

COPING WITH JOB STRESS

Fifty percent of the mortality from the 10 leading causes of death in the United States can be attributed to behavioral factors, including stress. For many of us, a job is a source of income and identity, and the place where we spend almost half of our life. Think about it. Most of us spend at least eight hours a day at work. When we include travel and overtime, it can mount to 10, perhaps even 12 hours a day.

Are we working harder and enjoying it less? Jobs can be a source of ill health and unhappiness. In today's work place, two factors, stress and clinical depression; have surfaced as "job busters." According to a national survey conducted by the Employee Assistance Professional Association (EAPA), stress and clinical depression rank as the second and third most significant problems in the workplace behind family crises. It is estimated that in the United States billions of dollars are lost every year due to reduced productivity, absenteeism, and premature death. Spending such a large portion of our lives unhappily, and letting that unhappiness spill over into our personal lives, doesn't make sense. Learning to recognize and cope with depression or job-related stress is necessary to lead productive and rewarding lives.

STRESS AND SUCCESS

To do our best work, we must generate some tension and stress. We need to get the adrenaline flowing. But too much stress is a different matter. It is ironic that the qualities most likely to make us successful in the work force- aggression, ambition, drive and energy- are those that are most likely to hurt us if not channeled in the right ways. Fifty percent of the mortality from the 10 leading causes of death in the United States can be attributed to behavioral factors, including stress.

JOB STRESS: THE SYMPTOMS

The most common symptoms of excessive job stress are fatigue, insomnia, high-blood pressure, headaches, ulcers, heartburn, inability to concentrate or relax changes in appetite, and waning sexual interest. When a person feels hopelessly overloaded at work, is unable to leave job problems behind at night or on weekends, experiences a trapped, immobilized feeling there is a definite problem. If not addressed, clinical depression may result from workplace stress. The depression may surface as impulsive or indecisive actions, irritability and anger, late arrival and a tendency to avoid colleagues.

WHAT CAUSES JOB STRESS?

Work overload and personality conflict (especially with superiors) are two of the most common causes of job stress. Too much responsibility is another. People in management jobs complain most often about work overload. But they have an advantage they may not be aware of ---flexibility. Through discussion, even confrontation, they have the power to change their workplace stress. This option does not always exist for other workers, such as assembly line workers or those in routine clerical positions. Research shows that jobs, which are perceived as boring and repetitious, can be just as much of a strain as the high-powered executive position.



Another cause of stress may be changes in technology, which are a threat to many workers especially older ones who may be intimidated by these changes while other workers, who have not been trained properly, feel "out of the loop." In some cases, workplace stress may arise because we genuinely cannot handle our job. Sometimes, newly promoted people simply need training for a new role---especially if this is their first supervisory or management position.

FIVE BASIC REACTIONS TO WORKPLACE STRESS:

1. Sharing grievances with others, without taking direct steps to change the situation.
2. Working longer and harder to reduce the overload.
3. Switching to an engrossing recreation activity, so we can return refreshed and do more work in a shorter time.
4. Withdrawing physically from the situation - quitting, seeking another job, or reducing the time and energy spent at work.
5. Analyzing the situation, revising strategies and looking for ways to change things.

At first glance, Number 5 seems the most practical alternative if we recognize how much of our job situation is out of our hands. So much depends on the actions and rules created by others that even our most constructive efforts cannot guarantee success. What can be guaranteed is the good feeling of "taking charge" of our situation. Because individual circumstances vary so much, "the right answer" will be different for everyone.

Remember: There may be no immediate solutions to the difficulties caused by stress on the job.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REDUCING STRESS ON THE JOB:

1. **Take charge of your situation.**
To the extent that this is possible, set and re-set priorities. Take care of important and difficult tasks first. Organize your time. You can be more effective.
2. **Be realistic about what you can change.**
Don't set yourself up for frustration and failure. Set realistic and attainable goals, do what's possible. Accept the rest. Now you're ready to carry on.
3. **Take one task at a time.**
Divide each large project into smaller manageable tasks. Make a list of everything that needs to be done and the approximate time for finishing each task. Prioritize the tasks. Complete the first task then go on to the next one. Keep the tasks small until you are feeling a sense of accomplishment and control.
4. **Be honest with co-workers.**
This includes the boss. Make it plain you feel in a bind. Chances are others are feeling the same. Don't just complain. Be constructive and make practical suggestions for improvement.

5. **Let your employer help.**
Many companies help their employees deal with the effects of stress through their Employee Assistance Professionals (EAP) Association, corporate fitness programs or special clinics for diet, smoking and alcohol. Finds out what services are available to you.
6. **Slow down.**
Learn to say "no." Drop activities that are not crucial.
7. **Recognize danger signs of job stress.**
Learn the symptoms of job stress and take action as soon as they appear to be getting out of hand.
8. **Take care of you physical health.**
Good physical health increases your stress tolerance. Eat and sleep sensibly. Get plenty of exercise. Cut down or eliminate alcohol, tobacco and drugs that alter our regular body rhythms of sleep. Watch your intake of fats and refined sugars.
9. **Learn to relax.**
Find a safety valve, whether it is a sport, hobby, music, reading or just walking. Use it to create a 'bridge' between work and home life.
10. **Don't neglect your private life.**
Work out a schedule that allows you to do justice to both work and personal life. *Stick to it.*
11. **Consider changing or quitting your job.**
It's a last resort, but still an option to you. If finances will not allow you to consider this, you might choose to concentrate on your personal life. If home life is more productive, more stimulating and more fun, it can take some of the sting out of an unhappy work situation.

Seeking professional help is just one more method of coping. Knowing when you need professional help is a sign of strength and self-knowledge, not a weakness

DEPRESSION IN THE WORKPLACE-AN OVERVIEW

Almost all of us have, at some time, felt depressed over such stressful life events as job loss, illness, or a death in the family. This depression may temporarily affect concentration and performance at work. The situation may be serious if depression persists for more than two weeks. Clinical depression, an illness that strikes more than 17 million American adults annually, is one of the most treatable of all medical illnesses. More than 80 percent of people with depression can be treated successfully with medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of the two treatments. Only a qualified health professional can diagnose if someone has clinical depression.



Depression may be caused by many factors such as an imbalance of brain chemicals; some medications; serious illnesses such as cancer or heart disease; or difficult life events such as death or divorce.

If you or one of your employees has experienced some of the following symptoms for several weeks, it may be time to talk with a mental health professional:

- *marked decrease in ability to get the job done
- *working more slowly than usual
- *frequently missing deadlines
- *making excuses for not finishing work
- *frequently calling in sick
- *appearing listless, unable to concentrate on work
- *frequently looking distracted or 'far away'
- *showing decreased interest or involvement in work
- *withdrawing from interaction with co-workers.

ADAPTED FROM PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FOLLOWING SOURCES:

Contact your local Mental Health Association or National Mental Health Association; 1021 Prince Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-2971, Phone: 800-969-6642. Stigma Watch Line: 800-2969-NMHA. TTY: 800-433-5959. WEB Site: <http://www.nmha.org>

The American Institute of Stress
124 Park Avenue
Yonkers, NY 10703
Phone: 914-963-1200

Carilion Employee Assistance Program
213 McClanahan Street
Suite 201A Roanoke, VA 24104 (800) 992-1931 (540) 981-8950

SOURCES:
"Business and Health" Medical Economics Publishing Montvale, NJ
Employee Assistance Professionals (EAP)
2101 Wilson Blvd. Suite 500
Arlington, VA 22201-3062
Phone: 703-522-6272

"Coping with your "job"
The Canadian Mental Health Association
Toronto, Ontario M4S 2Z3