

examinetics

Occupational Health Pathfinder

Work-related stress

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Overview

As many as one in four people consider that their job is the main stressor in their lives. This was a finding by Northwestern National Life as described in a booklet "*Stress at work*" by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). The cost of job stress to American industry is estimated at \$150 billion per year through absenteeism, lower productivity, health insurance and medical expenses. Work-related stress causes unwanted physical and emotional effects on an individual as a result of excessive pressures or demands placed on them at work. There are contributory factors to work-related stress such as working environment (eg. hazardous conditions), working practices (eg. lack of control, communication or clear job description, increased workload, long hours) and unethical management practices (eg. bullying or harassment).

Fight or flight?

When an individual encounters a stressful situation, their body's physiological reaction is to prepare them for an emergency either by confronting the issue or running away - the so-called 'fight or flight' response. In this response, heart rate, blood pressure and respiration are increased and hormones (eg epinephrine) are released to accelerate the effect.

Short-term psychological effects of stress on an individual include anxiety, anger and depression while physical effects include headaches, sleep deprivation and muscular aches and pains. Long-term stress on an individual, as a result of the body's continued state of alert, has been linked to hypertension, ulcers and heart disease. Long-term psychological effects include depression and increased propensity to [substance abuse](#).

Measures to reduce work-related stress

An employer can introduce a stress prevention program to reduce work-related stress. The nature and extent of the program will depend on the resources of the organization. The first step to an effective program is to identify the problem(s) by holding individual & group discussions and looking at absenteeism and turnover rates. This helps to identify the nature and scope of the problems causing stress in the workplace. The next step is to instigate organizational change to address the problems identified such as improving the working environment. Evaluation of the program is essential to monitor its effectiveness once it is in progress.

The physical and emotional health of employees directly impacts on the health of a business. Therefore, it makes good business sense to ensure that employees are well. This ensures greater productivity, efficiency and commitment by employees to the organization and a healthier and safer workplace environment.

KEY POINT SUMMARY:

- 1 in 4 people in the USA consider that their job is the main stressor in their lives
- The costs of job related stress to American industry is estimated at \$150 billion per year
- There are many contributory factors to job-related stress including working environment and working practices
- Stress induces a 'fight or flight' physiological reaction in the body causing increases in heart rate, blood pressure and respiration
- Short term effects of stress include anger, anxiety, headaches and muscle pain
- Long term effects of stress may include hypertension, heart disease and depression
- A stress prevention program should include:
 1. Research into the scope of problems causing stress
 2. Organizational change to address problems
 3. Evaluation of the effectiveness of the program once in place

FIND OUT MORE...

Bureau of Labor Statistics (DoL)
"Issues in Labor Statistic"
www.bls.gov/opub/ils/pdf/opbils35.pdf

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
"Stress at Work"
www.cdc.gov/niosh/pdfs/stress.pdf

Business Owner Briefing
"Reducing Occupational Stress: an introductory guide for managers, supervisors and union members"
www.workhealth.org/prevention/prred.html

Medical Director Review
Worksite characteristics and environmental and policy supports for cardiovascular disease prevention in New York state
www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/picrender.fcgi?artid=2396985&blobtype=pdf

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