



## Stress in the Workplace

### *Linking Employee Wellness and Workers' Compensation Strategies to Help Your Workforce*

We all have stress. The stress response is how our brain and body work together to overcome a challenge. This could be the routine stress of getting home from work, getting your kids to sports, and making dinner within a specific timeframe. It could be more sudden like an illness or loss of a friend or family member. Or it could be traumatic like an act of war, an assault or a natural disaster.

Sometimes we feel stress after we've had an argument or when we have a deadline. However, once the argument is resolved or the deadline has passed, we should feel relief. Humans are wired to solve problems or difficult situations.

What happens if the stress is constant? This is "chronic stress," a consistent sense of feeling pressured and overwhelmed during a long period of time.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, "Because the source of long-term stress is more constant than acute stress, the body never receives a clear signal to return to normal functioning. With chronic stress, those same lifesaving reactions in the body can disturb the immune, digestive, cardiovascular, sleep, and reproductive systems. Some people may experience mainly digestive symptoms, while others may have headaches, sleeplessness, sadness, anger, or irritability."

#### **Coping with Workplace Stress**

Just as we have home-life stressors, we can have workplace stress. Some stress pushes employees to grow and learn – and

advance job performance. However, if the stress is excessive, it can significantly affect employees' health. And this impacts your workers' compensation program and costs.

According to the World Health Organization, work-related stress is the response employees may have when work demands and pressures are not matched to their knowledge and abilities, challenging their ability to cope. Consider if work-related stress risk factors identified by the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (NIOSH) exist in your organization (see sidebar).

#### **What Can Employers Do?**

No simple solution or process will fit every organization. According to NIOSH, use a three-step process to guide the stress-prevention process:

1. Problem Identification
2. Intervention
3. Evaluation

**Problem Identification** – Does a problem exist among your workforce? Typical signs of job stress include turnover, poor morale, and employee health and/or job-related complaints. A conversation between management and employees can sometimes uncover the issues. Consider using more structured tools to gather data, such as PMA's Organizational Safety Perception Survey. Survey data can be combined with other measures (turnover rates, absenteeism, incident rates, etc.) and analyzed to determine problem locations/departments/conditions, etc.

*Continued on next page.*

## Job Conditions That May Lead to Stress (NIOSH)

**The Design of Tasks.** Heavy workload, infrequent rest breaks, long work hours and shiftwork; hectic and routine tasks that have little inherent meaning, do not utilize workers' skills, and provide little sense of control.

*Example: David works to the point of exhaustion. Theresa is tied to the computer, allowing little room for flexibility, self-initiative, or rest.*

**Management Style.** Lack of participation by workers in decision-making, poor communication in the organization, lack of family-friendly policies.

*Example: Theresa needs to get the boss's approval for everything, and the company is insensitive to her family needs.*

**Interpersonal Relationships.** Poor social environment and lack of support or help from coworkers and supervisors.

*Example: Theresa's physical isolation reduces her opportunities to interact with other workers or receive help from them.*

**Work Roles.** Conflicting or uncertain job expectations, too much responsibility, too many "hats to wear."

*Example: Theresa is often caught in a difficult situation trying to satisfy both the customer's needs and the company's expectations.*

**Career Concerns.** Job insecurity and lack of opportunity for growth, advancement, or promotion; rapid changes for which workers are unprepared.

*Example: Since the reorganization at David's plant, everyone is worried about their future with the company and what will happen.*

**Environmental Conditions.** Unpleasant or dangerous physical conditions such as crowding, noise, air pollution, or ergonomic problems.

*Example: David is exposed to constant noise at work.*

**Intervention** – Once you understand the problem(s), determine how to intervene to drive change. It may be as simple as employee group discussions to find solutions. Or it may require complete organizational change. If an employee's job stress outdistances their peers, consider helping them with strategies such as employee assistance programs and stress management training. Inform and update employees on all available interventions.

**Evaluation** – Assess both your short- and long-term results. Revisit the data collected in step one. Assess if measurable, lasting improvement occurred. NIOSH reminds us that "employee

perceptions are usually the most sensitive measure of stressful working conditions and often provide the first indication of intervention effectiveness."

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