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HEALTH

Stressed in your job? Upload your download

By LOIS CAIRNS

STRESSED AND depressed workers are being offered online counselling in a move that could revolutionise how companies deal with on-the-job stress.

An online therapy program, called Beating the Blues, is being trialled here by behavioural healthcare company Instep, whose clients include Air New Zealand and the police.

It is available 24/7 to staff of those organisations, at no cost, for the three-month trial and uses cognitive behavioural therapy, widely accepted as one of the most effective and long-lasting treatments for post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, bulimia nervosa, clinical depression and chronic fatigue syndrome.

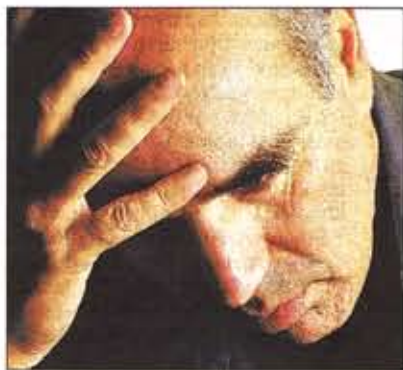
Psychologists have been trained to clinically review each Beating the Blues treatment and to provide additional advice for people who require it.

Instep psychologist Vanessa Caldwell said the launch of the program here was timely as the recession had left many workers feeling stressed.

"The perception that the country is struggling, that companies are struggling, that workplaces are under review ... creates an enormous amount of stress because people then don't know how to plan for the future or know how secure things are.

"What we're aiming for is to get people into support and appropriate level of care before it becomes a real health issue and they have to take time off work or stress leave."

New Zealand research from a study of around 900 men and woman born in 1972-73 has found clear links between workplace stress and depression. The research, published in 2007, showed that 45% of newly diagnosed cases of



Online counselling is an option if you can't face a therapist.

Photo: Dominion Post

depression or generalised anxiety disorder were directly related to workplace stress and that people with high levels of psychological demands at work were 75-80% more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety than those with the lowest levels.

The majority of large businesses and a

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growing number of small and medium-sized companies provide help for staff dealing with stress, but the amount of counselling that employers are prepared to pay for is limited.

Caldwell said online therapy was an easier option for people who could not face a therapist and there was also no need to wait for an appointment.

The Beating the Blues program guides users through eight "therapy" sessions. Users complete online interactive

exercises which include multi-choice questions such as "How many pleasurable things did you do last week?" They also view case studies of fictional patients who model the symptoms of anxiety and depression, helping to demonstrate techniques to improve their mood.

At the end of each session users are asked a series of questions about their own mood, and their answers are reviewed by clinical psychologists as a way of assessing whether they need further help.

"One in five New Zealanders suffer from depression at some point in their lives," Caldwell said. "In this internet age we are very comfortable receiving all kinds of information from the web. We do everything from learn, conduct business, be entertained and socialise online, so it makes sense that many of us will feel at ease receiving treatment on the net."

Judi Clements, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, said face-to-face counselling would always have a place, but there was a growing demand and need for online therapy.

"Reaching people who need help and support has to be a priority and using technology wisely can mean reaching more people than face-to-face contact alone."

The Beating the Blues program was developed in the UK and is the only online tool to treat depression used by the Britain's National Health Service.

Once Instep has completed the three-month trial, the program will be evaluated before any decision is made on whether the company adds online therapy to its range of services. Individuals can access the program even if their company is not signed up with Instep but they will have to pay for the eight-week course of therapy. Instep would not disclose their planned pricing, but in the UK the course has cost around £300 (\$650) per person.