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Handling Workplace Stress

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We have heard about the harmful effects of Workplace Stress for many years. As a matter-of-fact, that was the topic of my Master's paper. But even after all these years, we in the safety profession have not seen much change in this area.

Everyone who has ever held a job has, at some point, felt the pressure of work-related stress. Any job can have stressful elements, even if you love what you do. In the short-term, you may experience pressure to meet a deadline or to fulfill a challenging obligation. But when work stress becomes chronic, it can be overwhelming — and harmful to both physical and emotional health.

Unfortunately, such long-term stress is all too common. In 2012, 65 percent of Americans cited work as a top source of stress, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) annual Stress in America Survey. Only 37 percent of Americans surveyed said they were doing an excellent or very good job managing stress.

A 2013 survey by [APA's Center for Organizational Excellence](#) also found that job-related stress is a serious issue. More than one-third of working Americans reported experiencing chronic work stress and just 36 percent said their organizations provide sufficient resources to help them manage that stress.

The human body has a natural chemical response to a threat or demand, commonly known as the “flight or fight” reaction, which includes the release of adrenalin. Once the threat or demand is over the body can return to its natural state. Workplace stress can be defined 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 lead to poor health and even injury.

Acute or short-term, stress causes an immediate reaction in the body. If the threat passes quickly, the body generally returns to normal. However, with prolonged stress, many health problems can develop.

Some of the early symptoms of stress-related problems include:		If exposure to stressors continues for a longer period, chronic health problems can develop, such as:	
Physical Symptoms:	Psychological & Behavioral:	Physical Conditions:	Psychological & Behavioral Problems:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Headaches • Stomach problems • Eating disorders • Sleep disturbances • Fatigue • Muscle aches & pains • Chronic mild illnesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Irritability • Low morale • Depression • Alcohol & drug use • Feeling powerless • Isolation from co-workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Blood Pressure • Heart disease • Stroke • Spastic colon • Immune system dysfunction • Diabetes • Asthma • Musculoskeletal disorders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serious depression • Suicidal behavior • Domestic violence • Alcohol abuse • Substance abuse • Burnout for solutions



Certain factors tend to go hand-in-hand with work-related stress. Some common workplace stressors are:

- Low salaries
- Excessive workloads
- Few opportunities for growth or advancement
- Work that isn't engaging or challenging
- Lack of social support
- Not having enough control over job-related decisions
- Conflicting demands or unclear performance expectations

Taking Steps to Manage Stress:

- **Track your stressors.**
Keep a journal for a week or two to identify which situations create the most stress and how you respond to them. Did you raise your voice? Get a snack from the vending machine? Go for a walk? Taking notes can help you find patterns among your stressors and your reactions to them.
- **Develop healthy responses.**
Instead of attempting to fight stress with fast food or alcohol, do your best to make healthy choices. Exercise is a great stress-buster. Yoga can be an excellent choice, but any form of physical activity is beneficial. Set aside time for hobbies and favorite activities that give you pleasure. Getting enough good-quality sleep is also important for effective stress management. Build healthy sleep habits by limiting your caffeine intake late in the day and minimizing stimulating activities, such as computer and television use, at night.
- **Establish boundaries.**
In today's digital world, it's easy to feel pressure to be available 24 hours a day. Establish some work-life boundaries for yourself. That might mean making a rule not to check email from home in the evening, or not answering the phone during dinner.
- **Take time to recharge.**
Don't let your vacation days go to waste. When possible, take time off to relax and unwind, so you come back to work feeling reinvigorated. When you're not able to take time off, get a quick boost by turning off your Smartphone and focusing your attention on non-work activities for a while.
- **Learn how to relax.**
Techniques such as meditation, deep breathing exercises and mindfulness (a state in which you actively observe present experiences and thoughts without judging them) can help melt away stress. Start by taking a few minutes each day to focus on a simple activity like breathing, walking or enjoying a meal.
- **Talk to your supervisor.**
Healthy employees are typically more productive, so your boss has an incentive to create a work environment that promotes employee well-being. Start by having an open conversation with your supervisor. The purpose of this isn't to lay out a list of complaints, but rather to come up with an effective plan for managing the stressors you've identified.
- **Get some support.**
Accepting help from trusted friends and family members can improve your ability to manage stress. Your employer may also have stress management resources available through an employee assistance program (EAP), including online information, available counseling, and referral to mental health professionals, if needed. If you continue to feel overwhelmed by work stress, you may want to talk to a psychologist, who can help you better manage stress and change unhealthy behavior.

Editor's Note:

The KING Safety Matters newsletter is published monthly to provide general safety information. It is not a substitute for adequate safety training, or intended to provide complete safety information or training, on any specific subject. The information contained herein is intended to assist safety efforts, and increase safety awareness.

To ensure the contents of the newsletter are helpful and important to you, please feel free to send comments, suggestions and feedback to:

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