



# IS STRESS CONTAGIOUS?

Yes, according to a new study, which found anxiety and depression can spread around a workplace as quickly as a cold. Here's how to protect yourself from second-hand stress...

**PICTURE THE SCENE:** a colleague has a hacking cough and runny nose. Would you spend lots of time up close to her? No. Now imagine she doesn't have a cold, but she does spend most of the day moaning about work, her boyfriend and her overdraft. Would you spend lots of time chatting with her? Yes? Well, be careful because you might 'catch' her stress.

Professor Elaine Hatfield, a psychologist from the University of Hawaii, recently led a study that found stress is as contagious as a cold, and 'second-hand' or 'passive' stress is rife in today's workplace. Her study comes at the same time as research from the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development dubbed stress 'the Black Death of the 21st century' for being so widespread and debilitating, and the current biggest cause of workplace sickness.

As well as absorbing other people's stressed feelings, we can also start to subconsciously mimic their furrowed brows and hunched shoulders when we're talking to them, according to Professor Hatfield. 'Women and sensitive people are most at risk because they tend to be more in tune with other people's feelings,' Professor Hatfield told *Grazia*. Tough, hardy types and men tend not to 'catch' stress simply because they don't pick up

on others' emotions as much. 'Some people are oblivious and therefore immune to the stress around them,' she says.

## HOW TO FIGHT STRESS FLU

- \* 'Don't spend time with a colleague in the middle of a work-related meltdown, especially in the pub after work where their stress goes into overdrive,' says stress expert Professor Carey Cooper of Lancaster university.
- \* 'Don't get drawn into complaining – change the subject or physically distance yourself by going for a walk or making tea,' Cooper says.
- \* 'We have a psychological need to connect with our colleagues, but they will stress you less if you connect on a personal level, so chat about your relationship or last night's TV instead of office issues,' adds Cooper.