



Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

DOES WORK HAVE TO BE STRESSFUL?



Workplace stress is identified as the culprit behind many personal and corporate challenges yet, there are several ways in which work can be a potential health resource.

When the pressures of the workplace become too much, employees and the companies they work for experience stress and strain in a variety of areas, including the following:

Physical. Stress reactions range from relatively minor psychosomatic symptoms (e.g. sleep disturbances, upper respiratory and digestive problems) to life-threatening conditions (e.g. elevated blood pressure, hypertension, coronary heart disease). There is also evidence of increased potential risk of infectious diseases and suppressed immune functioning, musculoskeletal complaints, asthma, ulcers, and heightened risk of stroke.

Behavioural. Stress reactions can take a variety of forms including nervous habits and tics, increased smoking or alcohol and other drug consumption, and impaired positive health-related behaviours.

Psychological. Stress reactions include disturbed affect (e.g. depressed mood, anxiety, aggression) and/or disturbed cognition (e.g. inability to concentrate, forgetfulness, lack of attention to detail).

Organizational. Some of the most common organizational outcomes of stress include increased absenteeism, decreased performance, increased rate of accidents, greater incidence of safety events, increased interpersonal conflict, impaired communication, flawed decision-making, and reduced employee engagement.

Ultimately, any of these reactions can be devastating to both employees (the companies they work for)



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The link between work features and stress

According to most workplace stress models, the most common sources of work stress include:

Work load and work pace. The strain of being overworked is uniformly negative across physical, behavioural, psychological, and organizational outcome measures. Related to issues of work load and pace, there is concern about the absolute number of hours required of some employees.

Role stressors. The most common form of role stressor that employees face is 'inter-role conflict' (i.e. the demands of work and family conflict with the roles of parent or spouse). Another common role stressor is role ambiguity (uncertainty about what is expected in a job).

Career concerns. Stress arises from job insecurity or obsolescence, and concerns about career development.

Effort-reward imbalances. Stress can result when rewards (financial, esteem, career) are not consistent with efforts that employees offer or are demanded to offer.

Poor leadership. Employees who work for non-supportive leaders and supervisors tend to experience low levels of job satisfaction, life satisfaction, increased psychological distress, psychosomatic symptoms, anxiety, depression, and increased levels of work-family conflict.

Job content and control. Stress arises from lack of job control or work that provides little stimulation and has little intrinsic meaning for workers.

Work scheduling. Working rotating shifts or permanent night shifts results in a disruption of social activities, increased conflict between work and parent/spouse roles, and poor mental and physical health outcomes.

Health and productivity costs of stress

The costs of stress to employees is devastating and clearly documented in empirical literature and the media (e.g. depression, work/family conflict, lack of engagement, social withdrawal, etc.). For employers, the costs of stress typically focus on the economic costs of medical care, disability provisions, absenteeism, and lost productivity.

Such estimates dramatically underestimate the effects and costs of workplace stress because work stress is pervasive and can emerge in any, or in a combination, of four categories: psychological, physical, behavioural, and

organizational. For example, depression (a psychological outcome of stress) is linked to coronary heart disease (a physical outcome). Yet this same depression may increase smoking and alcohol consumption (behavioural outcomes of stress). Ultimately, the depression (which originally stemmed from stress) is experienced in the organization as increased absenteeism and loss of productivity (organizational outcomes).

Work can enhance well-being

Most empirical research has focused on the negative consequences of employment (i.e. stress) yet there is a large body of evidence that suggests work can substantially enhance well-being and there are many workplace factors that contribute to mental and physical health, improved family relationships, and satisfying home lives. This may be hard to grasp for somebody who is struggling with their workload, but is obvious to somebody who is unemployed and desperately looking for a job.

A fair salary and a strong benefits package clearly contribute to reduced stress, a more balanced family life, and improved job satisfaction. There are many other, less tangible workplace factors that also contribute to improved family relationships and more satisfying home lives. Consider the following:

Total hours worked. Research indicates that working too many hours (over 45 hours per week) leads to work family conflict. However, working too few hours (for example, less than 20 hours per week) reduces the positive benefits of workplace interaction and increased household income. Every family will be different, but there appears to be a "sweet spot" of total hours worked per week which offers the ideal balance.

Job autonomy. Nobody likes being out of control. Having some say in the work you do and when you do it allows you to meet family responsibilities and teaches you skills that can be applied in the family domain. The end result can be improved satisfaction at home and the development of healthier children with fewer behaviour problems.

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Social relationships. Humans are social animals. We have evolved and survived by being and belonging to communities. The social and networking aspect of the workplace has enormous benefits for people and their families. Research has revealed that people who enjoy the company of their colleagues have healthier children who do better in school, whereas those with less social engagement and interaction with peers are missing some of the key emotional resources that lead to reduced conflict at home.

Encourage work that works. Healthy workplaces are a result not only of the absence of job stressors but are also a result of a presence of organizational resources to help employees handle job and life stressors. Dr. Graham Lowe suggests the following guiding principles are necessary steps to positively shape the workplace environment, reduce stress, and retain satisfied, productive workers.

Supportive culture and values. Creating and maintaining a healthy workplace requires a supportive culture that clearly values employees and is trust-based.

Leadership. Commitment from top management is critical and must take the form of visible leadership on health issues. Employees judge commitment by the actions of the CEO and the executive team.

Define health broadly. Good mental and physical health is more than the absence of illness, injury and disease. It also means leading a balanced life, developing one's potential, and making meaningful contributions to the organization.

Participative team approach. Healthy workplace initiatives should be developed with input from management, health and safety, human resources, employees and unions.

Customized plans. Develop a clear policy with definite goals. The policy must be tailored to the business context, work force characteristics, and document gaps in the work environment.

Link to strategic goals. Integrate health and well-being objectives into the organization's business planning process, so that over time, all management decisions take health into account.

Continuing support. Allocate resources to support healthy workplace goals. Provide training to managers at all levels to sustain the initiative and embed it into how the organization operates.

Evaluate & communicate. Open and continuous communication is a key success factor in any organizational change initiative. Health is no different.



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For employees: take personal responsibility

Not all stressors affect all individuals in a similar manner. Individual resources and coping styles are key factors that moderate the relationship between stressors and stress. When individuals accept their personal role in managing stress and maintaining a healthy work-life balance and take steps to avail themselves of support (e.g. coaching, educational seminars and workshops) they begin to experience the joy and well-being of contributing to a healthy workplace and organization while at the same time successfully facing the challenges and stresses that inevitably accompany workplace experiences.

Self-responsibility is about:

- Accepting that we are each ultimately responsible for our experiences in life and not somebody else
- Making smart decisions which lead to a balanced life
- Changing aspects of ourselves that contribute to stress and ill-health while finding ways to resolve, accept, distance, or manage the people and situations that cause or contribute to our stress
- Knowing when to reach out for support if the going gets rough (e.g. contacting an employee assistance coach or workplace health and productivity specialist).

Workplace stress is inevitable. Unhealthy stress is not.

A variety of successful, empirically sound workplace health models exist. With the right information, the right tools, the right counsel, and the right intent, leaders, managers, and employees can reduce the negative impact of workplace stress and increase the likelihood that work will serve to enhance well-being and health.

Put simply, what is good for employees is good for the organizations they work for.



 Send us your questions, comments, and suggestions — lifelines@homewoodhealth.com

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