

Careers 2011

SPECIAL SECTION 2011

STRESSIN'

The strain of workplace stress

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Workplace stress hurts everyone. Stressed-out workers are less productive, require more sick time, are distracted easily and create an atmosphere of more stress for other employees. There are serious consequences to the long-term health of workers with blood pressure problems, and there is greater risk for strokes and heart attacks. Overall health care costs for stressed workers are 46 percent higher.

Stress happens when:

- We fail to meet deadlines, budgets or other goals.
- We have ambiguous job responsibilities.
- We perceive a lack of control over tasks.
- We have a sudden upsurge in tasks.
- We have conflicts with others.

"We typically spend one-third to one-half of our adult lives at work, but work is a common source of unhappiness and stress," says Maynard Brusman, a consulting psychologist, an executive coach and the president of Working Resources. "Studies have concluded that the number of burned-out, stressed-out or chronically stressed individuals is between one-fourth and one-third of the workforce. Problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than any other factor in people's lives, even financial or family troubles."

According to Brusman, a company can reduce stress by changing its corporate culture, "including increased awareness of the value of appreciation and positive emotions." He helps guide management toward providing a healthier and more productive environment. "Personal mastery of stress begins by recognizing that it's a palpable force in the workplace -- one for which we must proactively prepare. Of course, a certain amount of stress is the norm in business, but recognizing its signs and symptoms is essential for diminishing and controlling detrimental reactions."

Susan Orenstein, a licensed psychologist with advanced training in cognitive-behavioral therapy and couples counseling and the director of Orenstein Solutions, believes "employers can help employees de-stress by not overloading them with too much stress in the first place." She suggests that employers integrate physical exercise and foster healthy dialogue.

"Helping employees have a physical release and a voice in their organization will lead to better productivity and foster employee morale," Orenstein says. "And moreover, these employees can take these habits home with them. They can encourage their families to have regular physical activity and open dialogue. In this way, they're improving the physical and emotional health of their home, as well." The benefits include "healthier families, less obesity, decreased conflict at home, decreased incidence of divorce, less absenteeism, improved mental health (and a) happier home life."

Shawn M. Talbott, a nutritional biochemist and author, explains: "Any type of stress -- but especially the low-grade chronic stress that we experience at work and in our 'too busy' lives -- leads to both behavioral changes (less exercise, eating more 'comfort foods,' drinking, smoking, etc.) and biochemical changes (higher levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol), which can suppress the immune system, increase blood pressure and cholesterol, elevate appetite, increase fat gain -- especially in the abdominal

region (belly fat) -- reduce sex drive, lead to memory and emotional problems, etc."

Talbott serves as research director at Supplement Watch, a health education company. "Our program generally reduces perceived stress levels and stress hormones by about 15-20 percent, while mood and energy levels are increased by about 50 percent," he says.

Talbott's program educates people about ways to avoid detrimental health effects of stress:

- 1) Have an "outlet" (a hobby or some diversion outside of work).
 - 2) Do whatever you can to make the sources of your stress more "predictable," or learn to develop more "control" over those stressors; identify patterns related to when your stressors might appear.
 - 3) Hang out with friends; tough times are always easier when you're around other people.
 - 4) Learn to tell the difference between "big" issues and "little" issues.
 - 5) Look on the bright side; as simplistic as it sounds, the fact that you can look to "what is improving" in a given situation can help psychologically to buffer the stress in other areas.
- "With the right skills, we can navigate and enjoy the turbulence instead of



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Even the busiest of companies plan picnics, softball leagues, bowling parties and after-work happy hours as a way to create a work-fun balance in the corporate atmosphere. All work and no play, after all, is no fun. So when you get the memo that a basketball team is forming or a company happy hour is scheduled, don't look at it as another drain on your time and energy; look at it as a way to advance your career. Joining in the fun is a smart career strategy.

Lynn Berger, a career counselor and coach, says: "It's helpful to participate in fun company events. You get to see what's going on and who talks to whom and build stronger relationships with your colleagues and management, which can help your goals down the road." Berger calls joining in the fun a way to broaden your exposure and show yourself as a team player. "Employers like to see that you're part of the team."

Corporate fun might be a simple group lunch or a longer commitment, such as joining a softball team, which promotes the company's brand in the community. When participating in a team sport that requires an investment of your after-work time or your weekend mornings, be sure that you can commit to those time frames to be a reliable member of the team. It would work against you if you were to join and then rarely participate. "If you're not an athletic person, you might worry that your lack of skills could hurt your team's performance in games and high-profile tournaments," Berger says. "To avoid embarrassment and stress, just say you'll be happy to attend and cheer everyone on." This smart strategy makes you a valuable part of the team, as you lend enthusiasm and perhaps even call in your athletic friends to play for the team when additional members are needed.

It goes without saying that your behavior is an essential element of participating in corporate fun. Obviously, you would hurt your standing in the company if bosses were to observe you letting loose in an unflattering way, for example, having too much to drink at a company happy hour. So practice moderation. Bosses report that

they like their employees to reflect well on them in public, and bad table manners are just as much of a danger as getting tipsy. Eating sloppily and being greedy with shared appetizer plates are significant don'ts of the company lunch, dinner or happy hour.

And then there's conversation. Laura Vanderkam, author of "168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think," warns against being all business while attending a fun social event. "Let your boss bring up work-related stuff," she says, saying that now is not the time to pitch yourself for projects or seek approval and praise for work you're



CORPORATE FUN

How joining in helps your career