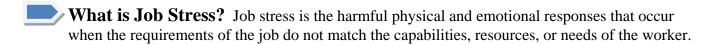




Stress@Work: An Introduction to Job Stress



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.

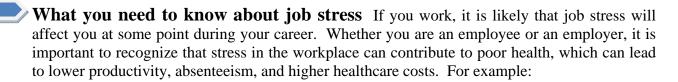
Stressful working conditions can also impact health indirectly by limiting our ability or motivation to participate in other health promoting behaviors such as eating well and exercising.

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.

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



- 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