



Communication key to reducing workplace stress

Some employees struggle to maintain work-life balance

By NICK STERN
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Stress's potential is lurking behind every deadline, every presentation you have to give, every scheduling conflict — your overall workload.

About a quarter of employees in the United States view their jobs as the number one stressor in their lives, while problems at work are more strongly associated with health complaints than financial or family problems, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

All of this stress leads to cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal and psychological disorders, workplace injury, suicide, cancer, ulcers and impaired immune function, NIOSH reports. It's also bad for business, leading to increased tardiness and absenteeism, lost productivity and a heightened intention by workers to quit their jobs.

As a modifiable risk factor, stress is second only to depression in terms of its impact on medical expenditures, according to a study by the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University in Atlanta.

When Jeanne Sherwood, a registered nurse and president and founder of Sykesville-based corporate wellness firm WellAdvantage, assesses a business' health issues, stress invariably is near the top of the list.

"People don't realize how important it is to identify stress and put programs in place to beat it at its root," she said.

Mt. Washington Pediatric Hospi-

tal in Baltimore, for example, set up its employee wellness committee — Team BENEFIT — about two years ago to address the whole mind-body-spirit needs of employees, including reducing stress, said Felina Basmaci, a benefits analyst at the hospital.

The committee surveys employees each year to determine how the hospital can better address their needs, Basmaci said. Depending on the results of the survey, the hospital will then host monthly "lunch and learns" at which outside experts are brought in to focus on a specific issue that causes employees stress, such as financial planning and retirement.

About 200 people attend the company's bi-annual health fair that focuses on nutritional screening, while some employees take advantage of yoga or qigong classes provided at a discount rate, she said.

Mt. Washington Pediatric Hospital also recently provided free massages to employees, which received a great response, Basmaci said.

Communicate better to beat stress

But while massages are a nice perk and morale booster, they don't necessarily address the underlying issues causing the stress in the first place, said Kerre Aufsesser, Health and Wellness Program Manager for WellAdvantage and a full-time contractor in that position at Amtrak.

One of the most important factors to consider is communication between workers and all levels of management, she said.

Mid-level managers that work more closely with employees they oversee, for example, tend to be more familiar with workers' life circumstances and to know more about the stressors impacting their lives, Aufsesser said. As a result, these managers can be more willing to help alleviate these stressors as they arise, by allowing someone to take a day off or work from home if a family situation arises.

Some companies can look down on flex-time or work-from-home schedules, but many employees actually wind up working harder in order to prove they're worthy of this arrangement.

"If you allow people to take care of their family, then you're taking care of that person as well," said Sherwood.

Just be present

The notion of being more focused and productive at work, is becoming a new focus in wellness programs in general, Aufsesser said. Employers should try to poll their employees to see what would help them to be more productive or present in their work.

The work-life balance is a big factor that causes stress, but so is the workload, particularly for employees who get bombarded all day by people who need help doing other tasks, she said.

Likewise, the work environment itself can cause stress and distraction, as when workers huddle close together in cubicles and are easily distracted or bothered by conversations throughout the day, Aufsesser said.

At Amtrak, in applicable job areas she works with supervisors to try to block off



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an hour or a half-day a week for workers to step away from the phone and email and focus on other work that needs to get done, she said. This type of strategy, as well as a work-from-home situation, may not work for all jobs, of course, but where they do apply, such as with jobs concentrated at an office, they can reduce stress.

Another organizational strategy that can work to reduce stress for employees is to enlist staff from a health and wellness department or your company's equivalent to shadow employees in higher stress areas, Aufsesser said. Look at shift schedules and other pressures that may be causing stress and you'll be better equipped to address the issues.

Also consider allowing employees time off — an extra day in a year, for example — to take care of dentist or doctor visits or eye exams, Sherwood said. It can lead to greater productivity and reduce absenteeism and turnover.