

Workplace Stress: How to Successfully Manage It

Author: Milton Jack . February 2020

In many ways, having a job improves an individual's health and overall attitude towards life." However, many employees face significant workplace stress that it outweighs any potential benefits and even poses a threat to their health. Most workers report feeling work-related stress at their employment and their performance and wellbeing are affected by that.

Over the years, stress has been defined in differing ways. It was originally conceived of as pressure from the environment, then as strain within the individual. Today's generally accepted definition is one of situational-individual interaction. It's the psychological and physical state that results when the individual's resources are not enough to cope with the situation's demands and pressures. Thus, in some situations, stress is more likely than others, and in some individuals than others. Signs of stress can be seen in the behavior, especially in behavioral changes. Acute reactions to stress can be in the areas of emotions (e.g. anxiety, depression, irritability, fatigue), actions (e.g. being distant, violent, tearful, unmotivated), thought (e.g., attention problems and problem-solving) or physical symptoms (e.g. palpitations, nausea, headaches).

Workplace stress according to the United States' National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health defines job stress as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Workplace stress can, in turn, lead to poor health and even injury.

According to the American Institute of Stress, job stress is far the major source of stress for American adults and that it has escalated progressively over the past few decades. Increased levels of job stress as assessed by the perception of having little control but lots of demands have been demonstrated to be associated with increased rates of heart attack, hypertension, and other disorders. According to the American Institute of Stress, studies done in New York, Los Angeles and other municipalities reveal that the relationship between job stress and heart attacks is so well acknowledged, that any police officer who suffers a coronary event on or off the job is assumed to have a work-related injury and is compensated accordingly (including heart attack sustained while fishing on vacation or gambling in Las Vegas).

A recent survey by North-western National Life as reported in the Corporate Wellness magazine revealed that about 40% of workers reported that their jobs were extremely stressful. In addition, another survey by Yale University, 29% of workers reported feeling extreme stress because of the work they did. Hypothetically postulating if surveys were to be done in the current Zimbabwean work environment with the prevalent socio-economic problems it might be found out that there are high levels of stress in organizations. It is postulated so because the current environment in organizations is a good breeding ground for job stress to occur.

According to a report by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), 40% of workers reported their job was very or extremely stressful. 25% view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives. 75% of employees believe that workers have more on-the-job stress than a generation ago. 29% of workers felt quite a bit or extremely stressed at work. 26% of workers said they were “often or very often burned out or stressed by their work. Job stress is more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems.

In a telephone polling for The Marlin Company which was done by Harris Interactive (2011), it was found out that More than a third of workers (35%) say their jobs are harming their physical or emotional health and 42% say job pressures are interfering with their personal relationships. 50% of the participants said they had a more demanding workload that year than the last.

The levels of stress differ between the professions and the population groups. Some employees are at greater risk of depression compared to others. Research indicates that younger workers, women and those in lower-skilled jobs are at the greatest risk of experiencing work-related stress and the difficulties associated with it. To add on, casual full-time employees, who are likely to have the lowest job control and high job demands, are at greatest risk of strain from work.

How stress is caused?

The degree of stress encountered depends on the functioning of two physiological defensive mechanisms:

- “Alarm reaction”. Faced with a threat to our safety, our first response is physiological arousal: our muscles become faster, our breathing and heart rate tense. Which serves us well when the threat is the proverbial bull charging toward us in the field. We either fight or flee. Present-day attacks appear to be more psychological — for example, a superior’s an unjustified verbal assault on work. It is usually not socially acceptable to act by “fight or flight”, and an alternative means of expressing the resultant emotional and physical energy is required. This falls in the arena of assertive communication.
- “Adaptation”. The second adaptive mechanism allows us to stop reacting when we learn that environmental stimuli are no longer a threat to our safety. For starters, when we spend time in a house near a railway line for the first time, as mentioned above, our reaction to trains hurtling past is to be shocked. Our response dwindles with time. If this mechanism did not work, physical wear and tear and emotional fatigue would eventually cause us to collapse.

Stress is experienced when either of these mechanisms does not function properly or when we find it difficult to switch from one to another appropriately. Which forms the basis of individual stress management strategies.

The Impacts of Workplace Stress

Stressors in the workplace are classed as both physical and psychosocial. Physical stressors include noise, poor lighting, poor office or work layout, as well as ergonomic factors such as bad postures.

Psychosocial stressors are perhaps the most prominent factors in stress. These include high demands for jobs, inflexible working hours, poor job management, poor job design and structure, bullying, harassment, and job insecurity. Stress in the workplace not only affects the worker but also has good adverse effects on company performance. The effects of work-related strain are evident in the physical health, mental health and behavior of workers.

Such effects occur in a series, in response to stressors beginning as distress. Distress, in effect, leads to increased blood pressure and anxiety, which raises the risk of heart disease, misuse of drugs, and anxiety disorders. Studies have shown that stress in the workplace is a strong risk factor for precludes to cardiovascular disease (obesity, high blood cholesterol, high blood pressure) and adverse cardiovascular events such as heart attack and stroke.

There is also a growing body of evidence that stress associated with work increases one's risk of diabetes. Other workplace-related physical health problems include immune deficiency disorders, musculoskeletal disorders including chronic back pain, and gastrointestinal disorders such as irritable bowel syndrome. Workplace stress also has adverse effects on the mental health of workers, with an increased risk of disorders of anxiety, burnout, depression, and drug use. Workers stressed in the workplace are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors such as smoking cigarettes, alcohol and drug abuse, and poor diet patterns.

With these accompanying health effects, workplace stress reduces the productivity of employees, increases absenteeism and presentism, increases the number of days taken off work for doctor visits, and increases the cost of health care employers incur. Workplace stress is also associated with higher rates of accident and injury, and higher rates of turnover, both of which increase administrative costs.

How employees can cope with work stress?

Workplace stress is preventable, and the first step in addressing them is to identify potential sources of stress to employees within an organization. Active workplace stress-reduction strategies can be categorized as primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Primary intervention strategies

Key approaches include constructive measures to prevent stress through the avoidance or reduction of possible stressors. That level of intervention focuses on the workplace sources of physical and psychosocial stress. Primary interventions Examples include:

- Redesigning the work environment?
- Providing breaks and nap-times for employees
- Increasing employee participation in decision making and work planning
- Increasing time and resources for completing specific job tasks
- Matching job description with employee skills and qualifications
- Creating clear promotion and reward pathways
- Eliminating physical hazards

- Substituting with safer equipment and technology
- Establishing control measures to reduce worker's exposure to occupational hazards
- Promoting the use of personal protective equipment

Secondary intervention strategies

Secondary approaches are corrective, which concentrate on improving the understanding and reaction of employees to stressors. Such strategies are aimed at improving the ability of staff to cope with stress and early detection of symptoms that are stress-induced. Secondary methods examples include:

- Training and education of employees
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy training for workers
- Routine health check-ups (Screening for high blood pressure and stress symptoms)

Tertiary intervention strategies

Tertiary treatments are control mechanisms at the stage of the disease. These are introduced for staff who are feeling stress already. Tertiary strategies include providing treatment, insurance arrangements, rehabilitation programs and returning disabled workers to work programs. Tertiary approaches encompass:

- Providing medical care and employee assistance programs to affected workers
- Return to work plans including modification and redesign of work

Workplace stress is a factor that is silent and often neglected and impairs the health and productivity of employees. It not only affects the workers but also significantly contributes to a decline in the overall success of a company. Employers will start tackling this troubling problem to build a healthier, happier, and more productive work climate.

Milton Jack is a Business Consultant at Industrial Psychology Consultants (Pvt) Ltd, a business management and human resources consulting firm.

LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/milton-jack-9798b966](https://www.linkedin.com/in/milton-jack-9798b966)

Phone: +263 242 481946-48/481950

Mobile: +263 774 730 913

Email: milton@ipcconsultants.com

Main Website: www.ipcconsultants.com

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/WorkplaceStressHowToSuccessfullyManageIt>