

Stress@ Work:

An Introduction to Job Stress

What is Job Stress? Job stress is the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

Job stress matters to our health and our work. When we feel stressed, our bodies respond by raising the concentration of stress hormones in our blood. When our bodies continually respond to constant demands or threats, coping mechanisms stay in overdrive, which can be damaging to health over time. Research shows that excessive job stress can lead to many long-term health problems, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, weakened immune function, high blood pressure, musculoskeletal disorders, substance abuse, depression and anxiety. Some short term signs of job stress are listed in the table to the right.

Stressful working conditions can also impact health indirectly by limiting our ability or motivation to participate in other health promoting behaviors such as eating well and exercising.

Job Stress Signs and Symptoms

Headache
Sleep disturbances
Upset stomach
Difficulty concentrating
Short temper
Fatigue
Muscle aches and pains
Over- and under-eating
Chronic mild illness
Anxiety, irritability
Depression
Gastrointestinal problems
Angry outbursts
Accidents
Substance use and abuse
Isolation from co-workers
Job dissatisfaction
Low morale
Marital, family problems

Good Stress vs. Bad Stress Stress is not always bad. Stress in the form of a challenge energizes us psychologically and physically, and it motivates us to learn new skills and master our work. When a challenge is met, we feel relaxed and satisfied. This is good stress or *eustress*. However, sometimes a challenge is turned into job demands that cannot be met. This is negative stress, or *distress*, which sets the stage for illness, injury, and job failure.

What you need to know about job stress If you work, it is likely that job stress will affect you at some point during your career. Whether you are an employee or an employer, it is important to recognize that stress in the workplace can contribute to poor health, which can lead to lower productivity, absenteeism, and higher healthcare costs. For example:

- Up to 44% of women and 36% of men want to quit their jobs because of workplace stress. This contributes to unhappiness as well as many negative health effects.
- Healthcare expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress.
- Sixty percent of lost workdays each year can be attributed to stress.
- Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems.

Health Effects

Studies of workers show that certain stressful job characteristics, when combined, can be particularly damaging to long term health. For instance, workers who say their jobs are very demanding (physically or mentally) and who also say they have little control over job tasks are more likely to experience health problems such as heart disease and other chronic conditions as compared with workers in jobs with lower demands and more decision-making opportunities. “Job strain” is a term that describes the combination of **high demands** and **low control**. It is “job strain” (not just feeling stressed) that is most often linked with serious health problems.

On the positive side, having a demanding job is not necessarily unhealthy, so long as you have a **control** over your work. Jobs with **high demands and high control** can be stimulating and challenging. These kinds of “active” jobs have been linked to positive health and well-being.

What can be done to design healthier jobs?

Give employees a sense of control over their work and opportunities to grow and learn new things. When designing jobs, pay special attention to these aspects of the job:

- Workstations are designed for tasks and injury avoidance
- Tasks are matched with workers' capabilities and resources
- Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined
- Job overall has meaning and a variety of tasks
- Workers can use their skills and learn new skills
- Workers can make decisions affecting their jobs
- Communication is required between co-workers and in two directions between workers and supervisors
- There are opportunities for social interaction among workers
- Work schedules are compatible with responsibilities outside the job

For more information, tools, and factsheets to address work related stress, visit the University of Massachusetts Lowell

Stress@Work website:

www.uml.edu/centers/cph-new/job-stress/default.html

Examples of Work Organization Stressors

Physical stressors

Constant sitting/lack of mobility
 Repetitive tasks
 Fast-paced work
 Rotating shifts
 Insufficient breaks
 Poor temperature control
 Excessive noise

Psychosocial stressors

Unrealistic deadlines
 Sustained, excessive workload
 Excess overtime
 Responsibility without authority
 Job skills not used
 Lack of recognition
 Poor communication
 Inflexible rules
 Lack of input in decisions
 Conflicting demands
 Poor supervision
 Poor relations with co-workers
 Lack of respect
 Dead end jobs (no promotions)
 Job insecurity
 Favoritism
 Discrimination
 Racial/sexual harassment