



Insightful Safety

News, Views, Tips and Techniques

March 2021

UNDER PRESSURE – WORKPLACE STRESS

There's stress and then there's STRESS!

During a presentation at the most recent CalCIMA Spring Thaw, Meghan Neal, Director of EHS, P.W. Gillibrand Co., Inc., and I discussed ways to manage stress at work. I'd like to expand on that discussion in today's newsletter. Make no mistake, the issue of stress at work is clearly a health and safety concern for everyone involved.



Mental Health Care Professionals have reported dramatic increased numbers of new patients and treatments for existing ones. Given all that has taken place over the course of the last 12+ months, it is no wonder that workers in all trades have anecdotally reported high levels of harmful stress and the ill effects of that stress. If there is any good news in all of this, it's that more people are reaching out for that help. But more on that later. Let's begin by listing some common stressors at work.

- Long Hours
- Heavy Workload Combined with Tight Deadlines
- Unexpected or Unwanted Changes to Duties
- Insufficient Skills for The Job
- Lack of Autonomy/Over-Supervision
- Unengaging, Boring, Perceived Unimportant Work
- Inadequate and/or Unsafe Working Environment, Equipment and Resources
- Few Promotional Opportunities
- Harassment and/or Discrimination

While any of the above factors may be experienced in one's work life and not necessarily result in harmful work-related stress, it appears that when these or other similar factors are present and there does not seem to be an endpoint or viable solution, that these stressors truly take hold. What's more, when such things occur and there are stressors in a person's private life, their negative effects are multiplied.

The personal symptoms may include any number of things.

Physical

- Muscular Tensions
- Headaches and Fatigue
- Heart Palpitations
- Sleeping Difficulties
- Repeated Gastrointestinal Upsets
- Dermatological Disorders



Psychological

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Discouragement
- Irritability
- Pessimism
- Feelings of Being Overwhelmed and Unable to Cope
- Cognitive Difficulties, Such as a Reduced Ability to Concentrate or Make Decisions.



Many of the above symptoms go unrecognized by everyone except the person experiencing them. It is not until behavioral symptoms are displayed that friends, family, coworkers, and managers recognize the effects of stress on a person.

Behavioral

- An increase in sick days or absenteeism

- Hyper-Sensitivity, Impatience, Reduced Tolerance for Frustrating Events
- Diminished Creativity, Initiative, Disinterested in Activities
- Reduced Work Performance
- Interpersonal Relationship Issues at Work and Home
- Irritability, Mood Swings
- Feelings of Isolation or Creating Self-Isolation

In many instances, the person experiencing these symptoms will identify stress or depression as the reason for them, but not openly. In other instances, the sufferer may mis-label or misidentify the stressors but still know they are not at their best. Self-diagnosis is not impossible, but it often takes an outside observer or mental health professional to find the true cause of one's stress-induced symptoms.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Not all stress can be removed from a workplace, home, or even life itself. Some stress is actually good for you which we'll discuss later but it is possible to manage stress to a degree that its negative effects can be minimized.

1. Recognition and Acknowledgement

Organizations with proactive, mature and supportive cultures understand that work stress is an ever-present factor in an employee's work life. What's more, home stressors and impact work stressors and vice versa. In most instances, these stressors form a repeating cycle that is difficult to stop. By being open and honest to everyone in the workplace that stress can and will be present, open dialogs and meaningful actions can take place.

Individuals who can acknowledge that they are suffering ill effects from work-related stress are well on their way to developing ways to manage that stress. Once you acknowledge the issue, you may be able to recognize and identify the stressors affecting you the most. Once identified, actions to reduce their effects can begin.

2. Seek Help

If you experience the negative effects of work stress, talk to someone about it. Discuss it with your friends, superiors, and peers. Merely talking about it truly helps. A company's Human Resources Department, Employee Assistance Program, or health care provider should have guidance and professional resources available to you to help. Don't try to handle it alone.

3. Identify the Stressor(s) and Handle

Once you have a clear understanding of what is causing you the most serious problems work on reducing their impact. This will likely require a combined effort from management and yourself to create solutions that are effective but realistic.



**“STRESS CAN HELP ACCOMPLISH
GREAT THINGS IN RECORD TIME...”**

Long hours? Create longer or more frequent breaks. Find out how frequent those long days will be, often knowing that there is an end

in sight helps to reduce stress.

Feel like you have no control over your day? Work with management to find areas where you might be able to exercise some control, even minor changes help. Look for ways to organize your workflow or work area.

There are many, many other things that can help so seek them out and be creative. Work it out your company to see what might be done. Be open, honest, and realistic.

4. Check In

Do you have a friend or colleague that doesn't work in your company but is a good listener? It helps if they understand your work and workload so they can listen with knowledge. Check in with them every once in a while and give them an update. Similarly, if you are working with management to manage stress, report progress, concerns, successes and misses with them on a regular basis.

Managers, though the above guidance is directed to an employee, you can take this information and work proactively to prevent work-related stress from having a negative, lasting effect.

BENEFITS

As mentioned earlier, not all stress is a bad thing. Stress can help accomplish great things in record time because of deadlines and restrictions to an outcome are imposed on a person. Such things help drive behaviors. Even when experiencing this stress, the feelings of accomplishment of finishing a project on time, under budget and all of the other potential stressor is transformative and reassuring.

Experts have said that imposing hard deadlines and other potentially stress-inducing factors on a person or team and be an advantage with one important caveat – GIVE THEM A BREAK!



Just like an athlete undergoing stressful training for several days, there is a time for dialing back the workout to allow the body to recharge. It feels good when you're riding a bike up a steep hill to coast down on the other side.

One might label such periods as "Episodic Stress," which is very different than chronic stress. After the stressful episode, take time to recover. Such approaches can be beneficial even when you didn't think you could make it to the top.

Stress, self-imposed or otherwise, can be used effectively for periods or time when a.) the finish line or goal is clearly identified, b.) there are supportive resources available, c.) course corrections take place as needed via guiding oversight, and d.) there's a chance to coast downhill a bit before undertaking the next challenge. Without that recharge, burnout is inevitable.

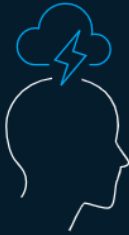
When we don't properly recover after a stressful episode, we continue to absorb stress unconsciously, which can result in chronic stress.

Warning signs of chronic stress



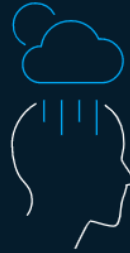
Physical

- Headache
- Stomachache
- Muscle tightness
- Elevated heartrate



Behavioral

- Bossiness/arguing
- Increased alcohol/substance use
- Compulsive eating/smoking
- Shouting/crying/withdrawal



Emotional

- Anxiousness
- Boredom
- Edginess
- Powerlessness



Cognitive

- Not thinking clearly
- Forgetfulness
- Indecision
- Inability to focus

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Take control of what you can including your physical health. Exercise, eat well, limit alcohol and all the other things associated with keeping yourself well.

Meditate. It's no longer some strange practice from the far East. It is a practical and effective way to quiet the mind, train yourself to focus and prioritize things in your life and workplace.

Managers – Talk to your people. All the time. Communicate what is going on in the company, the good news and the bad.

Never, never fail to seek out help – from friends and professionals. Your mental health is just as important as your physical health. Take care of your mind and body.

THE BACK PAGE

Let me begin by thanking my friends, colleagues, clients, and mentors who have helped me during the last twelve months. Through your kind, supportive words, and when it was safe, warm embraces, allowed me to not only survive but to flourish. It meant a lot and continues to be important as the months progress. The connections between us have grown stronger as a result of meeting the challenges together.



During this time, I've had the opportunity to deliver some new (or newly revised) virtual and live events (high level safety protocols in place) and to just name a few:

Agency Interactions: How to Talk to an Inspector – A half-day workshop that guides you through the often tricky situations that can happen during an agency inspection. Vital information.

Accident Investigation Skills – A full-day workshop that teaches you the skills necessary to conduct a meaningful investigation. A LOT of material is covered and is appropriate for safety professionals, front-line supervisors, and department managers alike.

Train -the-Trainer – THIS is the real work. Gathering over 35 years of experience and ideas have been brought together to help YOU become a better, more effective trainer.

Okay, all for now. Reach out and keep in touch.

"Insightful Safety" is a periodic newsletter from **Insight Services and Presentations**. The contents are shared for information only. Health-related issues are best addressed by medical and mental health professionals. The news has been gathered from various public sources and shared with you to keep you abreast of information, trends and ideas that may help you create a safer workplace, safer workers, and a safer home. The views are often my own as are the tips and techniques...though I borrow heavily from friends, colleagues, and experts. Any safety guidance provided is based on common safety sense. If you have any questions or concerns about this, reach out to me or talk to your company's safety professional. Also, none of this is copyrighted, share as you like.



Terry L. Tyson
P: 619.743.5755
E: terry@ttysoninsight.com
W: ttysoninsight.com