

Transcript for **Working with Stress**

Narrator (Ann Reskin)

It's been said that a job without frustrations is not a job. All workers will face occasional frustrations on the job, but it's also true that most workers enjoy a good challenge and the satisfaction that comes with mastering a job. Challenging work motivates us to learn new skills and perform to our potential.

But what happens when job demands become excessive? When pressure builds and healthy challenge is replaced by frustration and exhaustion?

Stress takes over. It can become a daily threat to health and well-being. Stress increases the risk of illness, injury, and job burn-out and unlike other occupational hazards nearly the entire working population can be affected. Most studies show that one-fourth to one-third of today's workers report high levels of stress at work.

The latest research tells us that job stress plays a major role in many chronic health problems, and the evidence is growing. Now more than ever, it's time to learn what can be done to relieve a workforce under stress.

Hello, I'm Ann Reskin for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Fortunately, for those of us who work for a living, research on job stress has expanded greatly in recent years. Such research has been furthered by a relatively new field of study known as occupational health psychology. Even so, confusion still remains about the causes and effects of job stress and how to prevent it. For example, there's the question of whether stress is a product of poor coping skills or the work environment itself. We'll be taking a look at this issue as well as the physical and psychological effects of job stress. And we'll discuss some practical methods to minimize this growing occupational hazard and help ensure a healthy and productive workforce.

Clinically speaking, job stress is a set of harmful physical and psychological responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

The response to stressful conditions is triggered by the brain, which prepares the body for defensive action. Signals are sent to the body to sharpen the senses, increase pulse, deepen respiration, and tense the muscles. The response is preprogrammed biologically and is known as the fight or flight response. Occasional episodes of stress are normal and pose little danger because the body returns to equilibrium after the stress passes. But when stressful situations persist, the body is kept in a constant state of activation. This prolonged response results in fatigue or damage to the body. It can no longer repair and defend itself as before. As a result, the risk of disease and injury escalates. In fact, health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress. It's now widely believed that job stress increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, certain psychological disorders, and musculoskeletal disorders of the back and upper extremities. Stress may also exacerbate existing health problems and interfere with their treatment.

In terms of safety, stressful working conditions may interfere with safe work practices and other precautions, leaving the worker more susceptible to hazards in the workplace.

Given these health effects, it's no wonder that job stress is strongly associated with health complaints. More so than even financial or family problems according to one study.

It is widely accepted that job stress results from the interaction of the worker with the conditions of the work environment.

However, opinions differ on the primary sources of job stress. Some studies have shown that personal and situational factors, such as personality, coping skills, and attitude influence stress will develop on the job. This point of view has given rise to stress management education, health promotion, and other workplace programs designed to help the worker cope with demanding conditions.

Other studies place more emphasis on working conditions as a key source of job stress. Because evidence suggests that certain working conditions such as heavy workload demand are stressful to most types of people most of the time. NIOSH believes the first line of defense against job stress is to design jobs in a way that avoid these conditions.

Thus, the NIOSH model of job stress looks like this: Stressful working conditions lead to risk of injury and illness. Conditions that commonly lead to stress include unrealistic deadlines and workloads, lack of control over the working environment, lack of supervisory support, and poorly defined work roles. The effects of stressful conditions can be modified by certain personal and situational factors as illustrated. Some personal and situational factors can reduce the impact of stressful conditions on safety and health. These factors may include a balance between work and personal life, supportive co-workers, and a relaxed and positive outlook. On the other hand, personal and situational factors can also intensify the effect of stressful conditions. Thereby increasing the risk of stress related health problems. For example family, problems or unhealthy behaviors such as inadequate sleep, diet or physical activity.

Nearly half of all large companies provide some type of stress management training to their employees. These programs usually teach workers about the causes and effects of stress and skills such as time management and relaxation. Because stress management programs are generally inexpensive and easy to implement, they continue to receive wide corporate support. While such programs are indeed beneficial at least in the short term they don't address the root causes of stress because they focus on the worker, not the environment. As the stress model we've just seen suggests, the most direct way to prevent stress is to improve working conditions.

The most direct way to prevent stress is to improve working conditions. So next, we'll take a look at how to prevent the damaging effects of stress through positive organizational change. Some companies remain uncomfortable with the concept of organizational change because they feel it may interfere with work routines and production schedules and therefore adversely affect their ability to compete.

But research suggests otherwise: that failing to remedy stressful situations can itself hinder profitability. Stressful conditions are associated with absenteeism, tardiness, and desire to quit all of which have a negative effect on the bottom line. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has found that the average period of absence from work due to a stress-related disorder is about 20 days. There are a number of organizational characteristics associated with high productivity and low levels of stress.

But because all organizations are unique, there is no universal prescription for dealing with stress. Prevention efforts are most effective when they focus on the specific needs of an organization and its workers. Also, stress prevention is a process, not a one-time event, and requires a structured approach.

As a first step, organizations should identify the problem. There are many potential stressors in the workplace, and each must be identified before it can be addressed.

The workforce itself can be the primary source of this information. In smaller organizations, group discussion may be sufficient to analyze the problem.

For larger groups, surveys are usually more appropriate. With either approach, workers should be asked about working conditions, stress levels, health concerns, job satisfaction, and other relevant issues. These data will help pinpoint the sources of stress within the organization and how workers are affected. Since most workers spend the majority of their waking hours on the job, they are extremely knowledgeable about such issues.

Once the problem is understood, solutions can be devised and implemented.

Many useful ideas can be generated through techniques such as brainstorming that solicit input from workers. In larger companies, consulting firms are often used to develop stress prevention strategies and redesign jobs.

Here are some examples of organizational changes that can prevent job stress. Define workers' roles and responsibilities. Allow workers to fully utilize their skills. Establish work schedules that are compatible with demands outside of work. Involve workers in decisions that affect their jobs. Reduce uncertainty about future job prospects. Of course, stress prevention measures will ultimately depend on the size and complexity of the organization, available resources, and the types of stress affecting workers.

As with any new intervention, evaluations should be conducted on a regular basis. Again, there is no universal prescription for job stress prevention, and evaluations are necessary to ensure desired outcomes are being achieved. Short-term evaluations can determine which techniques are working and which are not, so that the program can be refined as it progresses.

Longer-term evaluations, perhaps once a year, are useful for determining if strategies have lasting benefits. Long-term evaluations are especially important since many programs appear

effective at first, but their effects are short-lived. Or they may have unwanted side-effects that surface over time.

Evaluations typically include various forms of employee feedback as well as objective data such as attendance reports and health complaints. These steps will help ensure positive organizational change that targets job stress at its source.

Many organizations of all types have developed successful stress prevention programs. Here are some real life examples. The owner of a busy travel agency was noticing signs of tension and deteriorating morale among her staff. Job dissatisfaction seemed to be rising and absenteeism was higher than usual. The owner began asking employees about the nature of such problems and why they were occurring.

After talking with several workers, the owner concluded that job stress had become a major problem. Since the owner was not experienced in dealing with job stress, she contacted the local Chamber of Commerce for guidance. She was referred to a management consulting firm that developed an employee survey for the company and made recommendations for change.

Analysis of the survey data suggested that two job conditions. The first, lack of planning, caused workers to feel that they were always playing catch up and putting out fires. The second, poor communication throughout the company, resulted in problems being overlooked until they demanded immediate attention. These situations cause high levels of stress and compromise productivity and customer service.

The company took several steps to address these problems, including daily briefings to keep all employees updated on developing issues. Also, employees were given the opportunity to participate in scheduling and some forms of decision making.

Let's look at another example. This time at a large manufacturing company. Although there were no outward signs of stress at the company, the corporate Medical Director decided to establish a stress prevention program as a proactive measure. He presented the idea to senior management and union leaders and secured their support.

Next, a team was formed to develop the program. The team consisted of representatives from labor, the company's Human Resources Department, and from its medical department. A Human Resources consulting firm was hired to provide technical advice on program design implementation and evaluation.

The team designed a two-part program. One part focused on management practices and working conditions that could lead to stress. And the other focused on individual's health and well being. On the management and working conditions side the team added questions about job stress to the existing employee opinion survey. The survey data was used to identify stressors and suggest ways of including operations.

On the health and well-being side, the company held 12 weekly training sessions for workers and managers on stress management and healthier living. The team followed up on the program with quarterly surveys of working conditions and stress-related symptoms.

Nearly all available research on job stress supports the same conclusion: stressful working conditions are unhealthy and counterproductive. The consequences of job stress from high turnover and low morale to greater risk of illness and injury are damaging to the organization and for the individual. Even though they may be invisible, psychological and organizational hazards can be pervasive and are just as serious as many of the physical hazards that have been regulated for years.

As we continue to move into a service and knowledge economy, quality of work

life will become more important than ever. But were also in a better position to deal with job stress than we were even a few years ago. Now that the problem is so much better understood, organizations can make significant strides toward comprehensive wellness in the workplace, which is no small accomplishment. After all, isnt it in the best interest of any company to protect its most valuable assets?