‘new’ driving style was more relaxing but often stated that they do not have time to drive like that as they had too much to do in a short space of time; they were under pressure!

“However, when they found out that they had increased their average mph by 3.6% by driving in a fuel-efficient manner they pretty much rolled over! That saving equates to 75 hours saved per year, per driver, or a saving of 1.5 hours each week. How many extra parcels could be delivered?”

A half-day's training costs around £165 and Mr Neale said: “The cost of training will be recouped in fuel savings alone in just two weeks and after that businesses are making money. Then there are fewer crashes, less damage, reduced vehicle maintenance, ‘free’ duty of care and less stressed drivers.”

Source: Automotional

Conclusion

Driving is well-established, as a result of much research, as one of the most dangerous activities that an employee will be asked to undertake during their working day.



It is also well-established that whatever job an individual is tasked with undertaking if they are not 100% focused on the activity it may not be completed to the best of their ability.

Put those two scenarios together and an at-work driver – whether at the wheel of a company car, commercial vehicle or their own car on a private or business journey – not fully focused on the road ahead is potentially a heightened crash risk.

Many companies investigate the cause of a road crash and possibly also a 'near miss'. But do they consider the possibility of driver stress being a factor in the incident?

Evidence is clear that stress puts drivers at risk because they are not focused on their behind the wheel performance and whether or not that 'illness' has developed into a mental health problem the consequences could be catastrophic.

What is clear is that, from a business perspective, if a vehicle has broken down a fleet decision-maker knows what action to take. Similarly if an at-work driver has external signs of ill-health, maybe a broken arm or leg, the business or line manager knows what action to take in terms of perhaps making changes to their typical work load. However, if an employee is under stress – whether as a consequence of a work or personal issue – it, too often, is not talked about.

Employers may say that an employee has not raised the issue, but has the company put in place measures that make the member of staff feel that they can raise a topic that is too often seen as a sign of weakness?

It is clear that there needs to be more discussion about stress and mental health at work with employers developing an all-encompassing approach to ensure that the best results for employees can be achieved and they feel comfortable in talking about issues.

As one business leader said, actually having a conversation and an employee talking about how they feel and getting help early might prevent a whole lot of pain for that individual and obviously heartache and potential cost for the business as well.

Perhaps the line from the old BT advert was never more apt: **"It's good to talk."**

Sources and further information:

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Published August 2018