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Stress in the workplace

By Helena Peterson

BEST PRACTICES AND MECHANISMS THAT REALLY WORK

We've probably all had a job where there are stressors that can make us feel mentally, emotionally or physically ill.

We see people in the same workplace coping, or even indifferent, to the same stresses that make us, or our colleagues, suffer. Why do some people "roll with the punches" while others take sick days or stress leave to deal with it? Why does one company have happy, productive employees while another in the same field has high staff turnover, an overabundance of sick days and medical leaves taken, and an atmosphere of vitriol?

The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) states that too much stress can have a very negative impact on employees and employers alike. Fear of job redundancy, layoffs due to an uncertain economy and increased demands for overtime due to staff cutbacks act as negative stressors.

The CMHA notes that employees who start to feel the "pressure to perform" can get caught in a downward spiral of increasing effort to meet rising expectations, with no increase in job satisfaction. This relentless requirement to work at optimum performance takes its toll. Absenteeism, illness, alcoholism, "petty internal politics," bad or snap decisions, indifference and apathy, and lack of motivation or creativity are all byproducts of an over-stressed workplace.

Healthwise spoke recently with Dr. Merv Gilbert, R.Psych., a principal with Gilbert Acton Consulting. Along with Dr. Joti Samra, R. Psych., adjunct professor and scientist at the Consortium for Organizational Mental Healthcare at Simon Fraser University, Gilbert co-chairs the Psychologically Healthy Workplace Collaborative (phwc.ca), a non-profit organization based out of SFU's downtown Vancouver campus.

"These are tough times," says Gilbert. "Even before the economic downturn, job stress was costing Canadians \$16 billion annually, two-thirds of which is absorbed by the employer in lost productivity, having to hire replacement workers, high fees for staff medical insurance and payouts, and so on."

There is the intangible of corporate reputation as well. Companies with a bad rep feel the financial pinch from all sides. Who wants to work for a business that doesn't take care of its employees?

"In a typical office, you'll find a number of issues that impact an employee's health," says Samra. "The amount of work assigned, for example. And that's not the main stressor, in fact. It's actually the degree of control the worker has over his or her work that impacts on the stress they will feel."

Stress reducers

The Canadian Mental Health Association says you don't have to let stress get you down. Be proactive in fighting off stress. There are things you can do:

- Laughing is one of the easiest and best ways to reduce stress. Share a joke with a co-worker, watch a funny movie at home with some friends, read the comics and try to see the humour in the situation.
- Learn to relax. Take several deep breaths throughout the day, or have regular stretch breaks. Stretching is simple enough to do anywhere and only takes a few seconds.
- Take charge of your situation by taking 10 minutes at the beginning of each day to prioritize and organize your day. Be honest with your colleagues, but be constructive and make practical suggestions. Be realistic about what you can change.
- Take things one step at a time and don't neglect your physical health or your private life. Take care of yourself.
- Try meditating, start yoga classes, eat a balanced diet. Don't skip breakfast, as your body needs all the energy it can get to fight stress. Cut down on sweets.
- It's also important to drink plenty of water, as your brain is 75 per cent fluid and is the first to be affected by dehydration. As well, limit your consumption of coffee, alcohol, drugs or cigarettes in your bid to reduce stress.
- Don't neglect exercise. Even a brisk walk can do wonders.
- Socialize, talk to a good friend or relative about your feelings, think positive, have a massage, take up a hobby or have a hot bath.

It's important to recognize the danger signs that say you are under too much stress and act on them before they begin affecting your well-being.

SOURCE: [HTTP://WWW.VCN.BC.CA/RMDCMHA/MHWEEK.HTML](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/RMDCMHA/MHWEEK.HTML)

Picture Lucy and Ethel from the '60s show *I Love Lucy*, standing at the assembly line wrapping chocolates. They are forced to wrap them faster and faster as the belt speeds up, with no one concerned for their needs. You see the gals become more and more stressed out, and chaos ensues.

In an everyday situation in the workplace, one of the most important factors is for the employer to provide clear and defined leadership, to help reduce the stress in the environment.

"A workplace should be free of harassment, overt favouritism, disrespect and rules that are in the 'grey area'," says Gilbert. "Employees work well and get along when they know the rules, follow them, and the boss acknowledges their accomplishments."

- A number of research-based, free resources have been created by Samra and Gilbert specifically for employees and organizations, and are available through the website: www.comh.ca.