STRESS MANAGEMENT IN WORK SETTINGS

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PREFACE

Since the mid-1970s, a growing number of studies have evaluated the merits of prescriptive, relaxation-based stress control methods as applied in work settings. Collectively labeled stress management, methods like muscle relaxation, meditation, biofeedback, and cognitive strategies have been taught to workers as a means of reducing psychophysiological and subjective distress. Such strategies have focused exclusively on providing the individual worker with skills for recognizing and coping with stress in a health promotion context. Accordingly, stress management is usually offered to healthy, asymptomatic workers as a preventive measure. Workers exhibiting acute stress reactions or organizations where apparent stress problems exist have not been the usual targets for stress management.

The purpose of this publication is to summarize scientific evidence and to review conceptual and practical issues relating to worksite stress management. It is a collection of original contributions that address current issues and problems in the field. The chapters aim to provide a context within which stress management programs can be developed, implemented, evaluated, and maintained in work settings. As such, it seeks to offer guidance, not guidelines.

The intended audience of this publication is best described by their classification into "user" groups: (1) those who ultimately make the decision to offer employees a stress reduction program (or rather to take some action with respect to employee stress, be it a program or not), (2) those who have responsibility for deciding what type of action will be taken, its' scope, essential ingredients, and operating characteristics, and (3) those who actually implement the action, whether in-house personnel or an outside individual or group. Each of these "user" groups will find information in this publication relevant to their respective needs.

The document is divided into three parts. Part I contains three chapters that deal with organizational stress and its assessment. Part II contains four chapters that describe aspects of stress management as applied in work settings. Part III is a collection of resources for training materials, products, and equipment.

Two themes that run throughout this publication should be acknowledged here. First and foremost is that stress management, as currently defined, has a limited role in reducing organizational stress because no effort is made to remove or reduce sources of stress at work. Focusing on the individual as the prime target for organizational intervention creates a dilemma of "blaming the victim." A more appropriate application of stress management would be as a complement to job redesign or organizational change interventions.

The second theme is that conceptual issues are as important as logistical ones in determining program success. Considerable effort should be expended at the outset to define the purpose of the program, delineate organizational and individual goals, acquire organizational support, and integrate the program with existing occupational safety and health efforts. In this way, the foundation is laid for a more stable and holistic program for controlling organizational stress.

The present collection of papers aims to shift the 'mind-set' away from prescriptive, brief stress workshops and toward more comprehensive actions that target the organization and the individual worker as intervention points for stress reduction.