

Stress in the Workplace

In today's economic upheavals, downsizing, layoff, merger, and bankruptcies have cost hundreds of thousands of workers their jobs. Millions more have been shifted to unfamiliar tasks within their companies and wonder how much longer they will be employed. Adding to the pressures that workers face are new bosses, computer surveillance of production, fewer health and retirement benefits, and the feeling they have to work longer and harder just to maintain their current economic status. Workers at every level are experiencing increased tension and uncertainty, and are updating their resumes.

The loss of a job can be devastating, putting unemployed workers at risk for physical illness, marital strain, anxiety, depression, and even suicide. Loss of a job affects every part of life, from what time you get up in the morning, to whom you see and what you can afford to do. Until the transition is made to a new position, stress is chronic.

A Sense of Powerlessness

A feeling of powerlessness is a universal cause of job stress. When you feel powerless, you're prey to depression's traveling companions, helplessness and hopelessness. You don't alter or avoid the situation because you feel nothing can be done.

Secretaries, waitresses, middle managers, police officers, editors and medical interns are among those with the most highly stressed occupations marked by the need to respond to others' demands and timetables, with little control over events. Common to this job situation are complaints of too much responsibility and too little authority, unfair labor practices, and inadequate job descriptions. Employees can counteract these pressures through workers' unions or other organizations, grievance or personnel offices or, more commonly, by direct negotiations with their immediate supervisors.

Your job description

Every employee should have a specific, written job description. Simply negotiating one does more to dispel a sense of powerlessness than anything else we know. It is a contract that you help write. You can object to what and insist on what you do want. If there is a compromise, it's because you agreed to it. With a clear job description, your expectations are spelled out, as are your boss's.

A good job description is time limited. Set a specific date for a review and revision based on your mutual experience with this initial job description. If you and your boss can't agree on what your job description should be, look for another job, either within the same company or outside. Even in these tough economic times, it is important that your job be a source of satisfaction and respect.

When You're a Square Peg and Your Job is a Round Hole

Remember the old saying, "Find a job you love and you'll never work another day in your life." Most people spend about 25 percent of their adult lives working. If you enjoy what you do, you're lucky. But if you're the proverbial square peg and your job is a round hole, job stress hurts your productivity and takes a serious toll on your mind and body.

There are many reasons for staying in a job that doesn't fit you or that you don't particularly like. One reason can be the "golden handcuff"--having salary, pension, benefits, and "perks" that keep one tied to a job regardless of stress consequences.

Many people are in jobs they don't like or aren't good at. The quick answer is to get a job they like or one that better matches their skills, abilities, and interest--easier said than done. Some clients have no idea what kind of job they would like or what kind of job would be better. Worse, they don't have a clue on how to go about finding out this information.

Traumatic Events on the Job

Some jobs are inherently dangerous and others can suddenly become so. Criminal justice personnel, firefighters, ambulance drivers, military personnel, and disaster teams witness many terrible scenes and are exposed to personal danger routinely. They usually handle such incidents capably. But occasionally a particularly bad episode will stay with them, appearing in memory flashbacks and nightmares. Sleep disturbance, guilt, fearfulness, and physical complaints may follow. Even ordinary jobs can become traumatic: a coworker, boss, or client physically threatens an employee; a bus crashes on a field trip; an employee is robbed or taken hostage; a shooting occurs. Such events can create post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and result in workers' compensation claims if left untreated by a trauma specialist.

Work Setting

Sometimes your work setting creates physical stress because of noise, lack of privacy, poor lighting, poor ventilation, poor temperature control, or inadequate sanitary facilities. Settings where there is organizational confusion or an overly authoritarian, laissez-faire, or crisis-centered managerial style are all psychologically stressful.

Act through labor or employee organizations to alter stressful working conditions. If that doesn't work, try the courts, which have become increasingly receptive to complaints of stressful working conditions. Recent rulings created pressure for employers to provide working environments that are as stress free as possible.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is the federal agency charged with monitoring the work environment in the interest of work safety and health. If you think your work environment is dangerous to your health and safety from a physical standpoint, give them a call.

If nothing helps and the working environment remains stressful, exercise your avoidance options and get a new job. Job hunting can be stressful, particularly in times of high unemployment, but being ground down day after day by work is far worse.

Adapted from *The Stress Solution* by Lyle H. Miller, Ph.D., and Alma Dell Smith, Ph.D.

(c) Copyright 2004 American Psychological Association

Documents from apahelpcenter.org may be reprinted in their entirety with credit given to the American Psychological Association. Any exceptions to this, including requests to excerpt or paraphrase documents from apahelpcenter.org, must be presented in writing to helping@apa.org and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Permission for exceptions will be given on a one-time-only basis and must be sought for each additional use of the document.