



## **Are you Fit to Work?**

Over 1/3 of adults globally are classified as either overweight or obese but this figure rises dramatically in more affluent countries reaching 58% in Europe and a staggering 70% in the US!

Source: Overseas Development Institute.

Poor diet, sedentary lifestyle and office-based work are three key reasons for this pandemic of ill health. Ironically as developing countries get richer it allows sections of their populations to adopt these same habits and consequentially the levels of obesity are on the rise fastest in areas such as Latin America and North Africa.

Being overweight can cause secondary problems such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, joint problems and even some cancers. What is less understood are the effects on your ability to function to full potential at work. Being overweight tends to lead to a negative cycle of a person doing less and less physical exercise. The consequence of this is that they are deprived of the benefits which include a feeling of wellbeing and a better ability to tolerate stress. Exercise releases tension in the muscles which aids the feeling of relaxation as well as raising levels of certain hormones such as endorphins which block pain, decrease

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appetite and create a feeling of euphoria (the exercise high). Low energy levels resulting from an unhealthy cardiovascular system can affect performance as well as reduce your self-esteem and overall approach to life. According to the American Heart Association, exercise also increases the amount of oxygen your brain receives, resulting in improved memory and mental acuity.

It is not hard to see therefore why being of normal weight and doing some regular exercise can have a positive impact on your capacity to work – no matter how desk-bound you may be. Today's work environment is typically fast-paced and high pressure. Being fit won't change that but it will increase your ability to cope better with such conditions.

Ironically, that tight deadline that is stressing you out is actually contributing to your ill-health directly. Cortisol is a hormone that is part of the 'fight-or-flight' response to stress and when released it raises the blood sugar level (amongst other things) in preparation for 'getting away' from trouble. Of course physically running away (much as you'd often like to) is not an option to everyday stress in the office. This unused energy is therefore re-stored, often around the abdominal organs. To compound this, Cortisol release is also blamed for the craving for comfort food under such circumstances leading to the on-boarding of more fats and sugars if we give in to temptation.

It is clear therefore that all of us should reflect on our state of health and where improvements can be made we should try to make changes to our lifestyle. Exercise and healthy eating are not optional, nor are they the preserve of the super-fit or young. Getting a good night's sleep is also a fundamental part of the overall picture and can have an equally powerful effect on the capacity of an individual to function well at work. Healthy people also tend to sleep better by the way – looks like a conspiracy!

Working long hours, taking work home with you and not making time for exercise, relaxation and sleep will eventually prove counter-productive and may lead to longer term health problems. Put in a more positive context; most of us probably haven't yet seen our full capacity mentally or physically. A fitter, more energetic you will probably enjoy life outside the office much more and will find new levels of confidence, focus and persistence – and therefore success – within the work environment.

Here's a good place to start: <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/free-fitness.aspx>

Written by A J Low of Discussing Business Ltd, September 2016.

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