

Workplace Stress

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices, Organizational Culture

Tackling Stress Improves Morale, Productivity and Safety

This article is excerpted from the Center's brand-new, free online resource titled, Workplace Safety Is No Accident — An Employer's Online Toolkit to Protect Employees and Volunteers.

Rising workplace stress is a large albatross hanging around the necks of workers and employers. According to studies of the subject by the U.S. Department of Labor, the American Psychological Association, Yankelovich Monitor and CCH Inc., in recent years there has been a 20.3 percent increase in job absences caused by anxiety, stress and neurotic disorders. Stress affects morale, productivity and safety.

Developing a healthy workplace can pay off in reversing this trend. Inviting employees to have a say about their work environment in an honest and open fashion can change the workplace culture and reduce stress. Other successful management practices include improving communication, increasing staff members' decision making, offering flexible job scheduling, encouraging breaks, working in team toward a common goal, and leadership and professional development opportunities.

Providing such services as language classes, child care, onsite flu shots or health screening, and tuition reimbursement programs also help balance work-life issues thus reducing stress. One winner of APA's 2003 Best Practice Award allows injured employees time to recuperate and helps them ease back into work by doing light-duty work at community nonprofit organizations — all while receiving their normal compensation. Another offered three months' notice and job placement services to employees affected by layoffs.

Workplace Stress Defined

Workplace stress can be defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the employee or volunteer. Workplace stress results from the interaction of the staff member and the conditions of work. Views differ, however, on the importance of the individual characteristics versus working conditions as the primary cause of job stress. Differences in such individual characteristics as personality and coping style are most important in predicting whether certain job conditions will result in stress — in other words, what is stressful for one person may not be a problem for someone else. Other factors to consider in workplace stress include the design of tasks, autocratic management style, work roles, job insecurity or environmental factors such as noisy or dangerous working conditions.

Hazards Associated With Workplace Stress

Workplace stress can have physiological effects on employees and volunteers. These effects include headache, sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating, digestive problems and depression. The effects of job stress on chronic diseases are more difficult to see because chronic diseases take a long time to develop and can be influenced by many factors other than stress. Nonetheless, evidence is rapidly accumulating to suggest that stress plays an important role in several types of chronic health problems — especially cardiovascular disease,

musculoskeletal disorders, and psychological disorders. Lack of concentration or stress reaction can also lead to workplace injuries.

Dealing with workplace stress should encompass the staff member and the job. The person should have the opportunity to participate in such wellness programs as stress reduction, exercise, and weight maintenance.

By ensuring that the workload is in line with each staff member's capabilities and resources, the level of frustration that a person feels can be reduced.

Job design is also an important factor. Design jobs to provide meaning, stimulation, and opportunities for employees and volunteers to use their skills. Clearly define staff members' roles and responsibilities. Give them opportunities to participate in decisions and actions affecting their jobs. Try to establish work schedules that are compatible with demands and responsibilities outside the job.

Good job design accommodates a person's mental and physical abilities. The following job design guidelines will help minimize or control workplace stress. Where stress in the workplace is caused, for example, by a physical agent, it is best to control it at its source. If the workplace is too loud, implement control measures to deal with the noise wherever possible. If a person is experiencing pain from repetitive strain, the workstation can be redesigned to reduce repetitive and strenuous movements.

Teach employees and volunteers to relax by taking several deep breaths throughout the day, or taking regular stretch breaks. Stretching is simple enough to do anywhere and takes only a few seconds. Help individuals take charge of their situations by setting aside 10 minutes at the beginning of each day to prioritize and organize their day's tasks and responsibilities. Encourage them to be honest with colleagues, but be constructive and make practical suggestions, and be realistic about what they can change.

Resources

- 2002 CCH Inc. *Unscheduled Absence Survey*, CCH Riverwoods, IL.
- American Psychological Association, 2000 national public opinion poll.
- American Psychological Association, *Psychologically Healthy Workplace Best Practices 2003*. The Best Practices Honors recognize companies for innovative programs and policies that support psychologically healthy work environments.
- Canadian Mental Health Association, "Sources of Workplace Stress," Richmond, British Columbia DHHS (NIOSH) Publication No. 99-101.
- *Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety*, 4th Edition contains a comprehensive summary of the latest scientific information about the causes and effects of job stress (see Vol. 1, Chapter 5, Mental Health; Vol. 2, Chapter 34, Psychosocial and Organizational Factors).
- Quick, James Campbell, Jonathan D. Quick, Debra L. Nelson, and Joseph J. Hurrell, "*Preventive Stress Management in Organizations*," American Psychological Association 1997, 367 pages, hardcover \$39.95. This book offers a comprehensive, orderly framework for practicing healthy preventive stress management. The volume covers a variety of topics on stress and the organizational costs of distress.
- Sauter, S.L., L.R. Murphy., J.J. Hurrell, Jr., *Prevention of work-related psychological disorders*, American Psychologist 45(10):1146-1158.

Free Online Resource Now Available

Workplace Stress is just one of many topics addressed in Workplace Safety Is No Accident — An Employer's Online Toolkit to Protect Employees and Volunteers, the free, online toolkit developed by the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Consult the toolkit for help with a particular area, such as ladders, transportation or food service. Or peruse the toolkit for insights on setting up a workplace safety program. Print out sample forms and check out the links to additional resources.