

Workers are Stressed – How Employers Can Help

It should come as no surprise to learn that employees are stressed. According to a [recent Gallup poll](#), about half of American workers reported feeling stressed or tense on a daily basis while at work. This stress can stem from a lack of work/life balance; personal issues that may spill over into the workplace; feeling undervalued and under-compensated; and on-the-job stressors like tight deadlines, unclear expectations, and little or no feedback on performance, among many other factors. The events of the past few years have only exacerbated these issues.

Whatever the root causes, stressed workers tend to be fatigued, prone to mistakes and injuries, and are more likely to be absent. And most significantly, [they incur healthcare costs twice as high](#) than for other employees. In total, the consequences of stress-related illnesses, from depression to heart disease, [costs businesses an estimated \\$200 to \\$300 billion a year](#) in lost productivity.

April is National Stress Awareness Month, making now an ideal time to understand the impact of stress on employees and organizations alike, and take steps to address this issue in the workplace. A dual strategy of organizational change and individual stress management, brokers and leaders within the organization can help businesses take steps to be proactive and promote healthier, more productive employees while reducing healthcare costs.

The causes of workplace stress

Employees who feel they have little control over their work in one way or another are more likely to experience and report higher stress levels. Factors that can contribute to on-the-job stress include unpleasant work environments, low salaries, lack of opportunity for growth and poor management, as well as issues with work/life balance, among many others.

Issues such as caring for elderly parents or managing their own complex health issues compound the stress in employees' personal lives, especially if they are also confronting strained financial issues and compressed time allotment for family obligations.

The effects of workplace stress

Stress has a major impact on both organizations and their employees, ranging from an increase in workers' compensation claims to reduced productivity. For example, the American Institute of Stress estimates that one million workers miss work each day because of stress, [costing companies an approximately \\$602 per employee per year](#).

But even when employees come to work, stress may reduce their ability to fully perform their duties at work. [Studies show](#) there is a strong correlation between an increase in stress and a loss in productivity, which can add up to billions each year. This can add up to [nearly \\$225 billion a year in lost productivity](#), according to an analysis from the American Productivity Audit.

The cost may be even higher if the stress underlying presenteeism is not addressed, as absenteeism, job resignations, chronic illness, and disability may be the result.

Many employees who experience stress in the workplace also risk negative effects to their physical health. Workers who report that they are stressed incur healthcare costs that are 46 percent higher than for non-stressed employees, according to the [National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health](#). Left untreated, prolonged stress can raise the risk for alcohol or drug abuse as well as developing chronic—and costly—diseases, including heart disease, diabetes and even some cancers, which can collectively account for a vast amount of all healthcare costs.

Stressed workers have an elevated risk of mental health problems as well, ranging from anxiety and substance abuse, and perhaps, the most significant, depression. According to [Employers Health](#), more employees miss work because of mental illness than physical conditions or illnesses, including cancer or heart disease.

Addressing the issue

So what can organizations do to combat the causes and effects of workplace stress? Strategies need not be elaborate or expensive. Simply planning ways to improve communication and recognize employees can be effective.

The first step is to evaluate the scope of stress in the organization by looking at absenteeism, illness and turnover rates and performance problems. Employee surveys, Health Risk Assessments and committees are all helpful means to determine specific stressors and if they are concentrated in one specific department or are company-wide. It is also important to work directly with employees to get their input as to what strategies may help address the causes of stress.

While some changes to corporate culture need to be managed internally, there are a number of strategies brokers and organization leaders can suggest to help organizations reduce employee stress, such as:

- **Provide access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** – EAPs help assess and address personal issues that affect employee performance and productivity. Issues can range from substance abuse to family problems, and EAPs typically include counseling benefits. Studies show that EAPs for substance abuse can reduce workers' compensation claims, employer healthcare costs, and absenteeism. These programs can often help with other related work/life related issues, such as providing eldercare support for employees caring for older parents or loved ones.
- **Incorporate health advocacy into employee benefits** - Offering an expert who can personally address healthcare issues, such as helping to resolve medical bills and interacting with insurance and providers, can help employees reduce worry and stay focused on their job.
- **Offer a holistic wellbeing program** - A program that addresses the overall wellbeing of employees, including physical, emotional and financial health, can effectively lower

stress and improve health. Promoting engagement in onsite support groups and stress management workshops alongside traditional wellness program components can help reduce stress while increasing productivity.

- **Build in incentives** – In order to encourage participation in these programs, it's important to offer incentives for enrollment and sustained involvement, as well as reward positive changes.
- **Communicate consistently** – Ongoing communications to employees about these and other efforts to address and reduce stress will not only demonstrate the organization's commitment to their employees' health but also keep these strategies top of mind for employees so they take action.

The benefits of reducing stress are numerous for both organizations and their employees. In addition to lowering healthcare costs, research shows that less stressed workers and those satisfied with their work/life balance are more inclined to stay with their companies. They are also more likely to recommend them as places to work. It all adds up to a healthier bottom line.

No matter what stress management techniques are installed, the key to success is to have a continuing commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of all employees. Addressing the management of stress can be a vital wellness strategy that makes for a healthier, happier workforce and a stronger, more productive organization.

How Health Advocate Can Help

LVBCH has partnered with Health Advocate to provide special rates and terms for coalition members to offer the Employee Assistance+Work/Life program to their employees. Health Advocate's EAP+Work/Life program provides support for employees as well as managers/supervisors and human resources staff, offering access to valuable resources, counseling services, relevant and impactful workplace trainings, and more.

To learn more about how Health Advocate can support you and your organization, visit www.HealthAdvocate.com or contact Suzanne Starker at 215-880-6364 or sstarker@healthadvocate.com.