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Stress in the Workplace

In today's economic upheavals, downsizing, layoff, merger and bankruptcies have cost hundreds of thousands of workers their jobs. Millions more have been shifted to unfamiliar tasks within their companies and wonder how much longer they will be employed. Adding to the pressures that workers face are new bosses, computer surveillance of production, fewer health and retirement benefits, and the feeling they have to work longer and harder just to maintain their current economic status. Workers at every level are experiencing increased tension and uncertainty, and are updating their resumes.

The loss of a job can be devastating, putting unemployed workers at risk for physical illness, marital strain, anxiety, depression and even suicide. Loss of a job affects every part of life, from what time you get up in the morning, to whom you see and what you can afford to do. Until the transition is made to a new position, stress is chronic.

A sense of powerlessness

A feeling of powerlessness is a universal cause of job stress. When you feel powerless, you're prey to depression's traveling companions, helplessness and hopelessness. You don't alter or avoid the situation because you feel nothing can be done.

Secretaries, waitresses, middle managers, police officers, editors and medical interns are among those with the most highly stressed occupations marked by the need to respond to others' demands and timetables, with little control over events. Common to this job situation are complaints of too much responsibility and too little authority, unfair labor practices and inadequate job descriptions. Employees can counteract these pressures through workers' unions or other organizations, grievance or personnel offices or, more commonly, by direct negotiations with their immediate supervisors.

Your job description

Every employee should have a specific, written job description. Simply negotiating one does more to dispel a sense of powerlessness than anything else we know. It is a contract that you help write. You can object to what and insist on what you do want. If there is a compromise, it's because you agreed to it. With a clear job description, your expectations are spelled out, as are your boss's.

A good job description is time limited. Set a specific date for a review and revision based on your mutual experience with this initial job description. If you and your boss can't agree on what your job description should be, look for another job, either within the same company or outside. Even in these tough economic times, it is important that your job be a source of satisfaction and respect.

When you're a square peg and your job is a round hole

Remember the old saying, "Find a job you love and you'll never work another day in your life." Most people

spend about 25 percent of their adult lives working. If you enjoy what you do, you're lucky. But if you're the proverbial square peg and your job is a round hole, job stress hurts your productivity and takes a serious toll on your mind and body.

There are many reasons for staying in a job that doesn't fit you or that you don't particularly like. One reason can be the "golden handcuff" — having salary, pension, benefits and "perks" that keep one tied to a job regardless of stress consequences.

Many people are in jobs they don't like or aren't good at. The quick answer is to get a job they like or one that better matches their skills, abilities and interest — easier said than done. Some clients have no idea what kind of job they would like or what kind of job would be better. Worse, they don't have a clue on how to go about finding out this information.

Traumatic events on the job

Some jobs are inherently dangerous and others can suddenly become so. Criminal justice personnel, firefighters, ambulance drivers, military personnel and disaster teams witness many terrible scenes and are exposed to personal danger routinely. They usually handle such incidents capably. But occasionally a particularly bad episode will stay with them, appearing in memory flashbacks and nightmares. Sleep disturbance, guilt, fearfulness and physical complaints may follow. Even ordinary jobs can become traumatic: a co-worker, boss or client physically threatens an employee; a bus crashes on a field trip; an employee is robbed or taken hostage; a shooting occurs. Such events can create post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and result in workers' compensation claims if left untreated by a trauma specialist.

Work setting

Sometimes your work setting creates physical stress because of noise, lack of privacy, poor lighting, poor ventilation, poor temperature control or inadequate sanitary facilities. Settings where there is organizational confusion or an overly authoritarian, laissez-faire or crisis-centered managerial style are all psychologically stressful.

Act through labor or employee organizations to alter stressful working conditions. If that doesn't work, try the courts, which have become increasingly receptive to complaints of stressful working conditions. Recent rulings created pressure for employers to provide working environments that are as stress free as possible.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is the federal agency charged with monitoring the work environment in the interest of work safety and health. If you think your work environment is dangerous to your health and safety from a physical standpoint, give them a call.

If nothing helps and the working environment remains stressful, exercise your avoidance options and get a new job. Job hunting can be stressful, particularly in times of high unemployment, but being ground down day after day by work is far worse.

Adapted from The Stress Solution by Lyle H. Miller, PhD, and Alma Dell Smith, PhD. Originally published in The American Psychological Association Psychology Help Center. Stress in the workplace.
<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/workplace-stress.aspx>

Jobs and careers are an important part of our lives. Along with providing a source of income, they help us fulfill our personal aims, build social networks and serve our professions or communities. They are also a major source of emotional stress.

Stress at work

Even "dream jobs" have stressful deadlines, performance expectations and other responsibilities. For some, stress is the motivator that ensures things get done. However, workplace stress can easily overwhelm your life. You may continually worry about a particular project, feel unfairly treated by a supervisor or co-workers, or knowingly accept more than you can handle in hopes of earning a promotion. Putting your job ahead of everything else can also affect your personal relationships, compounding the work-related pressures.

Layoffs, restructuring or management changes can heighten anxiety about your job security. In fact, a Norwegian study showed that the mere rumor of a factory's closure caused rapid increases in workers' pulse and blood pressure. Research in the U.S. has found that workplace injuries and accidents tend to increase in organizations that are being downsized.

The body reacts

Along with its emotional toll, prolonged job-related stress can drastically affect your physical health. Constant preoccupation with job responsibilities often leads to erratic eating habits and not enough exercise, resulting in weight problems, high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol levels.

Common job stressors such as perceived low rewards, a hostile work environment and long hours can also accelerate the onset of heart disease, including the likelihood of heart attacks. This is particularly true for blue-collar and manual workers. Studies suggest that because these employees tend to have little control over their work environments, they are more likely to develop cardiovascular disease than those in traditional "white collar" jobs.

Your age is also a factor. A University of Utah study found that as stressed workers get older, their blood pressure increases above normal levels. Interestingly, many of the study's over-60 workers reported that they did not feel upset or unduly pressured by their jobs, even though their blood pressure levels were significantly higher.

A loss of mental energy

Job stress also frequently causes burnout, a condition marked by emotional exhaustion and negative or cynical attitudes toward others and yourself.

Burnout can lead to depression, which, in turn, has been linked to a variety of other health concerns such as heart disease and stroke, obesity and eating disorders, diabetes and some forms of cancer. Chronic depression also reduces your immunity to other types of illnesses, and can even contribute to premature death.

What you can do

Fortunately, there are many ways to help manage job-related stress. Some programs blend relaxation techniques with nutrition and exercise. Others focus on

specific issues such as time management, assertiveness training, and improving social skills.

A qualified psychologist can help you pinpoint the causes of your stress, and develop appropriate coping strategies.

Here are some other tips for dealing with stress on the job:

Make the most of workday breaks. Even 10 minutes of "personal time" will refresh your mental outlook. Take a brief walk, chat with a co-worker about a non-job topic or simply sit quietly with your eyes closed and breathe.

If you feel angry, walk away. Mentally regroup by counting to 10, then look at the situation again. Walking and other physical activities will also help you work off steam.

Set reasonable standards for yourself and others. Don't expect perfection. Talk to your employer about your job description. Your responsibilities and performance criteria may not accurately reflect what you are doing. Working together to make needed changes will not only benefit your emotional and physical health, but also improve the organization's overall productivity.

[Click here to take the online Stress Smarts quiz](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-smarts.aspx)
<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/stress-smarts.aspx>

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