



SSU 2004-11

## WHAT SUPERVISORS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EMPLOYEE STRESS

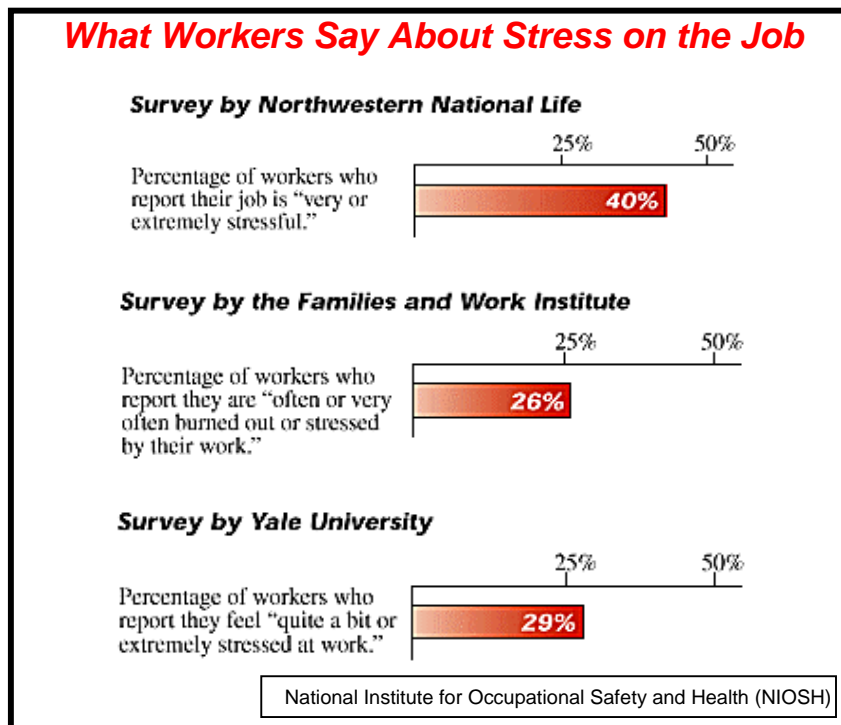
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**J**ob stress has been defined as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. Job stress can lead to poor health, lack of focus and even injury.

### The Growing Stress Factor

In the past 20 years, many studies have looked at the relationship between job related stress and a variety of ailments. Mood and sleep disturbances, upset stomach and headache, and disturbed relationships with family and friends are examples of stress-related problems that are quick to develop and are commonly seen in these studies. These early signs of job stress are usually easy to recognize and are the primary focus of this *SSU*. However, job stress on chronic diseases are more difficult to see because chronic diseases take a long time to develop and can be influenced by many factors other than stress.

It is now widely acknowledged that stress at work is a common problem and that it has a very high cost in terms of workers' health, absenteeism and lower performance. Just look at what workers have said about stress at work in the three studies shown below.



Employers are recognizing that job stress represents a significant concern as well as amounting expense. Workplace tension and stress related accidents mean lowered production, decreased quality and a variety of other costs. Management cannot ignore these factors and supervisors must cope with these every day. We must first understand the problem before we can hope to solve it, let's look at some of the complexities involved in this issue.

## What Is Meant By “Stress?”

*“I don't know what it is, but I've got it!”* Mention the word “stress” and it is safe to say most everyone knows what you're talking about. While they may not be able to give the dictionary definition, they understand the word. In fact, many people cannot provide specific causes or reasons for the stress they feel. Even so, these same people often believe they suffer more of “it” than most people. Stress in today's workplace and home-life can be a strange badge of achievement. People have even gone to court in an effort to prove they have experienced much more stress than should be normal or than others have experienced, and therefore deserve financial compensation.

**Stressors on-the-job, or off affect each person differently.**

**There's Good Stress and Bad Stress.** Yes, there are stressors that are good, and experts have named this type of stress "eustress." These stressors are the desirable life events, such as a new home, a wedding, the birth of a child, or the planning of a vacation. While these all can nevertheless be highly demanding, disrupting the peace and stability of one's life, they are positive events. These experiences can affect us physically and mentally, often bringing on illness, if there's just too much change happening or anticipated. One classic "eustress" stress period for many are the Christmas holidays. This holiday season of joy can exhaust your nervous system. It's a time of the year when illness, accidents and suicide rates are known to increase.

**Different Strokes for Different Folks.** One person's stress is another person's satisfying challenge. What used to be considered "a hard job," is today in many instances viewed as highly stressful to some people. Each person has different abilities to handle changing events or pressures in life. It is these differences that set individual tolerances to uncertainty and changes in the work environment and personal life. The problem arises when we find ourselves in a life situation that has either too much or too little challenge. Whether the situation that is being faced is just a “dip in the road”, “a rut”, or “a cliff” is only a matter of perception. A certain amount of stress is good --invigorating workers and making them compete harder. Too much, or a mismatch between work associates and their work, can mean physical or mental problems, both on and off the job.

**The Fight or Flight Reaction.** Stress sets off an alarm in the brain, which responds by preparing the body for defensive action. The nervous system is aroused and hormones are released to sharpen the senses, quicken the pulse, deepen respiration, and tense the muscles. This response, sometimes called the fight or flight response is important because it helps us defend against threatening situations. The response is preprogrammed biologically. Everyone responds in much the same way, regardless of whether the stressful situation is at work or home.

Not everyone realizes how closely connected our body, mind and emotions are. Consider what happens when a person is threatened with physical harm – such as being approached by a threatening person on a dark street, or a growling bear in the woods. The body's systems and responses include:

- Blood Stream: Adrenalin pours into the blood stream
- Breath: Breathing increases to a heavy rate, providing more oxygen to the blood
- Blood Supply: Shifts from skin toward vital organs
- Eyes: Pupils dilate
- Muscles: Muscles tense to prepare for the emergency
- Blood Pressure: Rises
- Heart Rate: Pulse rate speeds up
- Digestive System: Digestion system shuts down
- Senses: All senses become sharper

All of these responses prepare our bodies for one of two things: to face and fight whatever threatens -or to run like the devil until we're out of harm. The more threatened we feel, the stronger the physical response. Once the threat is passed, our body goes back to its normal physical state. This process has kept us alive throughout evolution.

**Is that a ~ Monster?** The problem with this great system is that our bodies react the same way to perceived threat as well. For example, if someone in an authentic looking gorilla suit suddenly appeared in front of you, pretending to attack, all the physical changes mentioned would take place. It doesn't matter that the threat was not a real one -- it seemed real! Emotional threats in our lives generally aren't as immediate to our person, so our physical response is lower. But a variety of dissatisfactions with our lives and our work situations create frustrations and anger, which are perceived as a "threat" to our well being. These also bring physical responses that, in the long term, can seriously affect our health, such as ulcers and high blood pressure. In addition, stress keeps us in an emotionally distracted state that invites accidents and injuries.

## The Supervisor's Role In Off-The-Job Stress

**Should Supervisors Be Counselors?** Personal, off-the-job stress factors are many. Supervisors must recognize that the stressors of a worker's personal life, such as financial problems, unhappy marriages and family disruptions distress and distract a worker from doing their job productively and safely. Even so, it is not the supervisor's job to serve as counselor if such situations are revealed. Research by Stanford University discourages talking about personal home life fears and worries on the job, such discussions are more likely to bring this stress into the work environment rather than help eliminate it. Supervisors in this study that had the best crew safety records were not father or mother figures, or informal psychologists to their crewmembers. On the contrary, those with the safest crews were those whose only connection with the workers' personal problems was to grant them time off when they needed it. The most successful strategy was to reduce tensions by getting off-the-job problems off the workers' minds and onto good work relationships and production. This is not to say supervisors should never acknowledge and empathize with employee's problems, but they should avoid getting involved. They should also avoid being the cause of unfounded stress!



**What About Alcohol and Drug Abuse?** A common way some people attempt to cope with stressors in their life is by abusing alcohol or drugs. On-the-job drug or alcohol abuse use can be handled through the company's formal drug policy and procedures. How should supervisors deal with workers whose breath, work practices and off the job social behavior suggests alcoholism for instance? As pointed out, the supervisor cannot and should not serve as counselor in such matters.

A supervisor trained to recognize and observe suspected abuses does have solid options to address the employee. The supervisor's role in these cases is to observe work behavior, and carefully document unacceptable behavior, such as absenteeism, tardiness, substandard work, unsafe practices or conflicts with co-workers. If early warnings do not result in performance changes, the supervisor must confront the employee, with documentation of events, dates and times. The emphasis must be work performance, not scolding, or advice about the problem. Communication should simply clarify that the behavior is not acceptable. The employee should be referred to the human resources department or a designated individual in the company, to investigate options. Employee Assistance Programs exist to help workers solve their financial, domestic or drug/alcohol problems in a confidential manner. If the employee accepts and utilizes this assistance, chances increase that they can return full functioning and productive to their job. Companies without a formal EAP can nevertheless locate community providers for referrals. To be successful, these situations call for supervisor training in problem recognition and the full support of top management.

## Common Factors That Contribute To Job Stress

**Physical, environmental factors.** Annoying problems such as overcrowded workspaces, excessive noise, air pollution and possible exposure to potentially hazardous substances are a few physical factors that can create unbearable conditions for some employees. Safety hazards may produce ongoing tension but go unreported.

**Management/Operational Factors.** According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the following factors were common contributors to job stress:

# STRESS ...AT WORK



- Inadequate time to complete the job to one's satisfaction.
- Lack of a clear job description or chain of command.
- Absence of recognition or reward for good job performance.
- Inability or lack of opportunity to voice complaints.
- Heavy responsibility but little authority or decision-making opportunity.
- Inability to work with superiors, co-workers, or subordinates because of basic differences in goals and values.
- Lack of control or pride over the finished product.
- Job insecurity because of pressures from within or the possibility of a takeover or merger.
- Prejudice and bigotry because of age, sex, race or religion.
- Commuting difficulties.
- Concerns relating to supervising employees.
- Lack of opportunities to effectively use personal talents or abilities to full potential.
- The FUD factor -fear, uncertainty and doubt.

**Warning Signals of Stress.** A study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) cites several warning signals. These include obsession with details, inability to concentrate, poor work habits, inefficiency, indecisiveness, friction between coworkers and an increased frequency of sickness and accidents. Signals can also come in other forms, such as low morale, health and job complaints, and employee turnover often provide the first signs of job stress. Even so, these signs can be hidden, especially if the workers are fearful of losing their jobs. Lack of obvious or widespread signs is not a good reason to dismiss concerns about job stress or minimize the importance of a prevention program. When supervisors recognize these signals, they can take steps toward problem solving.

## **Reducing Stress-Related Risk Factors at Work**

Suggestions that appear to have merit for reducing work-related psychological disorders include:

**Work schedules** -Design work schedules to avoid conflict with demands that are unrelated to the job. Schedules for rotating shifts should be stable and predictable, with rotation in a forward (day to night) direction.

**Participation/control** - Allow workers to provide input for decisions and actions that affect their jobs. If you have not instituted a Safety Committee, consider developing one.

**Workload** -Ensure that assignments are compatible with the abilities and resources of the worker. Prioritize tasks and / or activities. Unreasonable expectations cause stress in many workers.

**Job Content** -Work to match the individual employee to the task when stress can be a factor. Provide meaning, stimulation, a sense of completeness, and an opportunity to use their existing skills while at the same time work to develop new ones.

**Roles** -Define work roles and responsibilities clearly.

**Workplace Hazards** - Evaluate your workplace to determine the hazards to control or engineer-out stressors such as: noise, chemical vapors, harassment threats, etc.

**Social environment** -Provide opportunities for social interaction, including emotional support and help directly related to the job. EAP programs can assist with this.

**Future Security** -Avoid ambiguity in matters of job security and career development.

## Individual Coaching Strategies

For each individual including supervisors --attempting to cope with stressful situations, either on or off the job, often requires some self-analysis, education or counseling and behavior change. Three basic options cover most situations in one way or another. Briefly, these are:

1. **Change the Situation:** Don't be a doormat! A sense of being powerless is behind a good deal of stress, so find ways to be more in control of your life. Improve your skills in assertiveness. Negotiation, salesmanship, and communication or time management to improve or change the situation. Advance your education so you can improve your job options.
2. **Change Your Attitude About the Situation:** Remember the guy in the gorilla suit? We sometimes imagine disasters that aren't there, or blow things out of proportion. It's not corny to look on the bright side of life. Looking at the good side is a valuable survival skill. It helps to keep a sense of humor about the situation, and helps to get you over the 'hump'. Remember "the little engine that could...it did!"
3. **In a "last resort" Situation -Walk Away and Shrug It Off.** Life is too short...! If walking away is difficult at the moment, plan for a later escape. It makes the waiting more bearable. If, for some reason, you can't physically leave, meditation, hobbies and exercise are healthful retreats.

## Supervisors Can Make The Difference

In summary, the workplace stress issue is not likely to go away. Our world is not getting any less stressful. Although top management may determine the company's policies and procedures, supervisor's "on the front line" where both you and your subordinates experience the physical and psychological work environment. It's there that you can make a difference.

Since dealing with complex human personalities is a part of the supervisor's role, it's important to learn as much as you can about reducing job stress and putting what you know into practice. This will make your primary job of increasing production and reducing accidents more successful. To best make this happen, research shows that supervisors need and deserve education and training in discipline and discharge procedures, performance evaluation, job placement and employee motivation.

*One last word. If you have a subordinate who is showing signs of stress, try providing that person a little more supervision above what you would normally. Individuals focusing on personal problems are likely to be at greater risk of injuring themselves or others around them. By providing additional focus on the worker, you may assist them reliving some of the stressors that are affecting their work.*

### Sources:

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