

## Managing Employee Stress

Stress—physical, mental and emotional wear and tear—is emerging as a leading health risk of the 21st century and as a serious hazard in the workplace. Disabling stress has doubled over the past six years in the United States, with 1 million people absent from work every day due to stress-related problems.

Employee stress can take many forms and significantly impact on both individuals and organizations. It can manifest as anxiety, aggression, irritability, dependency, withdrawal or depression. Regardless of the form it takes, stress results in reduced productivity, absenteeism, employee burnout, turnover, increased medical expenses and health insurance costs, and stress-related compensation claims. Companies annually spend an average of \$7,500 per employee due to stress, and 75 percent to 80 percent of workplace accidents are stress-related.

### Work to counter stress

It is important for companies and their managers to treat workplace stress like any other work-related health hazard by taking an active stance to prevent and manage it. Simply dealing with the symptoms of stress when they arise isn't enough. It is most important to address the causes.

The first step is identifying sources of stress in your organization.

Possible stressors include high workloads, organizational changes, lack of employee control, the organization's culture and operating style, emphasis on competition, fears of job loss, increased technology, and the push for multi-tasking. The best ways to gauge the sources of stress are to observe trends during high stress periods, and to speak with employees.

Once you have identified your workplace stressors, take steps to alter or eliminate those elements.

1. Review and work to change policies, procedures and practices that undermine employees' personal power, sense of control or motivation.
2. Make changes in the work environment that increase employee involvement and give them as much control as possible over their tasks. Involve them in setting goals, making decisions and solving problems.
3. Adopt new cultural and communication styles that encourage open sharing of ideas and that avoid misperceptions.
4. Make sure employees are clear about expectations, what tasks and activities take priority, and why.
5. Keep employees apprised of changes and how those changes will affect their work in both the long and short term.
6. Supply employees with the resources needed to get the job done.
7. Consider physical changes in the work environment to make it more comfortable and user-friendly.

## Building stress resilience

Helping employees learn to cope with personal stress, to balance their home and work lives, and to build stress resistance can benefit everyone.

There is evidence that strong stress management skills result in improved ability to cope with work pressures. Consider helping employees by doing the following things:

1. Offer training programs that teach stress management techniques, relaxation, time management, positive thinking and assertiveness.
2. Institute flexible work schedule or telecommuting options if possible.
3. Be flexible, within reason, in allowing employees to take time away from work to deal with personal and family issues. Unresolved personal, health and family problems are a considerable source of stress.
4. Consider providing a relaxation space in your workplace.
5. Be aware of yourself as a role model. Try to demonstrate good coping and stress reduction behaviors.
6. Encourage and support employee self-care efforts by promoting the maintenance of a healthy lifestyle and the building and use of solid support systems. This might include the employee assistance program (EAP) and other benefits.

## Be aware of the danger signals of acute stress

Chronic anxiety, apathy, feelings of hopelessness, withdrawal, alcohol or drug problems, or depression all can indicate the need for immediate help. When an employee is in acute stress, it may warrant a call by the manager to the EAP or the company's medical department, if applicable, to decide how best to proceed. (Some signs of acute stress can also be signs of serious health problems which might require immediate medical help.) You may need to insist on a referral to your employee assistance program and even accompany the employee to the EAP office. If you are unsure of how to deal with an employee who appears to be in acute stress, seek help from the EAP.

All organizations will have some degree of stress among their employees. Stress is a part of life. The keys are in seeking solutions that target the sources of workplace stress, and teaching people to cope with those personal and professional stressors that are inevitable. Offer your employees a variety of stress prevention and management techniques. Doing so will benefit your employees and your organization.

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