

People get stress relief express-style

On-the-job massages and boardroom yoga



DEIRDRE MCMURDY

Paul Madden has an unusual problem.

As the owner of The Spa at the Monastery in St. John's, his business has grown by over 350% a year over the past four years. He has expanded his facility's space to 25,500 square feet from about 10,000 square feet and he's now contemplating construction of an entirely new spa on the Atlantic coast outside the city.

His dilemma?

"Everyone talks about stress and we've offered stress release spa packages from the start," he explains. "But the thing is no one wants to spend the time. Everyone wants express service, they want to relax in 15 minutes and move on to the next thing."

Eli Bay, founder of the Relaxation Response Institute in Toronto, where he has been teaching stress management skills for 25 years, shares that frustration.

"It's a Type A culture focused on performance and doing. People are reluctant to admit that they suffer from stress. It's perceived as weak," he says. "They might accept exercise because it's active and high-octane. But dealing with it through breathing, meditation or just being aren't really valid."

The two men are part of one of the most dynamic growth sectors in the modern economy: stress.

Certainly the costs of the problem are well-documented. According to Statistics Canada the annual cost to the economy is about \$12-billion.

Stress as a reason for employee absenteeism has increased 316% in the past decade. About 40% of job turnover and 60% to 80% of on-the-job accidents are stress-related.

Stress and emotional burnout were cited as among the main reasons for Canada's United Church clergy to form a union under the auspices of the Canadian Autoworker's union.

In addition to having a negative impact on productivity and morale, workplace stress carries a hefty tab for benefit costs, specifically prescription drug plans.

"Stress is a very individual thing. People respond very differently to the same external factors," says Gabor Mate, a Vancouver-based physician and author of the book *When The Body Says No: The Hidden Cost of Stress*.

"But whatever triggers the stress, it has a real physical effect on the hormonal and nervous systems."

He adds that there are three principal causes of stress: conflict that people can't handle; loss of control; uncertainty and lack of information.

"Work pretty much ignites all three of those causes. But while a strong emotional connection with others can mitigate the impact of the stress response, that's exactly what's missing in our lives," says Dr. Mate. "We deal more and more with machines, we don't have extended families close by, we don't have community. So as stress reducers diminish, the causes increase."

And that's where the business of stress kicks in -- sort of.

Companies now offer employees everything from on-the-job chair massages to employee assistance programs (which provide off-site counseling services for troubled staffers) and boardroom yoga sessions.

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'IT'S STILL A HARD SELL FOR ME'

MCMURDY

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"Because I worked as a manager before I became a massage therapist, I've got a good grip on stress in the workplace," says Keith Peck of Upper Canada Corporate Massage in Toronto. "I've focused on corporate work from the outset and it has grown phenomenally in the past five years."

Mr. Peck charges \$18 for a 15-minute neck and shoulder massage, spending as much as two days a week at the offices of clients such as insurance company, Kingsway Financial.

"We can set up in a boardroom, a lunch room. It's very simple. All you need is a mat and some loose clothes," says Lynn Roberts of Pure Yoga Mobile Studio in Vancouver. "It's very popular because it's not disruptive and it's not expensive."

She charges \$64 for a one-hour session for up to nine people, \$80 for an hour with up to 19.

Eli Bay's relaxation response classes are also popular with corporate clients including Bell Canada, CIBC, Celestica, Motorola and American Express.

"It's still a hard sell for me despite all the data that's available," Mr. Bay says. "They may invite me in the door but they're more interested in a quick fix, a 'lunch and learn' session, than in the real work." (Mr. Bay charges individual clients \$550 for five three-hour sessions, including a workbook, three CDs and a money-back guarantee.)

"There's still a lot of lip service to the issue of stress management, especially at the most senior levels," notes Wendy Poirier, a consultant with Towers Perrin in Calgary. "But there is more awareness. Especially since the issue of employee engagement has become so hot. It's being seen as the key to improved productivity."

She adds that another reason why companies are starting to pay more attention to employee stress is the growing competition to recruit young, educated talent.

"For younger employees, for the ones companies have to retain to compete, it's not about benefits and pensions. It's about work/life balance, about control," Ms. Poirier says. "And that's the new challenge. It's not about an easy break of the status quo."

Of course, whether it's a corporation or an individual, the expense of stress management is not always

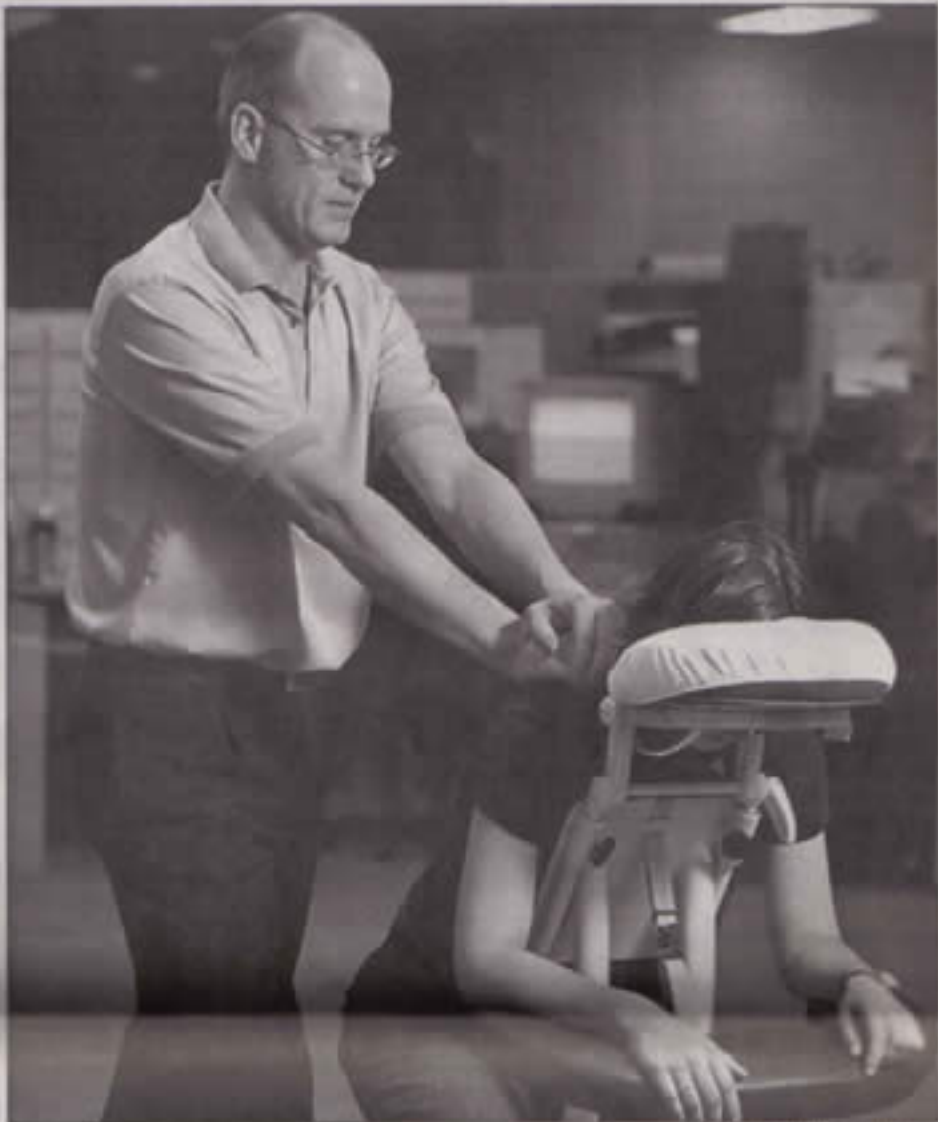


PHOTO: BENO FOR NATIONAL POST

Keith Peck of Upper Canada Corporate Massage in Toronto travels to workers with his massage chair.

minutes or a neck massage. But if you really want to relax it takes a lot more from us — and you," Mr. Madden says.

A HUSKY SOLUTION

One company that has become a poster child for progressive employee management is Husky Injection Mouldings of Aurora, Ont. Reflecting the personal values of the company's founder and CEO, Robert Schrad, the company has constructed a culture that proactively addresses stress in the workplace. In addition to a 150-child on-site daycare centre, Husky also offers workers a subsidized gym where, when not healthy, health is stressed.

Although not a stress management

chicken, fish and tofu are available along with a customized salad bar. Herbal teas are free.

Husky also has a wellness centre which employs a naturopath and a full-time massage therapist and a chiropractor. At the fitness centre, tai chi and yoga are among the daily classes on offer.

"We take the view that if it's good for quality of life, it's good for business," says Dirk Schlimm, Husky's director of human resources. "We mean well but we also measure our return on investment."

He says the savings come in the fact that his firm's rate of absenteeism is 30% below the national average. According to Mr. Schlimm, Husky also offers workers

pathic remedies, comes in at half the natural average. Workers' Compensation Board claims are 1.5% for every 200,000 hours of operation, compared with the average 7.2%.

Adds Mr. Schlimm, "We also offer the usual employee assistance programs for those who are in distress — which takes a burden off managers."

"The paycheque will always be a motivator, but we also want people to feel like they are part of something meaningful," Mr. Schlimm says. "That's a very basic human desire."

Financial Post

mmcmurdy@postmedia.ca

Toronto, 416-924-9333 or on-line

at www.postmedia.com