

(This article came out over a year ago, before the massive layoffs!)

High level of stress rampant in workplace

Problem blamed for absenteeism, loss of productivity

Kelley Holland, New York Times

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The feeling is familiar: You are savoring the last of a leisurely Sunday lunch or a long walk in the park when you abruptly realize that your weekend will be over in a matter of hours. In an instant, you are deep in what John Updike called the "chronic sadness of late Sunday afternoon." As you envision the to-do pile on your desk, the meetings on your calendar, and that trip to Topeka on Tuesday, your mood shifts again, your muscles tense and your head begins to ache.

You have a case of workplace-related stress. You also have plenty of company.

Poll results released in October by the American Psychological Association found that one-third of Americans are living with extreme stress, and that the most commonly cited source of stress - mentioned by 74 percent of respondents - was work. That was up from 59 percent the previous year.

Some people would not be alarmed by this. When David W. Ballard, the association's assistant executive director for corporate relations and business strategy, talks to executives, "the concept that stress can be a bad thing is sometimes foreign to them," he said. "They say stress is a good thing. It motivates them."

But excessive stress is different and extremely expensive for employers. Highly stressed employees are absent more often and are much more likely to leave their jobs. When at work, they tend to be significantly less productive - a phenomenon known as presenteeism, which can be even more expensive than frequent absences, Ballard said.

More than half the respondents to the survey said they had left a job or considered doing so because of stress, and 55 percent said that stress made them less productive at work.

With costs like that, you would think that companies would devote considerable resources to fighting the problem. But a survey published last year by Watson Wyatt suggests that they aren't. For example, some 48 percent of the employers in the survey said stress created by long hours and limited resources was affecting business performance, but only 5 percent said they were taking strong action to address those areas.

"Everybody knows it's an issue, but no one wants to look at it and address it," said Shelly Wolff, Watson Wyatt's North American leader for health and productivity. Employers view excessive workplace stress as an enormously costly problem that no one quite knows how to fix, she said. "There's a fear of opening up something you can't control," she said. "They feel it's going to open Pandora's box."

One problem is that stress can be subjective. Some people may feel permanently tethered to the office by their cell phones and laptops, but for others those devices are liberating. One person's dreaded business trip is another's respite from pressures at home.

That means there is no one-size-fits-all way for employers to reduce office stress. But putting in place a variety of initiatives is still simpler and less expensive than dealing with extreme stress once it arrives.

At GlaxoSmithKline, a program called "Team Resilience" combines things like health assessments, discussion groups and follow-up evaluations to deal with workplace stress.

The company's promotion management group, which develops promotional materials and obtains regulatory approval for them, went through the process last fall. The roughly 100 employees in the group, spread between Philadelphia and Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, completed questionnaires about workplace stress and then met in groups organized by work specialty - editors with editors, designers with designers, and so on - to discuss results.

At the outset, "they thought, 'Oh no, not another survey, not another class,'" said Karen W. Ruffner, the group director. "But when we set up workshops by functional areas, I think they were pleasantly surprised. It gave them an opportunity to talk among their peers. Sometimes, you almost have to force that time for people who are really busy." The groups are having follow-up meetings to address the issues that surfaced, like a desire for more flexibility in how work is organized, she said.

PricewaterhouseCoopers also addresses stress in multiple ways. For example, in annual surveys, employees asked for more coaching and opportunities to connect with more experienced colleagues - and got them.

Over the past two years, the firm has also created market teams for various business lines, which means that 80 to 100 people work together on a portfolio of client accounts. Employees can cover for one another more easily, easing some of the pressure.

Michael J. Fenlon, managing director for people strategy at PricewaterhouseCoopers, said the surveys found higher satisfaction levels and lower turnover among those in market teams. The goal, he said, was "to create an environment where there's openness and a sense of mutual support, where I can work through life-cycle events and no one's going to think less of me."

Until recently, if employees sent e-mails on weekends or after hours, an automatic message would appear asking the sender to wait, if possible, and let others enjoy their down time. The message was discontinued after the company determined that workers had taken this stress-reducing sentiment to heart.

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