



## How to not stress your employees to death

By Michael Friedman, PhD and Deborah McKeever

Commentary: Employers say that stress is the No. 1 workforce risk issue. And now employers have more reason to be concerned: A recent study found that people who report stress in the workplace lose three years of their life.

Considering that other studies show that as many as 83% of people experience significant workplace stress, creating a productive work environment while reducing the negative effects of stress is critical to any successful organization.

Workplace stress can destroy a business. We now know that stress can cause or exacerbate almost every form of physical and mental illness. Further, health issues cost U.S. businesses \$576 billion annually, including sick days and workers' compensation.

Moreover, stress, depression, or associated fatigue may be one of the reasons that employees leave their jobs. Research suggests that employees may leave their workplace because of emotional exhaustion.

Worse, what we know of workplace stress-management programs is not encouraging. Reviews of the literature suggest that the methodology of many studies of workplace stress-management interventions is weak, and there are so many disparate programs that it is difficult to draw broad conclusions.

In addition, few studies examine any type of process evaluation linking the delivery of care to outcomes so that we may better understand the link between intervention and outcome.

How do employers establish a workplace culture that manages rather than exacerbates stress?

It turns out that many workplace interventions focus on the individual, but not the organization. Yet it appears that interventions that focus on the organization have increased efficacy in managing stress among employees.

One of the most important ways that an organization can change to reduce stress is by improving the level of trust that employees have in their employer. A recent American Psychological Association survey found that 1 in 4 workers do not trust their employer, and only half feel that their employer is open and honest.

So how can employers increase employees' trust in order to reduce stress?

First, organizations can improve trust by aligning the purpose of the organization with that of its employees. Sense of purpose is a critical aspect of individual well-being; for example, one research study that followed more than 6,000 people over the course of 14 years found that those with a stronger sense of purpose were less likely to die prematurely.

Every employee works for a particular reason — perhaps money, identity, to be part of something exciting, to create something, and so on. The key for an employer is to determine what that purpose is, and how the employee's purpose is aligned with the mission of the organization. Initial research suggests that shared purpose between employer and employee can build trust.

Second, a key method of building trust is to have clear and transparent communication. Communication improves predictability and sense of control in employees. One study of 7,663 employees over an 18-year follow-up found that low predictability at work predicted the onset of myocardial infarction.

Including employees in organizational decisions and informing employees about those decisions can build trust and reduce stress. Similarly, one study of the effects of communication on a merger found that employees who received communications prior to the merger reported lower levels of stress than employees who received no communication.

Finally, despite the fact that individual interventions may not be efficacious per se, another step would be for the organization to show that it values employees by constantly trying to examine the research literature for new advances in stress management.

For example, a meta-analytic review of more than 38,000 participants found that workplace exercise programs had a small but significant effect on lowering stress and boosting work attendance.

Similarly, a recent study of 36 nurses who completed six to eight group telephonic mindfulness-based stress-reduction sessions showed reductions in stress, and that these effects were sustained over four months for those who continued mindfulness practice.

In order to compete successfully as a business, there often needs to be stress on members of the organization. But just because there is stress doesn't mean that employers can't take steps to mitigate the effects of stress.

Improving employees' organizational trust by aligning employees' sense of purpose with organizational goals, improving communication and keeping up-to-date with the latest empirically based stress-management techniques that may improve employees' stress will foster that trust, leading to happier, healthier, and more productive employees.

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