

Hidden Stressors at Work

By Patrick Erwin, CareerBuilder.com writer (09/15/2008)

It may not be part of the job description, but workplace stress is a part of every job. A recent CareerBuilder.com survey indicated that 78 percent of employees feel stressed and burned out at work.

There are some obvious factors that add to stress levels, such as increased workloads, intense deadlines or a demanding boss. But there are other stress triggers that may be less obvious. These "hidden" triggers add to an employee's negative experience at work and eventually lead to burnout.

Measuring Your Stress Level

In his new book on workplace stress, "Overworked, Overwhelmed and Underpaid," author Louis Barajas identifies several signs you may be nearing burnout:

- You frequently work more than 40 hours a week.
- You've seriously considered quitting your job or finding a new job at least once in the last month.
- You've missed at least one major work deadline in the last six months.
- You postpone visits to the doctor because you have neither time nor money to go.
- You feel more stress and less security about finances than you did five years ago.

The "Hidden" Stress Triggers

Some hidden factors that contribute to stress are not as obvious to co-workers or managers as, say, having a tower of untouched files on your desk. But these unseen elements have just as much of an impact on your stress level.

Barajas has identified some "secret" stress instigators that may have a negative impact on you at work:

- **Taking work problems home and letting it affect your personal life.** You may struggle with defining the boundary between work and home. When work gets more hectic, your professional responsibilities can bleed into your personal life. If that lack of balance spills back over into your work environment, it can also become a vicious circle.
- **Not having time to take a vacation or working while on your vacation.** If you can't completely disconnect from work, you are unable to reap the benefits of rest and relaxation. And if your company has weathered a consolidation or downsizing, your workload may not permit you to take a vacation.
- **Office competition and gossip.** It can be challenging enough to meet the goals and deadlines for your job, but if you have a competitive work environment, you must also keep an eye on your co-workers. If you are the target of office

rumors or in the center of a power struggle, your stress level can soar through the roof.

- **Feeling underappreciated.** Many workers simply don't feel that they are appreciated for the work that they do. Sure, compensation and benefits are considered recognition for work performed, but a simple "thank you" or personal display of appreciation is often missing, which makes workers feel that their efforts are futile.

Four Ways to Manage Stress Triggers

Managing the demands of your workday and home life may seem impossible when you are in the burnout zone, but it's important to restore balance in your professional and personal life.

In "Overworked, Overwhelmed and Underpaid," Barajas talks about people who have a "dual-centric" outlook. These people assign the same priority to their work and home lives, and, according to a 2002 survey from the Families and Work Institute, they experience less stress. Barajas suggests four strategies to help workers strike this dual-centric balance.

- 1. Set strict boundaries between work and the rest of your life.** Barajas says it's important to define where the line is between home and work. "When dual-centric people are at work, they focus on work. When they leave the workplace, however, they leave it behind completely. They rarely take work home in the evenings, and they do not make themselves available for work questions or communications outside of working hours."
- 2. Focus on whatever you are doing in the moment.** "Being physically present does little good unless you are mentally and emotionally present as well," Barajas advises. "When you put your full attention on whatever you are doing and are physically, mentally and emotionally present, you will find that you can give, and gain, the most from the task or relationship."
- 3. Take time for rest and recovery.** It's great to be able to meet or exceed goals at work, but it's important to remember that in the long term, taking care of yourself is an investment that pays off professionally as well as personally. Barajas suggests that workers create an atmosphere where this can happen. "Give yourself permission to spend time doing whatever helps you renew your energy, even if it's doing nothing at all," he writes.
- 4. Be clear about your priorities.** "When you feel overworked, the reality is that you have lost track of your priorities," Barajas says. "You must get clear about what's important to you. One of the best ways to do so is to create a life blueprint of your goals, roles, values and key relationships. When you design a blueprint and live it to the best of your ability, you'll feel less stress and more fulfillment -- not just on the job, but your life as a whole."