

business

Companies are tuning in to stress

Companies are turning to computer technologies that put relief at employees' fingertips

By Kimberly S. Johnson
Denver Post Staff Writer
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Mike Giovanni works in a stressful environment. As a transport engineering manager for Verizon Wireless in Denver, he's a technician tasked with maintaining and expanding the company's cellphone network in the Rocky Mountain region.

But when the stress becomes too much to bear, he uses relaxation techniques he perfected with a computer program.

"We're a 24-7-365 telecommunications company. We have our busy times and get our ups and downs," he said. "The program helps you learn some of the mechanical triggers (of stress)."

The program he's referring to uses a finger- or ear-pulse monitor that plugs into the USB slot of a personal computer, and a corresponding software application that rates heart rhythms to chart how stressed users are.

Workplace stress is a growing problem in companies worldwide. Employee stress is taking a \$300 billion annual toll on U.S. businesses, according to the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. In 2005, \$310 million was spent on stress-related programs, according to a study by Marketdata Enterprises, an independent market research publisher and consulting firm. That group expects costs to climb 6 percent by 2010.

However, technology is playing an increasing role in helping workers combat stress. At Verizon Wireless, Giovanni's boss, Wanda Oppenheim, is focused on helping her employees manage workplace stress. To that end, she teamed up with Laura Belsten, founder and president of CEO Partnership, a Denver-based executive coaching and leadership development firm.

Belsten is using software called emWave PC Stress Relief System, developed by HeartMath LLC, a Boulder Creek, Calif., company, that lets people easily receive biological feedback on stress levels at their desks.

HeartMath was founded in 1997 and its computer programs have been used by more than 10,000 executives, managers, staffers, physicians, educators, students, health professionals and athletes.

"We developed a consumer-oriented heart-rhythm feedback tool that took something powerful out of the hands of medicine and put it into the hands of people," said Howard Martin, executive vice president for HeartMath.

Last year, the company introduced a portable version of its emWave software, a device that users can carry around to periodically check their heart rate.

Belsten said she looked to HeartMath's solution because she wanted to give her clients an easy way to identify and manage stress comfortably. She has also worked with companies such as Qwest and Xcel Energy and is certified to use HeartMath's software and stress-reduction training program.

Software over yoga

"Many of my clients wouldn't be caught dead at a yoga class," she said. "I went out looking for something that was scientifically valid."

Coaches like Belsten say there's a need for creative ways to help clients battle stress, a top problem in the workplace, particularly among top executives.

"There's a bit of a silent epidemic," said Kay Cannon, president of the International Coaches Federation. "You do see some coaches using technology solutions."

Cannon said her organization has been approached by Logisense LLC, a Fort Collins-based company that alerts office workers when their stress levels reach a certain threshold. The company's software monitors stress by a temperature and sweat sensor on the side of a specially fitted mouse.

Logisense's tools differ from HeartMath's in that the Logisense monitor is always on and alerts workers in a small window at the bottom of the PC screen when they're stressed. The emWave program must be booted up each time - along with wearing the finger or ear sensor.

Logisense's alerts then prompt users to participate in one- to two-minute stress-reduction exercises, said Chris Stockinger, chief technology officer for the company."

"It's not meant to interrupt people's work flow," he said. "We're interested in the bottom line of the organization. We want to help them increase effectiveness, job satisfaction and reduce health-care costs."

However, all of these techniques have short-term effects and don't "begin to scratch the surface" of long-term mental health, said S. Mark Kopta, chairman of the psychology department at the University of Evansville in Indiana. He's developed Web-based and PDA-based tools that let users answer questions to assess their mental health.

"We're a very data-oriented society; people are looking at numbers about themselves all the time," he said. "That's good. But at what level do you want to look at mental health and improve it?"

There's a certain amount of "faddishness" around ways to reduce stress, similar to dieting, said Peter Buttrick, head of the cardiology division at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center.

Making major lifestyle changes such as exercising, moderating foods you eat and eliminating things that are stressful, are key to long-term effects.

"Stress is a part of people's lives. You can't avoid it, but you can try to manage it," he said. "These are big issues, not things that can be approximated by a small electronic device."

Staff writer Kimberly S. Johnson can be reached at 303-954-1088 or kjohnson@denverpost.com.

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