Ontario Safety Association
for Community & Healthcare

Fast Facts

Reducing Job Stress

This OSACH Fast Fact is intended to help workers, managers, employers and JHSC members become more aware of some of the measures that can be taken to reduce job stress.

When our co-workers tell us that they are feeling stressed, we immediately know what they mean. Yet defining stress is complex because there is a lack of consensus among experts. Some points of agreement: some "stress" is normal and necessary; intense, continuous or repeated stress to which a person is unable to cope, often leads to psychological disorders and physical illness.

What is Job Stress?

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines job stress as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of a job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker. NIOSH distinguishes between job stress and challenge: the former resulting in negative effects; the latter, in positive effects.

What are Some of the Signs of Job Stress?

Organizational behaviourists have identified some workplace signs of stress, including:

- low morale
- high turn-over

- high rates of absenteeism
- increased complaints, grievances and bickering

Early warning signs can include physical symptoms like:

- headaches
- sleep disturbances

- skin rashes
- stomach/intestinal problems

or psychological symptoms like:

- forgetfulness
- fatigue
- anxiety

- irritability
- depression
- sense of powerlessness

Prolonged stress may result in physical conditions like:

- elevated blood pressure
- heart disease

- infectious diseases
- spastic colon

or psychological problems like:

- accidents and injuries
- substance abuse

- suicidal behaviour
- violence

What are the Causes of Job Stress?

Job stress is dependent on the interaction between individual characteristics and conditions at the workplace. People differ in terms of personality and coping style. Not all of us would thrive in the high-energy environment of an emergency room or cope well with the often unpredictable and varied demands of community nursing. What is stressful for one person may not be a problem for someone else.

However, working conditions themselves can also be stressful. For example, excessive workload demands and conflicting expectations are stressful to most workers regardless of individual differences. Poor work conditions can also prolong the disability leave of workers. This suggests that organizations can enhance the general well being of their workers by changing workplace conditions.

How can Organizations Reduce Job Stress?

Some of the measures organizations can take include:

- Ensuring recruitment procedures are designed so that prospective employees clearly understand the demands and challenges of the job. The emphasis should be on achieving a good fit between the person and the position.

- Designing jobs that provide workers with meaning, stimulation and opportunities to use and enhance their skills. Job rotation is one way to expand skills.

- Providing safe physical working environments by improving indoor air quality, reducing physical and chemical hazards, improving lighting, eliminating manual lifting, repetitive work and awkward work postures.

- Ensuring that workloads/job demands (e.g., caseloads, overtime) are in line with workers' capabilities and resources.

- Clearly defining workers' roles and responsibilities and providing them with opportunities to participate in decisions that affect their jobs.

- Establishing work schedules (e.g., job sharing, flextime and forward (day to night) rotating shifts) that are compatible with workers' responsibilities outside the job.

- Clearly communicating organizational and technological changes and pacing their implementation.

- Facilitating a supportive environment. Some job stress studies have shown that low levels of social support in the workplace are associated with a number of ills.

- Developing meaningful employee recognition systems.

- Reducing uncertainty about career development and future employment prospects. Some workplaces now offer career planning resources to their employees.

- Implementing a workplace wellness program to enhance workers' personal coping strategies. Time management, assertiveness training, and courses on meditation and relaxation are some of the stress management techniques that could be provided. Plan your meal schedule to help you stay awake when you have to, and sleep when you need to. Have breakfast after sleeping, have lunch in the middle of your day, and have a light dinner just before you start your shift or several hours before going to sleep.

What are the Steps to Developing a Job Stress Reduction Program?

Research suggests that the active involvement of employees is a key success factor in addressing job stress.

Step 1: Identify the sources of stress by holding group discussions with employees, surveying workers (several stress surveys exist) and collecting and analyzing data on absenteeism, illness, turnover, performance problems and so on.

Step 2: Propose and prioritize intervention strategies on the basis of information already collected. (Additional information may be needed.) In a large organization, a small team may be assigned this responsibility. Workers should be included on this team.

Step 3: Communicate the planned intervention to workers and seek input about their development from internal and external sources.

Step 4: Develop the intervention.

Step 5: Implement the developed interventions.

Step 6: Collect feedback from workers on the progress of the intervention. Retool the intervention on the basis of this feedback.

Step 7: At six months to one-year post-implementation, evaluate the intervention. Repeat the survey of workers and compare data on absenteeism, etc. with baseline data.

Step 8: Refine the intervention on the basis of the evaluation results.